

The quest for social justice: the role of research and dialogue

**Interview with Sangheon Lee, Director of the ILO
Employment Policy, Job Creation & Livelihoods
Department, and Mikel Landabaso, Director, Fair &
Sustainable Economy of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of
the European Commission (EC).**

Introduction by host:

Welcome to the ILO Employment podcast series, Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The Future of Work. I'm your host Tom Netter...and today we're going to talk about the role of research and dialogue in the quest for social justice.

The advancement of social justice is an idea that's getting new attention these days. We're hearing more and more about it—and that the need for social justice in our lives is becoming more relevant than ever.

One of the main areas where social justice is growing as an idea--and a reality that people want--is the working world.

That means a lot of us. Nearly half of the world's population does some kind of work—and as the world population grows by about 100,000 persons a day and economies expand—there will be more and more people looking for jobs and more and more jobs looking for people to fill them.

In this challenging environment, what role can research and dialogue play in advancing social justice in the world of work?

To find out, we've invited two of the top experts in this field to today's podcast. They are Sangheon Lee, Director of the ILO's Employment Policy, Job Creation & Livelihoods Department, and Mikel Landabaso, Director, Fair & Sustainable Economy of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission (EC).

Sangheon, Mikel, welcome to our podcast.

Tom: My first question is to both of you. What role does employment policy play in advancing equality and social justice? Sangheon?

Sangheon: Thanks, Tom. As you know, the equality and social justice have multiple dimensions, but access to a decent job opportunity is obviously one of them because work influences essential parts of life and society. Quite often employment or jobs is where actually people experience inequality and social injustice. That's why employment policies are very important, and also a natural candidate for any social actions to advance equality and social justice.

When we talk about the employment policies we talk about a set of the policies that have an impact on labour markets. This includes not only very classical labour market and skill policies, but also sector policies and macro policies and investment policies, enterprise policies and social protection policies, et cetera. In doing so, a great attention should be given to the different situations and needs of people, especially disadvantaged groups. That's why the ILO strongly advocates gender-responsive employment policies and also the ILO programmes place strong focus on youth employment. And most importantly, we need to involve the workers and employers in the design and implementation of employment policies. Our analysis has clearly shown again and again that the social dialogue improves the design as well as the implementation of integrated employment policy frameworks. Having everyone's voice in policymaking is a crucial step to social justice and equalities.
Thank you.

Tom: Thank you, Sangheon. Now over to you, Mikel.

Mikel: Well, thank you. Thank you so much, Tom, for these opportunities. It's a pleasure to be here with Sangheon and you.

Let me rebound on some of the things that maybe Sangheon suggested. The logic to respond to your question probably the argument goes employment policies in

coordination, in good complementarity with other types of policies are essential for delivering decent jobs. And decent jobs are precisely the most effective way to provide justice, equality in the market economy that we know.

And, I think philosophy here in a way, plays a role because when we are talking about decent jobs, we are talking about what? We are talking about dignity. We are talking about meaning in life, sense of purpose. We are also talking about, and I think Sangheon mentioned this, status, respect in a community. This is something that it is intangible but essential for anybody.

There are other more tangible or more economic things that these employment policies can touch upon along these lines - skills, networks for professional advancement and social mobility. Social mobility is done largely by accessing the labour market to good job, good, decent jobs where you can learn and move forward. Then also you can mention that it empowers citizens to exercise, the bottom line is they exercise their freedom of choice by the job they have largely, and in particular when you think that most of the income of households, of families, in countries like mine and in the global South, in particular, comes from small and medium-sized companies where most of the income comes from the salary. This is why employment policies that determine consumption power, that determine living standards, location, social relations, where you live and who you meet, and all these things is really, factors that explain how decent jobs condition, in a very large way, your life in the sense of social justice and equality. This is why we have Article 43 in the United Nations, the right to work.

Tom: Okay, Mikel. Thank you so much for that reply. Now, it leads me to ask what would be the elements of future cooperation between the ILO and the JRC, as a follow-up to the joint symposium that both of your organizations held recently, and how will this build on already existing research and analysis by the ILO and the JRC? Mikel, can you start on that?

Mikel: Well, the first thing to say is the symposium was the, let's say, the exit strategy to three years of good cooperation. This is intense interpersonal cooperation trying to analyze and anticipate how digital transition, digital technologies, automation are reshaping the work, the labour market in Europe, the jobs that we know today. And things like algorithmic management, automation, occupational change, labour market transitions, which were really the chapters of this symposium, are the founding pillars of the cooperation ahead of us. As two institutions that have learned to know each other, have learned to appreciate each other and see the complementarities between our lines of research and want to push forward together. This means that we are drafting a

cooperation agreement. We are waiting for Sangheon and his team to come to Seville to have a deep dive with our two teams and then go deeper into what we started, I think successfully. And, the proof was the symposium and the discussions around it.

Tom: Thank you, Mikel. Now, Sangheon, what's your take here on this question?

Sangheon: I think Mikel already said how successful our joint project has been. I'm personally very, very happy with the process of the joint project and also the outcome.

One of the things actually I want to highlight here is that this project really undertakes the innovative research conceptually and empirically, but actually the project actually didn't stop there because one of the very unique approach of our joint project is to use these research findings to foster dialogue with the policymakers and also social partners. The research done is not a goal itself but influences actually policy decisions.

We really have the fantastic dialogues at the national and regional and global levels as part of this joint project. The symposium we had was actually one of those dialogues. We got very positive feedback throughout the event. And this dialogue is really appreciated, and also, more importantly, influences actually policy and political thinking. That's why I mean we are really, really grateful for the European Union for funding this project. Also, as Mikel said, we very much hope we'll continue to work on that.

I think one of the issues we are looking at as our next research project is looking at issues like macro and investment policies, which will really compliment what we have done on the labour market transition and digital changes and also the impacts on the enterprises and workers as well.

Tom: Sangheon, thanks so much for that. I'm assuming that this can help introduce some perspectives and equip policymakers and institutions and others with the tools to forge sound and effective policies. Is that correct, Sangheon?

Sangheon: Yeah, absolutely. I mean this is exactly what we have in mind. I'll be very brief on this. Let me just give one example. I have already mentioned the excellent joint work with the JRC, which actually created extensive empirical data and analysis on the workers and enterprises. Some confirm basically what we have already known or what we have suspected, but there are many others which are a lot unexpected or even surprising. For instance, how actually people have

navigated or experienced different jobs. It's more complex than actually we have thought. This means the current policy measures may not be so optimal at the moment.

So, then we actually put all these findings on tables for the policy dialogue, and once the relevance and significance of these findings are confirmed, then we naturally move to find good ways of supporting policy development. For that, of course we need a solid, user-friendly tools for the designing and implementing the policies, of course, with sufficient room for allowing country or situation-specific adaptation.

Tom: Sangheon, thanks. Mikel, do you have any or what are your views on this area?

Mikel: I think we are an institution that is focusing on science for policy. We start from a demand, a need, a question, and then we try to use science to resolve it or to help see clearer. In that sense, this symposium, this collaboration is establishing the groundwork for anticipating what is coming.

Policies have these inertias in them. Policymakers, political masters are not very well-trained or accustomed to looking into the future and anticipate. This is a risky business. Now, when we say we are going to join forces with the best of our brains and talent, and we do have it, on trying to identify what it means for decent jobs, algorithms or algorithm management, artificial intelligence or whatever, automation, digital transition, whatever you want to call it, what we are saying is we are trying to respond to the question, is this going to transform employment in a positive sense? Is it going to increase job satisfaction or rather more control? Is it going to increase gender balance, social justice or is it going to be about job polarization?

Responding to these questions will enable and will empower policymakers to do good policies. I think Sangheon was hinting at this also in his first answer. He said, now we will delve on macroeconomic and investment policies. This is absolutely essential. This is a framework within which employment policies and jobs are being created and we need to look into that, but we need to look also at the institutional landscape. There are three issues there. One is the type of regulations that can capture and treat and frame the complexity that is coming to us in this anticipation of the future with a digital transition. This means regulations in terms of competition policy, types of wage bargaining and all the laws that need to be concentrated and decided by the politicians in anticipation of things that are happening now and very fast.

But secondly, policymakers should realize that this complexity needs a whole-of-government approach, needs also a multi-level governance approach, needs

several policies to work together. And these several policies, they can be captured under the broad name, if you want, of innovation policies. Some people call it industrial policy, skills well beyond narrowly defined employment policies. It's all of them together. All of them together also taking good care of what we call place-based conditions, context, territory matter. We reason in terms of what we call ecosystems. All these elements have to be put together. We need to make sense of them in order to respond to the questions that the policymakers will be confronted with. This is our role to clarify and help in this business. Over to you, Tom.

Tom: Thanks very much, Mikel, for that great answer. I think you've basically answered a couple of my questions already. What I'd like to do now is go over to Sangheon and say can you give us your views regarding trends that are going to be examined, like the influence of artificial intelligence on jobs and employment, the impact of a more tech-driven work environment, and also about the importance of the relationship between employment policies and strong institutions and how exactly this can result in solutions relevant to the rapidly changing landscape of the world of work? Sangheon?

Sangheon: Yes, absolutely. I mean, as a part of our collaboration with the JRC, we really want to continue to tackle basically frontier issues to make sure our research findings can facilitate the policy dialogue and policy development on the emerging and evolving issues, which definitely include, as Mikel mentioned, like the impact of the AI on employment and also environmental and climate changes. There are so many other issues in that direction.

The one thing I want to mention here is that oftentimes the research tends to focus on the just aggregate job numbers when it comes to impact of these technological changes on the labour market. But in our view, it's very, very important to look at the job quality and the distribution of new jobs. This is because we have seen digitalization, for example, has not necessarily reduced aggregate employment level, but in many cases, that actually led to job prioritization between good and bad jobs. Also, we witnessed that some of the disadvantaged groups had not actually benefitted from the huge opportunities. In this respect, as I said before, on gender and youth and age and others are very important elements we have to consider.

For us, investigating employment impact means we have to look at the quantity and quality and also distribution of employment. We also want to look at the employment issues from a bit broader and forward-looking perspective, as Mikel already highlighted. For instance, we really want to know how we can direct this

current wave of digitalization and green transitions to inclusive structural transformation because at the end of the day, this process of this structural transformation will create a sustainable path of creating decent jobs. Of course, this begs very important questions relating to macroeconomic and sector and investment policies. Once again, Mikel mentioned that as well.

I think in doing all of this as, Tom, you asked about this as well, about the role of strong institutions. I mean, this for us is a very crucial question. Perhaps in the 100 years of the experience, the ILO firmly believes that securing decent work for all requires strong labour market institutions. I mean, institutions create a minimum level of protection for all whatever the situation is. Also, in doing so, institutions create a stability and security to the labour market, which actually both the workers and also the enterprise and employers appreciate. Then much of the income security and employment security, as we know, comes from these institutions.

At same time, this is also very important, institutions help in facilitating, creating decent jobs. For instance, institutions help when the workers who have acquired the skills through intensive training program have difficulties with finding jobs. Employment services and other supporting institutions can come in to bring these workers to the companies who needs them. In short, institutions help job matching and reducing unemployment.

As you can imagine, these aspects of institutions are even more critical when the world of work confronts disruptive changes, as Mikel actually detailed in his remarks. Also, there are more workers and enterprises in transition. The work of the institutions is important more than ever. That's why we need effective, strong and labour market institutions as an indispensable part of the employment policies. I think they're a bit like the blood vessels which circulate the blood to where the body needs it. We know the healthy blood vessel carries the blood to all parts of the body. There is no discrimination. There is no exclusion. Likewise, if we want to make our labour market institutions strong and effective, they should be inclusive.

Thank you.

Tom: Mikel, Sangheon, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts on this issue with us and also for giving us your time.

As we have heard, researching ways to advancing social justice is a tall order. It seems that this move by the JRC and ILO is a step in the right direction.

The goal will be to fill policy gaps and better communicate the findings to policymakers and other stakeholders involved in the pursuit of social justice.

What is clear is that there's no "one size fits all solution". But what's equally clear is that the pursuit of social justice in the world of work will affect us all.

I'm Tom Netter, and you've been listening to the ILO EMPLOYMENT Policy Department podcast series, "Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work". For more on this, go to www.ilo.org/employment. Meanwhile, thank you for your time.