

INTRODUCTION

Since the Decent Work Agenda was launched in 1999, after its adoption by the International Labour Conference at its 87th Session, there has been no lack of attempts to establish the full meaning of the concept and, more particularly, to develop concrete and reliable means of measuring countries' performance in achieving decent work for their citizens. Clearly, there is much interest not only in measuring how well countries of all sorts perform in this respect, but also in the degree of correlation with other crucial measures of social and economic development, such as the Human Development Index, or simply GDP per capita.

This special issue of the *International Labour Review* on "Measuring decent work" has been compiled with the aim of reflecting the range of approaches to the measurement of decent work so far developed by a number of distinguished researchers working mostly, but not exclusively, inside the International Labour Office. The intention is not to indicate a preference for one approach over another, but rather to demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of decent work. We hope that this will emerge from the contributions selected, so that readers will be able to appreciate the complex nature of the concept and therefore, also, the great difficulties in evolving viable and reliable statistical indicators for its measurement.

The articles contained in this issue variously provide clarification on the concepts involved, present a variety of innovative methodologies for measuring decent work, attempt practical illustrations thereof, discuss possible trade-offs between individual components of decent work and, of course, seek to indicate the remaining problems requiring resolution before decent work can be comprehensively measured. The special issue closes with a glimpse of the relationship between decent work and human development, established on the basis of cross-national data.

In the opening article, *Dharam Ghai* presents the first of four distinct approaches to measuring decent work presented in this special issue; his concern is the full range of indicators of decent work applicable in industrialized countries, transition economies and developing

countries. He starts by briefly discussing the uses and limitations of indicators in the context of decent work in all these environments, and then considers more closely the suitability of indicators applied to the four major components of decent work elaborated when the notion was first mooted in 1999. These are: employment, social protection, workers' rights and social dialogue. In so doing, he highlights the long-standing and continuing concern of the ILO with these issues, pointing to relevant international instruments. Finally, for illustrative purposes, he presents an index to measure the performance on decent work by 22 industrialized countries in the 1990s, and the results obtained as regards aspects of gender discrimination, employment, social protection and social dialogue.

The next article, by *Richard Anker, Igor Chernyshev, Philippe Egger, Farhad Mehran and Joseph A. Ritter*, aims to provide the basis for developing a core set of decent work indicators in order to focus efforts on, and monitor progress towards decent work around the world. The article starts with a discussion of the policy issues needing to be addressed through statistical indicators of decent work, and an examination of the concept and its implications for constructing statistical indicators. The authors then translate the concept into broad, readily understood characteristics of work, namely: employment opportunities; unacceptable work; adequate earnings and productive work; decent hours; stability and security of work; balancing work and family life; fair treatment in work; safe work environment; social protection; social dialogue and workplace relations; and the economic and social context of decent work. Arguing that a comprehensive measure must necessarily cover all the components of decent work, the authors then identify 30 existing, proposed and readily usable indicators with which to measure these characteristics. The particular value of this article is thus its comprehensive enumeration of all the components of decent work. However, in view of the comprehensive approach adopted, the problems of data availability in this area impose particularly severe limitations, and are an obstacle to an immediate application of this measure in its entirety.

In their article, *David Bescond, Anne Châtaignier and Farhad Mehran* select seven indicators from the 30 identified by Richard Anker et al. in the previous article, in order to measure certain key dimensions of decent work. Their selection is largely a pragmatic one, being dictated by the availability of comparable data for a large number of countries. The indicators measure decent work deficits (DWDs) relating to hourly pay, hours of work, unemployment, school enrolment, the youth share of unemployment, the male-female gap in labour force participation, and old age without pension. The authors combine these seven indicators into a composite index measuring the decent work deficit at national level for the 40 countries for which data were available for at

least four of the above-mentioned seven aspects of decent work. As a result, these countries can be compared and – tentatively – ranked in terms of the degree of deficit in these aspects of decent work.

The article by *Florence Bonnet, José B. Figueiredo* and *Guy Standing* seeks to establish a family of decent work indexes applicable at three levels: the macro (aggregate) and meso (workplace) levels, and the micro (individual) level. At the macro level, an index is created for each of seven forms of socio-economic security,¹ by combining indicators of national and international instruments and rules to protect workers, indicators of mechanisms and measure through which legislated principles and rules are realized, and indicators showing how far they are effective in ensuring worker protection. These indexes are then combined to form a national decent work index (on a scale of 0 to 1) for 84 countries. This index proves to be positively correlated with the UNDP's Human Development Index and with GDP per capita, and to be inversely related to income inequality.

The previous contributions having presented four distinct approaches to measuring decent work, the following article, by *Gary S. Fields*, considers the possible trade-offs and the potential for complementarity between the various components of the Decent Work Agenda. The author presents a simplified two-component model of a “decent work frontier” consisting of quantity and quality of employment (the latter used as a proxy for labour standards), and identifies labour market conditions in which there would be trade-offs and complementarities between the two components. The article argues and empirically analyses how economic growth could contribute to the promotion of decent work.

The last article, by *Ifikhar Ahmed*, is concerned with the contribution that the promotion of decent work can make to human development and to economic growth. To explore this, the author compares the performance of 38 countries studied in respect of the UNDP's Human Development Index, the index of decent work deficit (DWD) elaborated by Bescond, Châtaignier and Mehran in this issue, and GDP per capita. The article also shows how – surprisingly – countries without high incomes can nevertheless achieve lower levels of decent work deficit and, conversely, countries with high incomes do not automatically achieve lower levels of decent work deficit.

In conclusion, the contributions to this special issue illustrate the “state of the art” on research on measuring decent work in three important respects. Firstly, the diversity of approaches taken shows the very

¹ Covering security regarding the labour market, employment, job, work, skills reproduction, income, and voice representation, described in an earlier article by Guy Standing (“From People's Security Surveys to a Decent Work Index”, in *International Labour Review* (Geneva), Vol. 141 (2002), No. 4, pp. 441-454).

complex task involved in measuring decent work. Each individual approach presented here has value according to the purpose for which the statistics/indicators are used. For instance, if national decent work trends are to be monitored annually, the methodology of the DWD index would be relevant. Secondly, in four out of the six articles, an attempt at cross-country comparison is made by applying the respective index for illustrative purposes. And thirdly, the articles point to the hazards of cross-country comparisons based on partial composite indexes, as a country's ranking can be affected by the methodology, the data source, the level of aggregation and the selection of components used in constructing and estimating a composite index. (Several west European countries achieve a high ranking irrespective of the type of decent work index used – presumably because they apply sound social policies.) Nevertheless, it is likely that a methodology similar to the index of decent work deficit would be useful for monitoring national trends on an annual basis, as in the case of the Human Development Index.