



Asian Employment Forum: Growth, Employment and Decent Work

Beijing, China, 13-15 August 2007

Summary and directions for action

INTRODUCTION

The 14th Asian Regional Meeting (AsRM) in 2006 was a significant event, resulting in a commitment by the constituents to realizing decent work and, specifically an Asian Decent Work Decade 2006 – 2015 (ADWD).

The meeting called on the ILO to assist governments and social partners to develop new initiatives to consolidate and integrate action. The Office was asked to examine the feasibility of convening a regional event on growth, employment and decent work that would allow constituents to identify priorities, knowledge needs and challenges to implementation.

In response to this call the Beijing Employment Forum was organized. The Forum brought together the ILO's constituency and representatives of finance and planning in an effort towards placing employment and decent work objectives in the mainstream of national Government policies. As the realization of decent work for all requires action in a wide range of areas, a selected number of participants drawn from academia, regional organizations and other sources of expertise were also invited to participate.

There is much reason for optimism and hope. The Asia-Pacific economies are surging ahead, providing significant scope for improving living standards, reducing poverty and generating decent employment.

I DIAGNOSIS – THE GROWTH, EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK CHALLENGES IN ASIA PACIFIC

Using a set of background papers (which reviewed key challenges identified during the ARM), a wealth of ideas and experiences were shared during this roundtable. This produced an up-to-date diagnosis of the growth, employment and decent work challenges in the region:

- Combining productivity growth with employment generation and decent work
- Persistent and widespread informality
- Large pockets of poverty, vulnerability and a troubling increase in inequality
- Environmental pressure that increasingly threaten sustainable growth
- Protecting the rights of migrant workers and managing the growing number of migrants through regional cooperation
- Addressing the specific needs of women and youth, including under-utilization of labour and the challenges of an ageing workforce faced by some countries

- Ensuring coherence between macroeconomic policies and decent employment generation, especially in the context of globalization
- The need to ensure a social floor for all in Asia and the Pacific

II MAIN ISSUES AND POLICY PRIORITIES BY SESSION

Round table: Visions for a Decent Work Decade Roundtable

While tremendous progress has been made in reducing poverty and increasing per-capita GDP in the region, the Forum recognized that the Decent Work Agenda for the Asia-Pacific region cannot be successfully pursued without promoting economic, social and environmental goals in a coherent and mutually supportive manner. This session identified policies, strategies and governance measures needed to support sustainable and inclusive growth during the Asian Decent Work Decade.

Common themes

The interventions covered a number of important issues which were subsequently highlighted by the ILO's Director-General.

- Decent work has become an important objective for all countries yet national policies to achieve this take different shapes in different states. As a result decent work country programmes, which are tailored to individual country needs and circumstances and are part of their national development plans, take on greater importance in assisting countries.
- Despite the diversity of countries in the region the Forum identified common concerns and expressed the need to share experiences and good practices more effectively to address these challenges.
- Strong growth in Asia-Pacific allows – and societal challenges warrant – serious consideration of the establishment of an effective social floor, for the general public good. Such a floor could address the widespread problem of informality while allowing small enterprises to develop and flourish.
- International cooperation must play a central role in efforts to realize the goals of decent work and sustainable development.
- Trust between people and concerned partners is needed. Now there is accord on the objectives of decent work, agreement on the different policy options – and ensuring their coherence – is even more important.

Directions for action

- Support policy coherence related to social, environmental and economic sustainability and decent work in Asia so that it also takes into account relevant regional initiatives.
- Promote sustainable enterprises in line with the Conclusions adopted by the 2007 International Labour Conference.
- Make the ILO's "Green Jobs Initiative" operational at regional and national levels, using tripartite discussions and links with decent work country programmes.

Session 1A: Setting policy directions for job creation and poverty reduction

Over the last decade the Asia-Pacific region has been a leader in economic growth, but often this growth has not translated into the creation of enough jobs to absorb the expanding labour force and to reduce poverty sufficiently to meet the MDGs. This panel addressed the quest for policies that will support the creation of more and better jobs.

Common themes

- There was agreement between the panelists on the widespread underutilization of labour which translates into high levels of unemployment, under-employment, persistent poverty and vulnerability.
- Panelists discussed the main drivers of growth (consumption, exports, investment and government expenditure) and supportive policies for inclusive growth.
- Participants recognized the need for coherent macroeconomic, employment and social protection policies in designing an integrated policy framework. They also recognised the role of social dialogue.
- It is clear that governments have a key role to play in ensuring full employment.
- The establishment of effective social floors is crucial for providing protection to the most vulnerable, including laid-off workers seeking re-employment.
- Policies with a sectoral focus can boost employment, raise productivity and reduce poverty, particularly in rural areas.
- Human resource development through education and training is essential for productive employment and poverty reduction

Directions for action

- Dialogue between the ILO's constituents and planning agencies is essential for placing employment and decent work objectives into the mainstream of national policies. The Office should work to translate decent work objectives into operational initiatives using pilot programmes. Experiences from these pilots should be shared throughout the region.
- Assist constituents with the implementation of the Global Employment Agenda (GEA) as an operational and integrated framework of the employment pillar of DWCPs. This will provide a way to meet the AsRM's call for "tangible outcomes and practical measures" in implementing the Asian Decent Work Decade.

Session 1B: Sustaining Productivity and Competitiveness as a foundation for Decent Work

The presentations and comments focused on two driving forces: skills development and enterprise development. They also recognized that these cannot be effective without a broader enabling environment that includes employment-friendly macroeconomic policies, core labour standards, affordable social protection, effective social dialogue and constructive labour-management cooperation.

Common themes

- Linking skills formation to enterprise development and focusing on sectors with good job-creation potential. Key elements of support include access to infrastructure, utilities, transportation and markets in addition to joint skills and enterprise development. There were also many examples of public-private partnerships and incentives.
- Increasing the productivity of informal economy workers. This requires linking formal with informal training, recognizing skills acquired, and finding new ways to expand skills and entrepreneurship training for the informal economy.
- Social dialogue plays an important role in supporting productivity improvements, sharing the gains through better wages, and facilitating re-investment to expand enterprises.
- Women, young people, older workers, and people with disabilities may be trapped in low productivity jobs or be unemployed. Many countries are looking at ways to bring them into productive work – either by addressing labour shortages or promoting social inclusion.

Directions for action

There was a clear call for the ILO to identify successful policies and good practices and provide the constituents with a range of objectively presented options. Areas where ideas and models of skills and enterprise development would be particularly valuable include:

- The informal economy – particularly to increase formalization and improve work practices.
- Support for cluster development – there is potential for knowledge-sharing amongst countries.
- Gender equality – there is a need to share information on reaching out to women and to address gender issues in skills and entrepreneurship training.
- Services for those in low productivity work or who are excluded from work because of discrimination, poor education or lack of access to resources.
- Matching skills and enterprise development to the needs of sectors and industries that have the potential to grow and create quality jobs
- Increasing the capacity of the social partners to participate effectively in social dialogue on productivity and competitiveness.
- ILO help for constituents at country level to adapt different models to their national circumstances. Regionally, the ILO can facilitate direct exchanges of knowledge and information.
- Improve the quality of the information shared; the ILO has an opportunity to develop cost and time-effective impact assessment methods.

Session 2A: Labour market governance

The speakers and participants of the session focused on two main themes: balancing flexibility and security through improved labour market governance and strengthening and improving labour market institutions using the best combination of different instruments such as laws and social dialogue. The speakers noted that genuine efforts to build labour market institutions are underway in many Asian countries. However labour market institutions need to be strengthened and improved if we are to deal in an efficient and equitable manner with the shared challenges of managing the social and economic changes arising from globalization.

Common themes

- Tripartite social dialogue is an indispensable tool for achieving decent work for all in a transparent and accountable manner and for managing social and economic changes in a globalized world. Tripartite social dialogue is also a desirable end itself since it is a characteristic of an effective and efficient labour market.
- There should be full respect for the fundamental rights of workers and employers - including freedom of association and right to bargain collectively – so that the social partners are enabled and empowered to make a full contribution, through social dialogue, towards achieving decent work for all.
- Effective labour market governance requires coherence between different areas of economic and social policy and interventions that are effectively coordinated at all levels, from national down to enterprise level.
- Balancing security and flexibility is a common challenge for tripartite partners in a globalized world. To achieve such balance the tripartite partners need to make optimal use of a combination of different policy instruments – not just ‘hard laws’ but also ‘soft regulations’ - which they should support with capacity as well as commitment.

Directions for action

The Office should continue to assist the tripartite constituents in developing and implementing legal frameworks which ensure full respect for fundamental rights and create an environment that enables the social partners to make a full contribution to achieving decent work.

At the same time ILO should continue to support capacity building to help the social partners develop and implement policies designed to strengthen labour market institutions and improve labour market governance.

The LO needs to become a more effective facilitator for the sharing of information, experiences and knowledge about good labour market governance practices, using the ILO's Decent Work Knowledge Network.

Session 2B: Rolling back informality

There was a general agreement that the informal economy is a theme that cuts across all four pillars of the decent work agenda and requires integrated action.

Common themes

- The nature of the informal economy varies, particularly between more traditional agricultural and home industries sectors and more modern IT-based international outsourcing arrangements. But worker vulnerability remains pervasive in both.
- Organization of the informal economy is needed, with new forms of association suited to this highly disparate work force.
- Priority should be given to expanding the decent work agenda to cover the informal sector rather than in reducing the size of the informal sector
- A minimum package of working conditions, wage standards and social benefits should be in place for workers in the informal economy, but needs to be balanced against the need for economic competitiveness.

Directions for action

- There is a need to continue work on “mapping the informal economy”, building on definitions that have already been outlined by the International Conferences of Labour Statisticians and the Delhi Group. Based on these definitions there is a need to continue improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of information.
- A basic legal framework covering the informal economy is needed, within individual countries and across the region.
- Particular attention should be given to reducing the insecurity of vulnerable workers in the informal economy, including rural migrants and laid-off workers
- There is a need to share knowledge about good practices in all areas of decent work, including innovative ways to improve productivity and working conditions, extending social protection, building self-reliant communities, strengthening representation and voice and extending the outreach of organizations.

Plenary session: Asia-Pacific Knowledge Network on Decent Work

This session provided a forum to discuss the proposed Asia-Pacific Knowledge Network on Decent Work. Participants were requested to consider two key aspects of the proposed Network: 1) the content of the Network, including the types of information that should be included; and 2) the products and services that the Network would offer.

Common themes - General

- Participants recalled the Conclusions of the 14th Asian Regional Meeting which included agreement to encourage regional cooperation and tripartite initiatives to share information, knowledge and experience. The idea of a regional knowledge network was borne out of these discussions.
- Broad support was expressed for the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Knowledge Network on Decent Work. It was clear that much work must be done to assess and plan the best ways in which the Network can be established and made operational.
- Participants underscored the need for the Network to be adequately resourced and to have tripartite governance.

Common themes – Content

- Suggested topics for the Network included: employment stability, labour market governance, labour migration, the informal economy, productivity and competitiveness. It was also suggested that the Network should include recent labour market statistics related to these topics. The four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda could form the basis of the structure of the network.
- The Network could present ILO research and tools alongside country experiences, to facilitate learning between countries. Examples of both “positive” and “negative” experiences and practices would enrich the dialogue.
- Participants recommended that the Network should “start simple” and be built up over time.
- It was suggested that the Network should make full use of existing networks both in the region and outside Asia-Pacific.

Common themes – Products and services

- It was suggested that the Network could also provide a mechanism for constituents to share information amongst themselves. Accordingly, as Secretariat for the Network, the ILO would not judge or censor content related to this mechanism.
- Participants indicated that the Network should be linked to other regional networks and initiatives and should aim to build constituents’ capacity.

It was suggested that the Network should use open access and an accessible format and that it should provide relevant and timely information.

III SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ASIAN DECENT WORK DECADE

DCWP implementation and UN reform

- Challenges and priority areas for action identified during the Forum cannot be dealt with in isolation. DWCPs are the key vehicle to ensure coherence in producing tangible outcomes for the Asian Decent Work Decade.
- The formulation of DWCPs needs to involve social partners and, on the government side, all relevant ministries and institutions with policy and technical competence over relevant implementation issues.
- Through DWCP, constituents can identify further concrete ways in which the Office can support their plans for achieving their objectives related to growth, employment and decent work.
- In the context of continuing UN reform, the ILO is fully committed to working together on “delivering as one”. The decent work toolkit prepared to help sister UN agencies mainstream

decent work and employment into their agendas will be developed further for national use and will contribute to system-wide policy coherence.

Strengthening labour market information systems

- The Forum highlighted the importance of sound and realistic labour market information and statistical services to support analysis and policymaking, and the need for capacity building in this area.
- Particular efforts are required to improve methodology and measurement of the less easily quantifiable dimensions of decent work (decent work indicators). Constituents would need to work closely with the Office to assess the adequacy of current statistical methods and make recommendations for appropriate changes.

Knowledge-sharing and expert networks

- The Forum created a better understanding of how the Office could support constituents' calls for a better way to develop and exchange knowledge and best practices and build and strengthen the "knowledge communities" on the relevant topics.
- The Forum initiated a process of consultation that will assist the Office in designing a better Decent Work Knowledge Network for Asia and the Pacific.

Regional Cooperation

- Build on concrete experience with ASEAN to increase engagement with other relevant regional organizations (such as SAARC and APO), to address cross-cutting and emerging issues including labour market information systems, green jobs, employment and the decent work implications of climate change.

Funding mechanisms and local resource mobilization

- Sustainable and predictable funding is essential for providing consistent support to countries in implementing the Asian Decent Work Decade. In this regard the establishment of the Regular Budget Supplementary Account (RBSA) will facilitate the gap between Regular Budget and Extra-Budgetary resources. Tapping funding provided through UN reform and the MDG enhancement fund will provide additional opportunities.