

## **Introduction to the ILS Research Conference**

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Good morning everyone, and I would also like to welcome you to this first research conference of the International Institute for Labour Studies.

You all know the Institute. We undertake independent research on labour and social policy issues, we promote policy dialogue and international debate, we organize educational activities on labour issues. But I think that the key, the particular advantage of the Institute, is its ability to build bridges between the ILO and the academic community, worldwide.

We are trying to do something a bit different in this Conference, at least in the ILO – to open a new space for debate and reflection on some of the key research issues on the ILO's agenda. So the first thing I would like to do is to thank you for joining us here, for being interested in this effort, and contributing to it through your presentations and presence in the discussions.

I would also start by thanking the people who have put this together – Christiane Kuptsch who has organized the event overall, Lydia Fraile, Anne Posthuma, Tzehainesh Tekle and other colleagues at the Institute who have been organizing particular sessions, Sophie Lievre who has been providing the administrative support to this process, and all the colleagues at the Institute who have been helping to put this together.

While this event is basically supported from the Institute's own programme, I would like to also acknowledge financial support from the Russell Sage Foundation and Swedish SAREC.

The rationale for our conference is really to support the decent work agenda by bringing together some of the relevant research and researchers from different parts of the world.

The idea is to strengthen interaction between the ILO and the academic community. At the moment I think our contacts with the knowledge world are uneven. There are a number of researchers, intellectuals, academics who come regularly to the ILO and enrich our work. And some ILO staff members participate in academic conferences or publish in international journals. We have a first rate journal, the International Labour Review, and we plan to work to make it the leading world journal on our issues. But our links are patchy, stronger in some areas than others. I am looking for ways to strengthen these exchanges, build wider networks, and this conference is one.

We wanted the Conference to be both broad and focused. Broad because we needed to hook up with the decent work agenda as a whole. After all, it's an integrated agenda. Focussed, because that is the only way to have a useful discussion.

So in order to have our cake and eat it, we combined a broad theme for the Conference as a whole with two focus groups on specific issues.

Our overall title is decent work, social policy and development. That highlights two fundamental questions on which not enough is known: how does the decent work agenda connect with other dimensions of social policy; and how can you embed the goal of decent work in development paths and policies.

Then, under that umbrella we chose two particular topics to treat in depth in the focus groups: social models in Europe and Latin America, and global production networks and their implications for decent work.

The leitmotiv, the common thread, is about understanding social and economic systems. The decent work agenda brings economic and social goals together, and aims to link them with a coherent framework of policies and institutions. It's not much good creating jobs if the jobs are lousy. There's not much advantage in defending the rights of workers if there is no work. All these different factors interact. We need to look to look at the system as a whole to understand the impact of policy in any one area.

That's not natural for an economist, we are forever holding everything else constant to explore something in particular. Yet everything else is not constant.

This notion of a coherent system determines our approach to the first in depth theme, social models. We are interested in sets of policies which hang together. Under what conditions do the main economic and social policy instruments come together in a way

which underpins a stable and egalitarian development path, which delivers decent work? On this the European experience is immensely valuable. We thought it particularly interesting to take this experience, and compare it with recent developments in other parts of the world, particularly Latin America, where some of the institutions are comparable, although others are not.

Of course, it's not only about Latin America. This is a global issue. The expression "social model" is not used everywhere, but the underlying notion of coherence and consistency between economic and social policies is as valid in China or Chad as it is in Chile. And there are global challenges to social policy models coming from globalization, from the need for sustainability or from technological change. This really is a development agenda, and European history shows that when social goals, equality and participation are built in from the start, that supports a process of egalitarian growth – and if they are not, it is hard to reverse the inequalities later.

The second focus theme, global production networks and the creation of decent work at the local level is also about coherent systems, but different ones – the interlinked production, trading and investment processes of multinational firms, operating across borders. Within these networks the fortunes of workers in different parts of the world are closely linked. Employment trends in Brazil are not independent of employment trends in France or Cambodia, even if the relationships are indirect. In order to promote decent work as a global goal we need to understand how these complex, global systems create opportunities, or fail to do so, in different

local environments. That also calls for more thinking and evidence on the legal and behavioural frameworks and their impact, the forms of governance which can lead to socially desirable outcomes. This is the key to making progress in today's debates on outsourcing, on ethical trading, on the space for national social policy, on the need for coherent policy frameworks for the global economy.

Now, the danger of a systems approach is to try to encompass too much. The Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran commented that "History proves nothing because it contains everything", and models of social and economic systems run the same risk if we put too much into them. How can one construct economical models which capture the essential facts and relationships and provide a reliable basis for policy development? Ay, there's the rub.

Of course, if you believe Nietzsche, there are no facts, only interpretations. But there are more or less convincing interpretations. It is important for the ILO to be able to interpret and understand these relationships if it is to do a good job on the decent work agenda. Many specific policy interventions, which look good locally, may be of little value globally because they have adverse effects elsewhere – within countries, or in other parts of the world.

Let me stop, since you want to hear our speakers and not me. I hope that this conference will be fun. I also hope that it will help us to build and strengthen research on labour and social policy,

whether at the ILO, in the outside research community, or as a joint endeavour.