

THE ILO IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: 90 YEARS OF PROGRESS

By Allan Dow, Communications Officer, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

Any 90th birthday is bound to be special.

The ILO at 90, however, is behaving – and partying – like a youngster. Together with its constituents throughout Asia and the Pacific dozens of events are being tied to this remarkable and auspicious occasion – from Pakistan to the Philippines and further out into the Pacific islands.

The theme chosen for the anniversary is “90 years working for social justice”.

In China, India and Thailand (three of the founding members of the ILO) these events include radio and TV programmes, workshops and exhibitions. In other countries plans include a ‘fun run’, talk shows and commemorative postage stamps.

The ILO was an offspring of the Treaty of Versailles, an agency of the newly-created



For more than 50 years the ILO has been working with countries throughout the region to improve skills and productivity. In 1959 an ILO productivity expert advised Indonesia's P.T.T. on ways to improve work methods in their Bandung workshop. Photo: ILO, 1959

Ratification of ILO Fundamental (Core) Conventions in Asia and the Pacific 1994 & 2009	
1994 (75 th Anniversary of ILO)	2009 (90 th Anniversary of ILO)
68 ratifications ^a	164 ratifications ^b

^a In 1994 there were 25 member countries compared to 31 in 2009.

^b Includes 24 ratifications of C182 (Worst Form of Child Labour, 1999 which entered into force in 2000).

League of Nations. The International Labour Office made its debut in the sober aftermath of devastating conflicts across Europe and Asia – horrendous events that resulted in the loss of millions of productive lives.

At present the Asian and Pacific region includes 31 ILO member States, including seven of the original 42 countries that founded the Organization back in 1919. Globally, the ILO's membership now covers more than 180 countries.

Australia, China, India, Iran, Japan, New Zealand and Thailand joined what was mainly a group of nations from the Americas and Europe¹ to lay the cornerstone of what would become one of the world's oldest and most enduring international organizations. Another generation – and another World War – would pass before the creation of the United Nations and its specialized

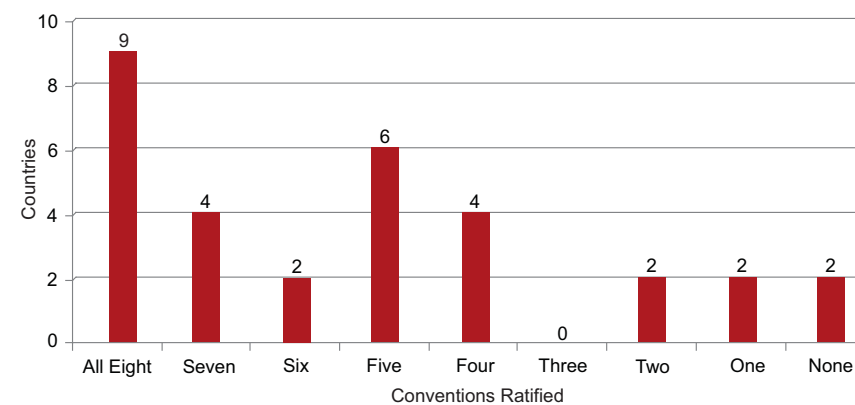
agencies, an international system within which the ILO fully participates.

Working in Asia and the Pacific

The ILO opened its first Asian Field Office in 1946 at Bangalore, India. The office was later moved to Colombo, Sri Lanka and in 1966 it transferred to Bangkok and became the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. A series of country offices was set up and a restructuring of technical services resulted in the establishment of multidisciplinary teams working from three subregional offices in Bangkok, Delhi and Manila.

At that time (1964-65), expenditure on technical cooperation work in Asia averaged US\$3.5 million per year or just less than one-quarter of the Organization's global expenditures – equivalent to more than US\$23 million in today's figures when adjusted for inflation².

Ratification of ILO Core Conventions by Member Countries in Asia and the Pacific



Thirty years later – in 1994, when the Organization observed its 75th anniversary – Mr Tadashi Nakamura, the Assistant Director-General responsible for ILO activities in Asia and the Pacific announced that more than US\$41 million worth of technical assistance had been implemented in 1993, a slight increase from 1992. “This high volume attests to the continued relevance of technical cooperation at a time when new funding is difficult to find,” he said.

Today, 15 years later, the amount of ILO technical cooperation work in Asia and the Pacific has topped US\$50 million (in 2008) and the regular budget for 2008-09 is US\$ 62 million. Funding comes from both regular and extra-budgetary sources – once again at a time of worsening economic conditions for both donors and recipients. Donors, Governments and social partners clearly view the ILO's continued contribution to improving the world of work as vital to international development.

Ratifications Soar

Since the ILO's 75th anniversary in 1994, the rate of ratifications of the Organization's eight fundamental or ‘core’ Conventions has also risen dramatically – especially in Asia and the Pacific. It is also worth noting that many of these ratifications have occurred since the beginning of the new millennium – showing the continuing relevance of these international labour standards.

Currently, there are 164 ratifications of the core Conventions by the 31 member countries in the region. The number of ratifications is now more than double what

it was when we marked the 75th anniversary.

Nearly one in every three of the member countries in Asia and the Pacific has ratified all eight fundamental Conventions, and a further one-third have ratified five or more. Eighty per cent have ratified the core Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour (C 182) – a Convention that also marks its tenth anniversary this year.

The countries that have ratified all eight core Conventions are: Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa and Sri Lanka.

“It is very encouraging to see this recent rise in rates of ratification of the eight core Conventions, especially as we mark the 90th year of the ILO,” said Ms Sachiko Yamamoto, ILO Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific. “It is a clear indication that, here in Asia and the Pacific, the ILO not only remains relevant, but its technical cooperation and guidance is valued and

increasingly replicated”.

“In just 15 years, since the 75th anniversary, our constituents have shown a great determination to move forward with the basic principles of decent work,” she added.

There are, however, still many hurdles to overcome. With 57 per cent of the world's population living in Asia and the Pacific, poverty on a large scale is still a major problem.

One of the ILO's contributions to the Millennium Development Goals is to help reduce poverty by creating an environment where decent, safe and dignified work can thrive.

Although the situation is improving, the contradiction of youth unemployment existing alongside child labour still needs close attention. Ending discrimination – especially gender-related – inside and outside the workplace, is another area of continuing work. Improving the management of intra-regional migration for employment also continues to pose many challenges for Governments, workers' and employers' organizations, as the supply of and demand for workers fluctuates from country to country.

“Our constituents have made great strides in improving the world of work for people in Asia and the Pacific,” said Ms Yamamoto. “There are still challenges to confront, but the ILO stands ready to continue providing technical assistance and other support so that as we move towards a century of cooperation, we can make our common goal of social justice and decent work for all a reality”.

All in the ILO Family

At the end of 1965, when the Regional Office moved from Colombo to Bangkok, one of the officials who made the trek to Thailand was Robert Staermose, a Manchester-educated Danish economist specializing in cooperative management and training.

During his time in Asia Mr Staermose also went on to help establish an ILO-supported training institute on cooperatives in Lyallpur, Pakistan.

His grand-daughter, only two years old at that time, remembers his visits back to see her family in a small village in Denmark and his stories of far-away lands and learning to eat with chopsticks.

Today that little girl is now a grown woman and the ILO Country Director for Sri Lanka, Tine Staermose.



Robert Staermose



Tine Staermose



ILO Director-General David A. Morse with the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the Fourth Asian Labour Conference, held in New Delhi, India in 1957. Photo: ILO, 1957.

¹ Only two countries from Africa were among the founding member States: Liberia and South Africa.

² CPI calculation from US Bureau for Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm)