

Decent Work

“Women and men, families and communities want to live in a world where the values of dignity, respect and security, of freedom and equality have meaning in their own lives. They want to live in a world with opportunities for Decent Work.”

Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General

Decent Work is productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity. It involves opportunities for work that deliver a fair income; provide security in the workplace and social protection for workers and their families; offer better prospects for personal development which also encourage social integration; give people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and guarantee equal opportunities and treatment for all. International consensus among governments, employers, unions and civil society organizations is that productive employment and decent work are key elements in achieving fair globalization and the reduction of poverty.

Key aspirations

Fair globalization – The failure of the current global economy to generate enough decent jobs to accommodate an annual influx of 40 million workers into the global labour force while substantially reducing unemployment. It is therefore imperative to reshape global growth to generate increased opportunities for decent work, especially for young people.

Poverty reduction – Employment is the principal route out of poverty. A true global commitment to decent work is the best way of eradicating poverty.

Social inclusion – Commitment to equality of opportunity for everyone and protection against all forms of discrimination in employment are crucial to fully realizing people’s capabilities.

Dignity – Labour is not a commodity and cannot be treated merely as part of the cost of production. All people must be treated with the dignity.

Diversity – Policies must be tailored to the specific needs of a country, reflecting different national priorities and conditions.

The Decent Work Agenda

The Decent Work Agenda is built on the ILO's four strategic and mutually supporting objectives - rights, employment, protection, and dialogue – where gender equality is a cross-cutting objective. It declares the ILO's commitment to promote the rights of workers and employers and to create a more just and stable framework for global development. The 2008 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization is a powerful reaffirmation of these values. It emphasizes the key role of the Organization in helping to achieve social justice in a globalized world. It also stresses the need for enhanced efforts to advance these goals through the Decent Work Agenda.

Strategic Objectives of the Decent Work Agenda

Fundamental principles and rights at work and international labour standards – All workers must have opportunities to participate and be represented, to obtain their rights and earn respect.

Employment and income opportunities – Poverty elimination requires that the economy generate opportunities for investment, entrepreneurship, job creation and sustainable livelihoods.

Social protection and social security - Basic social protection, such as health care and retirement security, is essential for participating productively in society and in the economy.

Social dialogue and tripartism – Social dialogue between different stakeholders is central to increasing productivity and avoiding disputes at work and to building cohesive societies.

Decent Work during the Crisis

Less than a year after the adoption of the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization the world economy spiralled into a severe financial and economic crisis. It is now more critical to ensure that decent work is achieved in all countries. The Director-General's 2009 Report to the International Labour Conference highlights the urgency of fulfilling the ILO's decent work mandate, stating that the crisis is expected to continue to affect unemployment at least until the end of 2010 and perhaps into 2011, and will most severely affect the poor and workers in the informal sector while also weakening the middle class. Meanwhile, in 2009, 45 million new workers will also enter the labour market looking for their first jobs. Although the International Monetary Fund forecasts some recovery for mid 2010, it is dependent upon the successful implementation of stimulus packages. At the same time, even as growth returns, past experience has shown that there is a lag of four to five years between economic recovery and employment recovery – decent work programmes are essential for shortening this lag. Finally, it is vital to ensure that social protection measures are in place: when jobs are not available, there is increased risk for social and political instability.

In response to these interconnected issues, in June 2009, the International Labour Conference adopted a decent work response to the crisis entitled "Recovering from the crisis: A Global Jobs Pact." This resolution represents a response to the crisis by the actors of the real economy. It has received widespread international and multilateral support and in July 2009 it was adopted by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).