

**Report of the meeting on the project:
“History of ILO ideas and their impact”
13 February 2007**

The International Institute for Labour Studies organized a preparatory workshop on the “History of ILO ideas and their impact” on 13 February 2007. The meeting was attended by over 30 participants invited from within and outside the ILO. For a list of participants please see the end of this document.

The workshop was organized into three sessions, spread over a day. The ILO Director General opened the meeting and took part in the discussions of the first and second sessions. The opening session was devoted to a general discussion on the project outline, prepared and presented by Dharam Ghai. The second session focussed on a discussion of the major milestones in the history of the ILO, the main themes and ideas that originated in the Organization, and the institutions for governance developed during the past ninety years. The third and final session was devoted to a discussion of the practical steps to be followed in pursuing the various activities and outputs of the project. For an agenda of the meeting please see the end of this document.

The opening session

Welcoming the participants of the meeting, Gerry Rodgers, Director of the Institute, mentioned that the immediate aim of the history project is to prepare a comprehensive history volume in connection with the 90th anniversary of the ILO. This document will commemorate the Organization’s contributions to thinking and policy development on social and economic issues and to the progress of institutions for governance at national and international levels.

In his opening remarks, the ILO Director-General noted that the ILO has a longer history than any other UN organization, spread over a great part of the 20th century. He would therefore like the present project to be called “*The ILO Century Project*”. However, in the short run, it must aim at producing a comprehensive history volume to commemorate the 90th anniversary.

The DG noted that the “ILO has a fascinating story to tell”. The Organization has lived through a series of turbulence and crises linked to wars, revolutions, economic nationalism, depression, demographic explosions, decolonisation, the Cold War, changing economic role of women, globalization and changes in social organization. All through these

events and crises, the ILO has offered ideas and ways forward, engaged and contributed, debated, mobilized and promoted the vision of a fairer world. As a “seedbed for democracy”, it has made great contributions to the development of democratic institutions all over the world.

In the history volume to be brought out in connection with the 90th anniversary, we should be able to put together ILO influence on the conceptualization of key ideas and the implementation of policies. They should be expressed in a readable way and help the readers understand how the ILO can continue to contribute to knowledge and to influence thought, analysis, debate and political agendas even today. The value of an institution lies in the respect for its own history. Studying the past and using experiences of past successes and failures can be helpful for future policymaking in a globalized world. In this case a historical methodology is necessary. The project should be able to help significantly in strengthening the institutional memory of the ILO. Therefore it will be based on the contributions of ILO officials, past and present, and of the constituents. It should be an office-wide effort involving the headquarters as well as the field structure.

The DG suggested that the ILO should publicize a rich collection of material from its archives, especially the works of former officials who have guided the Organization from its inception. Among these, he specially referred to a manuscript of the memoirs of Edward Phelan, who was Director-General during the Second World War.

The project output and a methodology for organizing it was presented by Dharam Ghai. He argued that it should be an attractive volume of about 250 pages, embodying the main social and economic ideas propagated by the ILO and addressed to a wider audience. It should aim at a political economy approach and prepare a chronologically narrated history embedded in the major social, political and economic themes of the 20th century. Its emphasis should be on highlighting ILO responses through new ideas and methods for dealing with contemporary problems, and on their cumulative impact in different countries and regions. As for developing an appropriate methodology for organizing the project, Dharam Ghai invited the workshop participants to give views and ideas which could harness substantive contributions from a variety of sources: partners and scholars belonging to different countries.

Among the participants there was overwhelming support for the idea of proceeding on two tracks: the first one – a short term objective – to commemorate the 90th anniversary; and the second one – a long term goal – to celebrate the ILO Centenary.

Sessions 1 and 2: Major milestones and themes in the history of ILO

A number of participants gave their views on the choice of major milestones, themes, ideas and institutions that should be discussed in connection with the proposed project. They

also commented on specific topics linked to the project such as: (a) source materials for compiling the history; (b) possible contributors; and (c) means of putting the volume together.

Historical milestones

* The project gives an opportunity to revisit the historical origins and context in which the ILO came into being and the dynamic role it has played in generating ideas for governance in the world of work. In the early 20th century, the ILO was the product of a first wave of globalization and its creation represented a great intellectual contribution to the strengthening of the foundations of a worldwide economy. In recent times, the ILO has adapted itself to the post-Cold War era of accelerated trade liberalization, giving greater emphasis to dealing with the social dimensions of globalization.

* The efficacy shown by the ILO in overcoming the political crises of the 20th century with its own ingenious solutions needs to be documented. It is important to note that the ILO functioned even during the most difficult years of the Second World War and continued to set standards governing the world of work. The writing of such a history should not become a self-congratulatory exercise, and the volume should give equally serious attention to the failures of the organization.

* The history of the ILO is also the history of the representative organizations of its constituents. There is a case for tracing the growth of the International Organization of Employers which supported the development of institutions for governance together with the international trade union movement as the latter campaigned for regulatory interventions in the workplace.

* There is a need to revisit the documents pertaining to various themes and advocacies promoted by the ILO relating to the changing needs and requirements of its constituents. One such document is the strategy papers prepared by Harold Butler, a former Director-General in the aftermath of the Great Depression. In more recent times, the Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization stands out as an important contribution to thinking on new social policies in the global economy.

* The contribution made by the ILO to the development discourse and towards setting an agenda for employment and development premised on the basic needs of all people is another topic of interest. It played a pioneering role in defining the principles of international social policy within the framework of multilateral institutions. A major turning point in the history of international organization came with the Philadelphia Declaration when very clearly crystallized ideas on development strategies were advocated by the ILO.

Major themes and ideas for consideration

* Perhaps the most important contribution made by the ILO is to the development of public international law. In the process it gave shape to a very original and innovative constitution which evolved with time and also maintained continuity by way of responding to changing circumstances.

* The seminal concept of social justice was nurtured within the precincts of the ILO. It was institutionalized among the welfare states through the mediation of the ILO. The history of the ILO is closely linked to the historical evolution of the concept of social justice.

* ILO engendered the institution of tripartism as the most effective means for dispute settlement and consensus building among partners in the world of work. Tripartism became a major building block in the development of democratic institutions in many member States.

* ILO engagement with the human rights discourse is another topic. Freedom of Association has been a foundational principle guiding many initiatives. Progress with FA has strengthened the representation and credentials of workers all over the world, while setbacks suffered on that front have provided an early warning on critical situations emerging in many countries and regions. More importantly, the freedom espoused by the ILO underlined the fact that no development could ever take place without participatory democracy and that such freedom has empowered the workers to set an agenda for rights based development.

* The sectoral and regional dimensions of ILO work, in particular, how the Organization has taken on board the problems and concerns of workers in different sectors need greater attention. It is equally important to share the perceptions of ILO constituents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the work of preparing a history of ideas.

* The history of ideas could also be viewed in terms of the ideas embedded in the core conventions of the ILO. Important issues are, for instance, how the ILO was instrumental to the growth of a world wide movement against child labour, the special concerns for women workers and gender questions, and themes related to the informal sector.

* Several other ideas and themes, originally promoted by the ILO, deserve a place in the proposed history volume. Some, repeatedly mentioned, were the following: The Philadelphia Declaration; development agenda for basic needs and the elimination of poverty; strategies for the promotion of productive and freely chosen employment; and ILO institutions for social protection.

Source materials and possible contributors

* The question of involving the ILO staff who currently work or previously worked in the field offices of the ILO was raised. There are a number of unsung heroes who worked for the Organization in different parts of the world and made valuable contributions to the

development of ILO ideas, values and institutions. They are the repositories of an important, but rapidly disappearing knowledge-base of the Organization. It is time the ILO tried to harness their recollections, narratives and memoirs on major events and turning points in the history of the Organization.

* These contributions from a variety of sources could be compiled and stored using new audio-visual technology and consequently made accessible to a wider audience. This in itself will add value to the institutional memory of the ILO.

* Participants drew attention to the importance of identifying a small team of project associates including historians who can prioritize the issues for further work and then bring out the history volume within a given time frame.

Summing up by the DG

Summing up the discussions of the second session, the Director-General noted that a number of important ideas, raised during the meeting, opened up new avenues for further reflection on the structure and content of the proposed history of ideas. In particular, he found the discussion on ILO contribution to the development of international labour law, tripartite mechanisms for consensus-building, multilateralism for global policy-making, Philadelphia Declaration, the discourse on human rights, constitutional democracy and development policy very interesting. He expressed a wish that “*The ILO Century Project*” would facilitate a structured discussion of the various themes and issues that came up during the sessions and that he would like to be directly involved in ensuring the project’s success.

Session 3: Means and modalities for organizing the project

The topics that came up for discussion during this session are listed under the following headings: (a) Other publications to be brought under the project; (b) Launching a website (c) Participation of outside contributors, constituents and the regions in the project; and (d) Resource requirements and the means of raising them.

Publications

* The Institute has the copyright for the hitherto unpublished memoirs of Edward Phelan, kept in the ILO archives. The memoirs give interesting insights into the early history of ILO. It could become one of the first publications to be brought out under the history project.

* Using the archival sources, the project can bring out short biographical sketches of an earlier generation of leaders, notably Albert Thomas, David Morse and Wilfred Jenks who have piloted the ILO and made unique contributions to its history. The archival sources can

also come in handy for preparing a photographic essay on the history of the Organization from its origins.

A website for the project

* The question of developing a special website for the history project was discussed. The site can be a place for posting invited contributions. These can cover a range of topics related to various facets in the evolution of ILO and linked to the particular themes selected for further study under the history project. They can generate further debates involving ILO constituents and the academic community of different countries and regions with distinct linguistic backgrounds.

* It was also noted that a website has become the most widely used medium for generating and disseminating ideas by several international organizations which have launched their history projects in connection with the 60th anniversary of the United Nations.

Network of possible contributors

* It is important to secure the support and cooperation of a network of scholars and institutions specializing in labour history. The contributions thus gathered on specific themes and topics selected for further analysis could also be posted on the project website with a view to generating a broad-based debate as well as for reaching out to a wider audience. Such debates when organized also need to be monitored to ensure the content and the language. A project coordinator should be entrusted with the responsibility for facilitating access to the website and for monitoring the debates based on materials posted on the site.

* Several participants observed that it is important to secure the services of professional historians interested in collaborating on the ILO history project. Such collaboration can help in producing an objective assessment with a professional approach and a specific methodology lacking in other disciplines to combining the different viewpoints. More importantly, external collaborators can help avoid the kind of biases that are likely to crop up in any in-house exercise.

* The Institute should also explore the possibility of organizing resource support to young scholars from different universities all over the world interested in working on different aspects of ILO history, for instance by providing doctoral grants. This could also be combined with the post-graduate teaching and research programmes of different universities with which the Institute and ILO technical departments are currently associated.

* The meeting took note of several important depositories of labour history such as the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam and the Frederick Ebert Foundation in Germany, which could support and share their resources for implementing the

ILO history project. The IISH is collaborating with the University of Ghent to organize an international conference on the history of the ILO in October 2007.

Access to the ILO Archives

* The ILO archives being a huge reservoir of valuable information and materials on the ILO both at the headquarters and in the field, there is a strong case for making it accessible to a larger community of researchers worldwide. The archivist remarked, however, that digitalizing the entire archives in order to make them a universally accessible resource centre is not feasible in the near future. The ILO archives' budget and staffing situation do not allow access to a large group of researchers (in contrast to the archives of other international organizations like e.g. IMF and World Bank).

* The sensitive nature of the documents kept in the archives also needs to be taken into account. Since many of the historical documents kept in the archives have passed the customary embargo period for disclosure, they can be made accessible to the general public. However, there are serious constraints in terms of time and resources standing in the way.

Financial resources for the project

* Some practical aspects of raising the funds required for the project came up for discussion. These were raised together with the question of securing the support and involvement of ILO technical departments and field structures for implementing the project.

* A comparison with other UN and Bretton Woods institutions shows that similar history projects launched by these organizations are mainly financed by in-house budgets.

* The financial resources for the ILO project should be raised from within the ILO with the support of the technical departments and the regions. The meeting took note of some promising developments on this front. The Director-General has expressed a keen interest in the project. The director of a department, present at the meeting, promised to provide human resources for the project to work on legal aspects and constitutional concerns of the ILO.

* As part of an internal resource mobilization drive, the ILO should explore the possibility of securing voluntary contributions from countries who have been members of the ILO for a long time. It could also explore the possibility of securing financial support from specific foundations which are inclined to support research on the origin and evolution of ILO ideas and institutions.

Conclusions

Summing up the discussions, Gerry Rodgers made the following observations:

- * General agreement has been reached on the need for the launch of a history project by the ILO. As indicated by the Director-General, this will be called the “*ILO Century Project*”. The project will be orientated in two directions: firstly, a short term and well-defined project on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the ILO in 2009, and secondly, a long term project for the 100th anniversary of the ILO in 2019.
- * The proposed history volume should combine a historical thread of the chronology of ILO thinking, including among its constituents, an analysis of the contributions of the ILO’s ideas with respect to a small number of well defined themes and areas of progress; where did the ILO make a difference?
- * The book should be short in size, not exceeding 250 pages, and it should be addressed to a general audience with a wide appeal, without compromising the quality and rigour expected by a more serious audience.
- * The book should *not* be a Geneva-based exercise, but should engage the ILO as a whole, with an explicit point of view from the regions and the constituents.
- * It should *not* only be a history of the past, but also about constructing the future – and so linked to present debates such as that on the social dimension of globalization. It will not only be a history of the institution’s successes, but also of cases where its impact could have been stronger, showing its continuous relevance in a globalizing world.
- * This should be an external partnership with professional historians, views from outside the ILO as well as inside.
- * We now need to form a small steering group to pursue the project and coordinate the various contributions.

28 February 2007

Workshop on the “History of ILO ideas and their impact”
13 February, 2007

FINAL LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. Juan Somavia (Director-General)
2. Maria Ducci (CABINET)
3. Kari Tapiola (ED/NORM)
4. Assane Diop (ED/PROTECT)
5. Patricia O’Donovan (ED/MAS)
6. Johanna Walgrave (DIALOGUE)
7. Jean-François Retournard (ACT/EMP)
8. Jim Baker (ACTRAV)
9. Anne Trebilcock (JUR)
10. Dharam Ghai
11. Lex Heerma van Voss (IISH), Amsterdam
12. Professor Frédéric Lapeyre, Brussels
13. Professor Victor-Yves Ghebali (HEI, Geneva)
14. Janine Rodgers
15. Maryse Gaudier
16. Zohreh Tabatabai (DCOMM)
17. Duncan Campbell (INTEGRATION)
18. Evy Messell (GENDER)
19. Stephan Pursey (CABINET)
20. Rashid Amjad (ED/EMP)
21. Zafar Shaheed (DECLARATION)
22. Remo Becci (Archives)
23. Renée Berthon (Archives)
24. Jaci Eisenberg (Archives)
25. Laura Freeman (Archives)
26. Claude Akpokavie (ACTRAV)
27. Frank Hoffer (ACTRAV)
28. Lee Swepston (IPEC)
29. Frank Hagemann (IPEC)
30. Gerry Rodgers (INST)
31. Jean-Claude Javillier (INST)
32. Lim Lean LIM (INST)
33. Eddy Lee (INST)
34. A. V. Jose (INST)
35. Christiane Kuptsch (INST)
36. Jasmien Van Daele (INST)
37. Marie Weiller (INST)

AGENDA

Preparatory Meeting on the Project “History of ILO ideas and their impact”

13 February 2007

Elimane Kane Room (M3-South)

<p>Opening Session 9:30 – 11:00 hrs.</p>	<p>Chairperson: <i>Gerry Rodgers</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Welcome: <i>Gerry Rodgers</i> 2. Opening Remarks: <i>The Director-General</i> 3. Presentation of the project proposal: <i>Dharam Ghai</i> 4. Comments on the project: <i>Participants around the table</i> 5. Closing remarks: <i>Chairperson</i>
<p>11:00 – 11:30 hrs.</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>Session 2: 11:30 – 13:00 hrs.</p>	<p>Chairperson: <i>Dharam Ghai</i></p> <p>The main focus of this session will be on (i) <i>Historical milestones</i> and (ii) <i>Key themes and issues</i> for inclusion in the proposed history volume. In addition to commenting on these topics, participants will be invited to make suggestions on: (a) Use of source materials, (b) Contributors and resource persons, (c) Means of putting it all together.</p> <p>Written comments will also be welcome.</p>
<p>13:00 – 14:30 hrs.</p>	<p>Lunch Break</p>
<p>Session 3: 14:30 – 16:00 hrs.</p>	<p>Chairperson: <i>A.V. Jose</i></p> <p>The session will be devoted to a discussion of the various <i>activities and outputs</i> that could be pursued under the project, namely: (a) Other publications; (b) Websites for posting personal testimonies, memoirs and other contributions; (c) Participation of constituents; (d) Involvement of technical departments and regions; (e) Preparation for the ILO’s 100th Anniversary, (f) Resource requirements and the means of raising them.</p> <p>The meeting will be concluded with a summing-up by <i>Gerry Rodgers</i>.</p>