

Human.Rights@Work

“Trade union rights are human rights”

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UN reform and the ILO

The reform of the UN was a major topic at the March session of the ILO Governing Body.

Proposals for the reform of the United Nations are set out in a report prepared by a high-level panel at the request of Secretary-General Kofi Annan. His successor Ban Ki-moon will be pronouncing on the plans very soon. They featured prominently in the discussions of the ILO Governing Body, which held its 298th session in Geneva on 8-30 March. This was the first opportunity for the different groups within the Governing Body to give their views on the reform plans, and to ask the ILO Director-General about the organization's role in this process and its potential advantages or disadvantages.

The High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence submitted its report to the UN Secretary-General last November. Global interdependence is growing, while social and economic inequalities are increasing, the panel noted. A solid, coherent multilateral framework is therefore needed. So the high-level group, composed of 16 personalities, drew up a series of recommendations based on five strategic thrusts: the coherence and regrouping of UN activities at all levels (countries, regions, headquarters); the establishment of governance mechanisms; a

results-oriented operational system; the implementation of a unified system; and better planning of activities. Unity is one of the main concepts in the panel's report.

While not questioning the need for reform, both the Workers' Group and the Employers' Group, supported by many governments, warned against any process that would dilute the ILO's unique, specific role. Leroy Trotman, spokesperson for the Workers' Group, insisted that "What we need to be sure about is that when we engage with governments, when we engage with members of the United Nations family, that we are engaging from a position where they understand our very *raison d'être*. If the reform is intended to make the ILO weaker, then all of us should have a fundamental difference with any level of reform". Addressing the Director-General, Marc Blondel (Worker, France) asked him to "assure us, as you began to do in your declaration, that you will be the faithful defender of the spirit of tripartism and the practice of tripartism. We can then move forward together." On behalf of the Employers' Group, Mr. Funes de Rioja (Argentina) emphasized that "for us, the tripartism of the ILO is fundamental to the creation of a forum for permanent dialogue, debate and analysis and for relaying policies, ideas and standards to the social world and the world of production. And it is this dialogue which makes it possible, within a tripartite vision, to tackle the issues of standards, employment and technical cooperation." A government representative set out what is at stake: "There are three scenarios that can happen. Scenario No.1 is, we can interact with a greater UN system, we could stress our unique capabilities: labour standards, worker rights, social dialogue, tripartism, social protection and employment; and, if we do it right, if we interact correctly, the work of this Organization will be greatly magnified...Scenario No. 2 is, we are protectionist; we stay as we are, we are the same thing, the world changes, we remain as we are. Scenario No. 3 is, we interact, and we do it badly, we spread what we do too badly, we get into too many things, we become just a syrupy mix, we are poured on the UN system and we disappear, essentially."

Taking up the concerns expressed by the various speakers, Director-General Juan Somavia stated the ILO's position very clearly: "Throughout this process, I want to say very clearly at the outset, our function is to make sure that the ILO's normative function and the ILO's tripartite identity are absolutely part of this whole exercise. All the things we are doing at the UN are on the basis that we have a normative function, we have a tripartite identity and we obviously, as a consequence, have a space of knowledge and experience that has to do with the world of work and we expect these things to be recognized as such."

Back in June of last year, the conclusions drawn up by the Committee on Technical Cooperation of the International Labour Conference pointed out that the ongoing debate on UN reform gives the ILO, with its tripartite structure, an opportunity to exert a positive influence on action taken at the international and national levels and to ensure a more focussed and effective technical cooperation programme. The ILO is already implementing Decent Work Country Programmes in seven of the eight countries in which pilot One Country Programmes have been launched as part of the reforms. These pilots will make it possible to verify the application, in the different countries, of the principles set out by the high-level panel. An analysis will be presented at the end of the year.

As the reform document submitted to the Governing Body points out, the ILO's contribution to the overall coherence of the system should be to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations and the other organizations to build effective partnerships, so as to achieve the aims of decent work.

In the ILO's view, the reform of the UN should cover all of the development actors, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the ILO standard-setting framework should serve as a common reference point for the whole of the multilateral system. So markers have been laid down for the ILO's role in the reform. Progress on this will be assessed at the Governing Body's November meeting – also in terms of the constituents' involvement and particularly that of the 8 pilot countries (Albania, Cap Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, United Republic of Tanzania, Uruguay and Vietnam).

Progress towards a more coherent global policy

Cooperation between the WTO and the ILO is to continue, but controversy still surrounds the social clause.

Presenting to the Governing Body the results of a first joint study by the World Trade Organization and the ILO – a study which the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) called a “step forward towards achieving genuine coherence in the way the world's major institutions work together” – WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy emphasized that coherence between trade policy, labour market policy, education policy and redistribution policy “helps to optimize the results of trade liberalization and will probably have positive effects on public support for trade reforms”.

He pointed out that the joint study, entitled *Trade and Employment: Challenges for Policy Research*, gives an impartial overview of what can be said – and with what degree of precision – concerning the relationship between trade and employment. He added that the study refrains from “advocating policies” but that it could “help decision-makers to reflect on the conception of policies and on the arbitration that this might entail”.

During a round table after Mr. Lamy's presentation, several worker delegates, led by Group spokesperson Leroy Trotman, asked if the WTO could contribute to the universal respect of labour standards. They were supported by the governments of the European Union countries and a number of others, notably South Africa, Brazil and Chile. The Chilean Minister of Labour, for example, stressed that workers must be involved in the economic opening process, through social dialogue, while the South African government representative was concerned that some countries are breaching basic labour standards in the hope of attracting enterprises and investments. The European employers backed this view, declaring that it is not wise to undermine freedom of association as a means of improving economic competitiveness. Nonetheless, the President of the International Organization of Employers, Mr. Abraham Katz, warned - quoting well-known economists – that any new attempt to bring labour issues into the WTO's discussions would no doubt prove to be the “kiss of death”. The Workers' Group, on the other hand, pointed to the joint study's finding that freedom of association and social dialogue promote a fairer distribution of the benefits of liberalization. This, they said, should give the actors in globalization pause for thought – the more so as trade union rights are still being seriously violated in various parts of the world. On this point, Mr. Trotman deplored the joint WTO-ILO study's silence on the issue of the Export Processing Zones and the working conditions prevailing there.

When the Workers' Group specifically asked about the possible establishment within the WTO of a link between trade and decent work, Mr. Lamy replied that a debate on this issue had taken place at the WTO, but there had been no consensus in favour of inserting a specific text, except in the case of forced labour.

ILO Director-General Juan Somavia said the joint study could help to achieve a better understanding of the link between the various fields of policy action, so contributing to greater coherence at the national level. He added that the discussion marked “an important institutional breakthrough” in relations between the ILO and the WTO. In conclusion, noting the commitment made by Mr. Lamy to promote and continue cooperation between the two secretariats, he repeated that the joint study could become a very useful source for tripartite dialogue at the national level, and so contribute to tripartite consultations on trade negotiations.

Other initiatives on policy coherence

The Governing Body’s Working Party on the Social Dimension of Globalization also reviewed the latest information on research and meetings concerning the coherence of the policies initiated by the ILO and involving representatives of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the WTO, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme, UNIDO, UNCTAD and the FAO. Two meetings were held during 2006 and a seventh one is planned for the first half of 2007, to be held at the IMF’s European Office in Paris. A new phase will begin this year because, as well as the world-level meetings, dialogues will also be organized at the regional and national levels. The first of these is scheduled for Delhi at the beginning of April 2007. Following the working group’s discussions in March 2006, preparatory work has begun for an ILO forum on decent work for a fair globalization. It is to be held in Lisbon on 1-2 November 2007.

Decent work to the fore in 2008-2009 budget proposals

Zero growth, but greater responsibilities.

The main aim behind the two-year programme and budget proposals for 2008-2009 presented by the Director-General is to give the ILO constituents the means of intervening actively to ensure that decent work is at the centre of national development strategies. Given the lack of consensus on the appropriate real growth in the regular budget, Mr. Somavia proposed a regular budget of US\$594 million, which in constant 2006-07 US dollars represents no change for the next biennium, before accounting for cost increases. The proposed budget will be submitted to the International Labour Conference in June for consideration.

The programme centres on the ILO’s four strategic objectives for decent work: promoting the basic standards, principles and rights at work; creating better opportunities for women and men to obtain decent work and incomes; strengthening the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all; and making tripartite and social dialogue more effective. Strengthening tripartism, the ILO’s knowledge base and policy coherence will be a particular concern over the next two years. On this, the Director-General indicated that his proposals would prepare the ILO for active involvement in the ongoing reform of the United Nations, while respecting the ILO’s governance structure and its tripartite identity. In view of the difficulties experienced in achieving consensus among the governments on an increase in the regular budget, and given the reduction in resources, the Director-General proposed the establishment of a new Regular Budget Supplementary Account, which would enable those governments that wish to do so, to make voluntary contributions over and above their financial commitments to the ILO. These resources should, he said, contribute to country programmes for the promotion of decent work and would be subject to the same controls as the resources of the regular budget. The new account will be inaugurated with an exceptional voluntary contribution of €3 million from the Spanish government.

In addition, the extrabudgetary resources financing specific technical cooperation programmes were put at US\$350 million for 2008-2009.

Workers' Group spokesperson Marc Blondel (France) repeated his call to governments to increase the ILO's regular budget. He reminded them of the unique, vital role played by this agency which is dedicated to achieving social justice and so promoting world peace.

Glimmer of hope in Burma?

The Burmese government has signed an understanding aimed at providing forced labour victims with a mechanism for seeking redress.

The Governing Body welcomed the Supplementary Understanding reached between the ILO and the Burmese government in February 2007 on a mechanism for victims of forced labour to seek redress without having to fear reprisals. It also welcomed the fact that the implementation of this mechanism had begun, and that action had been taken by the authorities in those cases that involved forced labour. The understanding stipulates that alleged victims of forced labour in Burma will be free to submit complaints to the ILO Liaison Officer in Yangon, who will make a confidential preliminary assessment of each report in order to establish whether it is a case of forced labour and, if so, will ensure that it is examined by the Burmese authorities and that measures are taken vis-à-vis those responsible. The understanding includes guarantees that no retaliatory measures will be taken against the complainants. It also stipulates that the ILO Liaison Officer will be permitted to travel freely within Burma in order to meet the complainants or any other person whom he considers appropriate. This mechanism will be implemented for a trial period of 12 months, which may be extended by mutual agreement.

The Governing Body underlined the importance of the mechanism continuing to function effectively in the context of a very serious forced labour situation. In this regard, the Governing Body requested the Office to move quickly to assign suitable international staff to assist the ILO Liaison Officer, and requested the Government of Myanmar to extend the necessary cooperation and facilities.

As regards seeking an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, the Governing Body decided to defer this issue on the understanding that the necessary question or questions would continue to be studied and prepared by the Office. During the discussion on Burma, the Workers' Group welcomed the efforts that have been made, but hoped that things will change rapidly on the ground. "We have twelve months to see if things really are progressing," said workers' spokesperson Leroy Trotman. On this, he noted a report that more than 5,000 people have recently been forced into labour in one area of the country. More than a hundred people were killed and many others were arrested and tortured in the course of that operation. "We therefore insist that we must quickly be able to note progress in the country as a whole," Mr. Trotman declared.

Belarus – one step forward, two steps back

Union rights in Belarus have taken one step forward and two back, the Workers' Group spokesman said.

The Governing Body considered for the third time what measures had been taken by the government of Belarus to implement the recommendations of the 2004 Commission of Inquiry.

Noting some positive steps taken by the government, the Governing Body is nevertheless still concerned that several important matters raised by the Commission of Inquiry and figuring in their corresponding recommendations have not been fully addressed by the government. In particular, reference was made to the non-registration of several trade union organizations, following the non-registration of primary-level organizations. A report by the Committee on Freedom of Association cites management interference in the unions' affairs, anti-union discrimination and retaliatory action against workers who cooperated with the ILO Commission of Inquiry. The Workers' Group spokesperson asked the government to "show that it does not wish to control the trade unions, restrict their activities or dragoon them, but rather that it is concerned to ensure that people's right to work freely is respected and that they can enjoy the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining ... We do not want cosmetic changes, we want changes that benefit the people of Belarus."

At the end of a long discussion, the Governing Body called upon the government of Belarus to fully cooperate with the International Labour Office in implementing all the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry. It also asked the Government to ensure that all workers' and employers' organizations can function freely and without interference, and can obtain registration.

The Governing Body urged the government to abandon the present draft concept on the trade union law and review all its legislation in full consultation with all the social partners concerned in order to ensure fully the right to organize both in law and in practice, in accordance with Convention No. 87, so that free and independent trade unions may exercise their full rights.

Djibouti and Zimbabwe carpeted by Freedom of Association Committee

Several industrialized countries were also taken to task for breaching labour rights.

The tripartite Governing Body approved the 344th and 345th Reports of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association, drawing special attention to the cases of Djibouti and Zimbabwe.

On **Djibouti**, the Committee regretted that it did not even have a reply from the Government to the allegations of intimidation and increasingly serious violations of trade union rights. The allegations include the unfair dismissal of numerous trade union leaders and activists and the subsequent detention of nearly 200 workers acting in solidarity with the dismissed workers.

The Committee requested the Government to rapidly establish an independent inquiry into the allegations of unfair dismissal and, should they prove to be founded, to ensure the reinstatement of these workers without loss of pay. The Committee expects that trade union leaders Adan Mohamed, Hassan Cher Hared, Mohamed Ahmed Mohamed and Djibril Ismael Egeuh will be released and all charges against them will be dropped, and it strongly requested the government to give precise information on this.

In the case of **Zimbabwe**, the Committee examined allegations that the government had been sponsoring a rival faction within the Zimbabwe Central Trade Union (ZCTU) in order to undermine its leadership, breaking up its meetings, raiding its headquarters, illegally seizing its property, launching unfounded inquiries, and proposing labour law amendments which violate freedom of association. It also looked at several instances of arrest, detention and beating of ZCTU leaders and members.

The Committee urged the government to drop the charges brought in connection with trade union activities and to launch an independent inquiry, having the confidence of the parties concerned, into the allegations of beatings of ZCTU members while in detention, as well as into the disruption of their meetings and physical assaults on ZCTU members by rival factions within the union.

As various foreign trade unionists had been expelled from or refused entry to the country, the Committee urged the government to allow mutual support missions into Zimbabwe, and to make any approval subject to objective criteria only. The Committee noted with deep concern that the trade union situation in Zimbabwe has not evolved and may even have worsened since its last examination of the case. It urged the government to reconsider the Committee's request to accept a direct contacts mission. "The deplorable events in Zimbabwe confirm that the violations were perpetrated with the government's support," noted Workers' Group spokesperson Ulf Edström. He also drew attention to rights violations in a number of industrialized countries, including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Sweden.

ILO to report regularly on worldwide pay trends

Wages were a major topic in the Committee on Employment and Social Policy.

Expressing reservations about a document presented by the Office on "wages around the world", the Workers' Group insisted that the ILO should strengthen its capacity in this field, so as to produce information that is useful to the constituents and offer them concrete assistance if needed. The document attaches undue importance to the positive effects of market opening on wages while minimizing the negative impacts, according to Workers' Group spokesperson Ebrahim Patel (South Africa). The report noted an increase in real wages at the world level, changes in wage shares, growing wage disparity and a diversification of wage composition. But Mr. Patel said that other issues also deserved attention: the importance of the social wage, which helps to improve income security and reduce inequalities, the reasons for disproportionately high pay at the top of the wage pyramid, the effects of wages on consumption and macroeconomic performance, and wage discrimination – particularly inequalities between men and women. Following the discussion, a number of proposals from the Workers' Group were accepted. For instance, the ILO will make a comparative analysis of the different wage setting mechanisms and a comparative assessment of wage bargaining practices and outcomes worldwide. It will regularly distribute these analyses in the form of a global wage trend brief.

Other Governing Body decisions

30th anniversary of the Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy: The Office adopted the programme for the anniversary celebrations to be held in Geneva on 16 November. Workers' Group spokesperson Sharan Burrow (Australia) supported the idea of using this occasion to show that the ILO has instruments going beyond its traditional supporting action to governments. In the same vein, the Subcommittee on Multinational Enterprises adopted the modalities for a programmes aimed at providing enterprises with guidance on international labour standards. The various relevant ILO sectors will be involved in this.

ILO presence in Colombia: Following the tripartite agreement signed last year during the Governing Body session, an ILO representation is now operating in Bogota. But the Workers' Group asked for this presence to be strengthened so that it can carry out its mandate, which

centres on protecting trade unionists. Halimah Yacob, the Workers' Group spokesperson on the Committee on Technical Cooperation, deplored the murder of at least 84 trade unionists in 2006.

New orientation for sectoral activities: Grouping sectors to better reflect developments at work, strengthening the process for consultation with the social partners (through a consultative body for each group of sectors) and interaction with the Decent Work Country Programmes – these new orientations for the ILO sectoral activities programme should enable it to achieve maximum impact within the workplace. On behalf of the Workers' Group, Jerry Zellhoefer (United States) welcomed these developments, emphasizing that they are firmly supported by the Global Union Federations. “The sectoral activities programme provides a unique opportunity to promote good industrial relations and give effect to standards in the sectors and services,” he said.

Brunei: The Governing Body welcomed Brunei into membership of the ILO. Brunei is the Organization's 180th Member State. A first ILO mission visited the country at the beginning of April. It met members of the government, employer representatives and leaders of the oil workers' union.

International Organization for Standardization (ISO): During a discussion on cooperation between the ILO and the ISO, the Governing Body requested the ISO to refrain from adopting standards on health and safety in the workplace. So the Governing Body reaffirmed the ILO's specific mandate in the field of international standards relating to work and workers.

African Decade for Decent Work

The ILO's 11th African Regional Meeting will be held in Addis Ababa on 24-27 April.

The African Decade for Decent Work will be launched during the ILO's 11th African Regional Meeting in Addis Ababa on 24-27 April. Some 300 participants representing the region's governments, employers and trade union organizations are expected to take part. Employment creation, poverty reduction, youth employment, social protection, HIV/AIDS, occupational health and safety and international labour standards will be on the agenda.

The ILO Director-General will present a report on decent work in Africa. Also to be published during the meeting is a report on employment trends in Africa. The Chairman of the Commission of the African Union, Mr. Alpha Oumar Konaré, will be among the guests attending.

Labour market gender disparities persist

Poverty is being feminized, an ILO report warns.

More women than ever before are in work, but a persistent gap in status, job security, wages and education between women and men is contributing to the “feminization of working poverty”, according to an ILO report issued to mark International Women's Day on 8 March.

According to *Global Employment Trends for Women Brief – 2007*, the number of women participating in labour markets - either in work or looking actively for work – reached 1.2 billion last year, out of a world total of 2.9 billion workers.

The report shows that today more women of working age are in waged and salaried employment (47.9 per cent) than 10 years ago (42.9 per cent). But according to ILO estimates, in 2006

women were still more likely to be unemployed than men. Whereas the female unemployment rate was 6.6 per cent, for men it was 6.1 per cent.

Employment-to-population ratios - which show the extent to which economies use the productive potential of their working-age population - are much lower for women than for men in the world as a whole. Scarcely half of working-age women (aged 15 or over) are actually in work, as against more than 7 men in 10. The report also cites evidence that wage gaps persist. Throughout most regions and many occupations women earn less money for the same job. A review of data available for six occupational groups shows that in most economies, women still earn much less than what their male co-workers earn. Even in so-called “female” occupations such as child-minding and teaching, gender wage equality is lacking.

Last but not least, even though young women are more likely to be able to read and write than 10 years ago, access to education and education levels are still far from equal in most regions. 60 per cent of school drop-outs are girls: they often have to leave school to help in households or to work. Preventing girls from finishing even basic education reduces their chances of shaping their own future, the study emphasizes.

28 April: World Day for Safety and Health at Work

Most work-related accidents could be prevented if standards were respected, an ILO report emphasizes.

“Safe and healthy workplaces – making decent work a reality”. That is the theme adopted by the ILO for 28 April, when trade unions worldwide commemorate the victims of work-related accidents and illness. Ever since 2003, the ILO has added its tripartite strength to this event, by marking it as the World Day for Safety and Health at Work. In a report for the occasion, the ILO estimates that 2.2 million people die every year due to accidents or illnesses related to work. More than 270 million workers are injured each year, and at any given time, 160 million people are suffering from work-related illnesses. Apart from the human tragedies involved, this slaughter also costs an estimated 4 per cent of world GDP, which is 20 times more than all countries’ development assistance put together.

Proper reporting, labour inspection, and respect for ILO Conventions, Recommendations and codes of practice on health and safety could greatly reduce the number of accidents and illnesses, the ILO argues. “Most accidents are preventable,” it insists. It is calling on Member States to ratify the new Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, adopted in 2006, as well as the other Conventions dealing with this issue.

In its report, the ILO emphasizes the importance of the international labour standards, including those on freedom of association and collective bargaining, in the struggle to prevent accidents and disease. On the subject of decent work, the report notes that some categories of worker face particular risks, notably those in precarious employment, in the informal economy or in small and medium-size enterprises. It also emphasizes the importance of social protection, as well as of social dialogue and tripartism, as key factors in risk prevention. Good workplace health and safety should not be seen as hampering an enterprise’s competitiveness, the report says. On the contrary, it shows that lower accident rates can lead to higher productivity.

Labour inspection: The international conference of the International Association of Labour Inspection (IALI) will be held on 18-20 April in Toronto (Canada). The conference will examine policies, strategies and practices to improve the working environment and reduce work-related

accidents and illnesses. It will be preceded by an ILO workshop on 17 April, which will look at health and safety throughout the production chain, including suppliers. The workshop will examine the situation in multinational corporations, but also in small and medium-size enterprises.

Labour and environment linked – naturally

Social, environmental and economic aims should be pursued simultaneously.

One year after the Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment/WILL 2006, the new publication *Labour and the Environment: A Natural Synergy* was launched during the 24th session of the UNEP Governing Council and Global Environmental Ministerial Forum on 5 February. This is a joint publication by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development (Sustainlabour). It covers fields in which the involvement of the trade union movement and workers is essential: climate change and energy, public access to resources and services, health at work, the environment and public health, chemical hazards and dangerous substances, corporate social responsibility, education, competence-building and the sharing of knowledge.

It emphasizes the importance of the link between social, environmental and economic objectives in the search for policy options for sustainable development. Such a development model does, it insists, require the participation of workers and their trade unions, because this is about protecting the environment while ensuring decent work and a just transition for labour to the new conditions implied by these changes.

The application of international labour standards (particularly those dealing with safety and health at work, together with the fundamental standards) is, the publication says, a particularly appropriate tool way of taking up the sustainable development challenge. After all, the promotion of decent work implies that people's basic needs should be satisfied today without compromising future generations' ability to satisfy theirs.

European Union to step up fight against HIV/AIDS

The EU recognizes the role of the workplace in the struggle against HIV/AIDS and draws inspiration from the ILO Code of Practice.

Last month, European Union health ministers adopted the Declaration on Responsibility and Partnership - Together Against HIV/AIDS. Known as the Bremen Declaration, after the city in which it was adopted, it commits signatories to consider new initiatives for fighting AIDS in the European context, notably as regards discrimination and the protection of rights, confidentiality and the reintegration into the labour market of HIV-positive workers on antiretroviral treatment.

Recognizing the importance and the role of the workplace in the fight against the pandemic, the Declaration invites governments, employers and workers to ensure non-discriminatory policies for people living with HIV, and care and support for those affected. It specifically refers to the Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work drawn up by the ILO. "This blueprint for workplace action is internationally recognized and globally applicable - employers and trade unions in industrialized countries increasingly recognize the value of HIV/AIDS policies and use the ILO code as a point of reference," says Sophia Kisting, Director of the ILO's Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work, who attended the Bremen conference.

HIV/AIDS has cost more than 1 million jobs in the worst-hit countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. But it is also a growing challenge for Europe, despite its lower prevalence rates there. According to UNAIDS, an estimated 270, 000 people in Europe were newly infected with HIV in 2006, bringing to 1.7 million the number of people living with HIV. That is a twentyfold increase in less than a decade.

Is there a social dimension to Information technology?

ILO meeting discusses changing labour force requirements in the electronic components manufacturing sector.

More than 70 senior representatives of labour and employers organizations, along with governments, are meeting in Geneva on 16-18 April for the first major global tripartite discussion on emerging labour and social issues in the booming electronic components manufacturing sector that generates more than a trillion dollars in exports each year.

Spectacular growth and investment in the electronic components industry, which manufactures the worlds chips, semi-conductors, cell phones, music players and computers, has generated millions of jobs and spawned billions of dollars in investment, much of it developing and emerging economics, especially in Asia

But this growth has also spawned a considerable number of social and labour challenges, including concerns over working conditions, wage levels, gender issues and management-labour relations, according to a new ILO report prepared for the meeting.

The meeting brings together representatives of the manufacturers, labour and governments for the first time to discuss these issues at such a high level and will be closely monitored by the information technology sector. Participants are expected to consider the role of social dialogue between workers and employers as well as what actions the ILO and its tripartite constituents can take regarding these issues.

In response to concerns regarding labour and social issues in the IT electronics manufacturing industry, many multinational companies adopted programmes of corporate responsibility and some now also participate in voluntary industry initiatives.

The Global e-Sustainability Initiative (GeSI) has established a supply chain working group. Its members, including most of the industry's computer and telecom giants, explore ways in which ICT sector companies can collaborate so as to manage social and environmental issues in their supply chains more effectively. By subscribing to the sustainable development principles, GeSI members contribute to the United Nations Global Compact.

GeSI has established a close working relationship with other voluntary industry initiatives, including the Electronics Industry Code of Conduct (EICC) group. The group consists of 26 companies that have come together to ensure that working conditions in the electronics industry supply chain are safe, that workers are treated with respect and dignity and that manufacturing processes are environmentally responsible.

EICC has developed a common questionnaire and audit process to assess conformance to the Code. In its labour section, the Code covers some of the ILO's fundamental principles and rights at work, including freely chosen employment, the elimination of child labour, non-discrimination and freedom of association. Working hours should not be more than 60 per week and workers

should be paid in compliance with minimum wage and overtime regulations as provided by national law.

“Trade unions and civil society have criticized the EICC for not being consistent with international labour standards, particularly in respect of ILO core labour standards. No mention is made of promoting the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining...”, says Robert Steiert from the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF).

The IMF – which is ensuring the coordination for the workers' Group at the Geneva meeting – is a member of Goodelectronics, a broad alliance of civil society organizations and trade unions, which was formalized in August 2006. The international network aims to improve human rights and environmental conditions in the electronics industry bridging local activities with global initiatives.

ILO supports alliance for Decent Work, Decent Life

“Although decent work is starting to figure in international statements, it is still not being promoted by the main actors of global governance” said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

Launched in January this year at the World Social Forum in Nairobi, a “Decent work for a decent life” campaign is being organized by the International Trade Union Confederation, the Global Progressive Forum, Social Alert, Solidar and the ETUC. The campaign is aimed at placing decent work at the centre of national and international social, economic, development, financial and trade policies. For the alliance, the notion of decent work comprises a fair job, adequate pay, social protection, trade union rights and non-discrimination.

“The organizations that today are launching the Decent Work / Decent Life campaign have the capacity to campaign locally and globally. Your structures reach from the shanty towns on the edge of Nairobi to the corridors of the IMF in Washington and the World Trade Organisation in Geneva. That gives you a remarkable mobilization capacity. We will work closely with you and wish you every success.” stated Assane Diop, Executive Director at the ILO, attending the launch of the campaign.
