

“With over 60 per cent of the global workforce, Asian countries are of great diversity and global significance. They range from the natural resource-rich Gulf States, or the new economic giants of the global economy, to the Pacific island States. (...) A major reduction in the decent work deficit in this region will be a tremendous boost to the realization of decent work globally.”

Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General

The twenty-first century is widely spoken of as the Asian century. Asia's four billion people now live in the region with by far the most rapid economic growth in the world. Recent figures have put this at more than double the global average and since 1995 labour productivity has risen by approximately 41 per cent, compared to an average of 14 per cent in the rest of the world.

But this dynamic economic performance has not been matched by job creation, let alone by the adequate expansion of opportunities for decent work. Despite regional economic growth of 6.2 per cent in 2005, employment increased by only by 1.4 per cent (or 24 million additional jobs). In addition, conventional unemployment remains the tip of the iceberg. Underemployment, insecurity and poor working conditions are widespread. Work in the informal economy, usually without any social protection, remains the reality for the majority of the region's 1.7 billion working women and men.

While productivity growth has brought higher wages for some workers, notably those with skills in short supply, in most cases such pay increases have not matched the productivity gains. In some countries and sectors real wages have actually fallen in the last 15 years.

There has been remarkable progress in reducing poverty, but Asia remains home to two-thirds of the world's poor. Increasingly, the problem of the one billion so-called “working poor” (those who may work long and hard but whose labour produces an income of less than US\$2 per family member a day) demands attention. Working poverty and income inequalities are seen as creating a growing threat to social stability.

Demographics also have an impact on efforts to meet the decent work challenge. Some countries' populations are aging very rapidly, with serious implications for labour markets and social security systems. Others must cater for increasing numbers of young people, a group which bears the brunt of the region's rising unemployment; the under-25's make up a disproportionate 47 per cent of the region's jobless.

It is clear that as their economies continue to shift from agriculture into manufacturing and services Asian countries face an enormous task in creating enough decent and productive jobs — especially for women, the growing number of unemployed youth, and other disadvantaged groups. The picture is made more complex by increasing rates of labour migration, a trend which creates both opportunities and challenges. Over the past two decades, gross emigration of labour rose at an annual rate of six per cent for the Asian region as a whole. This means an increase in migration more than two times faster, on average, than the growth of the labour force of the countries of origin. Labour migration can easily become a source of economic, social and political tension. A more mobile workforce, skilled and unskilled, can be a competitive advantage for both individuals and economies but can also threaten workers' fundamental security and rights. The challenge is how to manage labour migration so that all involved benefit.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for making decent work a reality in Asia. Different countries, given their national realities, cultures and development levels, will strive in different ways to achieve the goal of more and better jobs. But there are fundamental principles and rights at work – which include freedom of association and collective bargaining, freedom from discrimination, forced and child labour – that remain a universal part of any decent work solution, regardless of context, culture or development level.

Decent work deficits in Asia

- ◆ In 2005, 84 per cent of workers in South Asia, 58 per cent in South-East Asia, 47 per cent in East Asia and 36 per cent in the Arab States did not earn enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$2 a day per person poverty line. In the region as a whole one in five workers survives on less than US\$1 per day per family member.
- ◆ Informal employment among non-agricultural workers is common: 83 per cent in India, 78 per cent in Indonesia, 72 per cent in the Philippines, 51 per cent in Thailand, and 42 per cent in the Syrian Arab Republic.
- ◆ When measured by hours worked per worker per year, the top six economies are all in Asia.
- ◆ Asia has more than 48 per cent, or 41.6 million (2005 figures) of the world's unemployed young people. In some countries the youth unemployment rate is four times that of adults.
- ◆ One million workers in Asia die every year through work-related accidents and disease.
- ◆ Asia and the Pacific has the lowest ratification rate of any region of the two ILO Fundamental Conventions relating to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

The Decent Work Agenda

The Decent Work Agenda is put into practice via the implementation of four strategic objectives, with gender equality as a common goal throughout:

To promote economic growth that translates into the creation of decent jobs and encourages investment, entrepreneurship, skill development, proper labour standards and sustainable livelihoods.

To respect, promote and realize fundamental principles and rights at work, namely freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to organize and bargain collectively, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, and the effective elimination of child labour and discrimination in respect of employment and occupations.

To extend social protection and increase its effectiveness, particularly for workers in the informal economy.

To support institutions and systems that strengthen labour market governance, including frameworks that encourage social dialogue and help resolve workplace disputes. Social dialogue, involving strong and independent worker's and employers' organizations, plays a pivotal role in increasing productivity and building cohesive societies.

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Decent work: a global goal

The Decent Work Agenda was created by the ILO's constituents – governments, employers' and workers' organizations – with the understanding that decent work contributes to personal dignity, family stability, peaceful communities. It goes hand-in-hand with economic growth that is supportive of productive jobs and enterprise development.

In a relatively short time this idea has moved from the ILO's agenda to the global agenda. The Outcome Document of the United Nations World Summit in 2005, which was endorsed by 150 world leaders, makes full and productive employment and decent work a core objective of relevant national and international policies, and spells out its central role in development, poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The global goal of decent work for all received further strong support from the Ministerial Declaration adopted by the high-level segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in July 2006.

Given that Asia accounts for about 3.7 billion of the total world population of 6.4 billion and almost 60 per cent of the world's labour force, and given also that it is the most dynamic region in the global economy, realizing decent work in Asia will be an important step on way towards realizing decent work as a global goal.

Fundamental ILO Conventions relating to decent work:

- 1930: ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour
- 1957: ILO Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour
- 1948: ILO Convention No. 87 on the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize
- 1949: ILO Convention No 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining
- 1951: ILO Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration
- 1958: ILO Convention No. 111 on Employment and Occupation
- 1973: ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age
- 1999: ILO Convention No. 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour

For more information on Decent Work in Asia go to:
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/bangkok/14arm/reports/index.htm>