

In recent years Asia and the Pacific has seen an increase in the number of middle-income countries (MICs). This represents not only an opportunity for a broader exchange of knowledge and expertise on development issues, but for forging new partnerships that support the goal of decent work for all in the region.

The challenge for the ILO is to foster and capture this regional growth momentum and turn it into an opportunity. A new Unit for Partnerships, Resource Mobilisation and United Nations Reform has recently been established at the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in Bangkok.

There are three complementary types of partnerships the ILO aims to explore. They revolve around regional institutions, donor relations and South-South cooperation.

Regional institutional partnerships build on both existing and new collaboration opportunities between the ILO and other United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asian Development Bank.

Key donor partnerships in the region include Japan, Korea and Australia. These countries' support for the ILO's work in the region remains essential, and the growing trend towards long-term partnership arrangements increases both the breadth and the predictability of cooperation.

The final category is the growing potential for South-South cooperation, in particular 'triangular' South-South cooperation; bringing together two countries from the Global South, and a partner agency – the ILO – providing expertise, experience and technical knowledge.

South-South Cooperation is becoming an increasingly relevant approach through which countries in the so-called Global South can share knowledge and exchange expertise to advance their development goals. South-South cooperation is about partnering countries below the high-income category regardless of their actual geographical location. Some South-South cooperation actually takes place in the northern hemisphere – hence the term Global South. For the ILO this type of cooperation can help promote decent work beyond the reach of its traditional technical cooperation activities.

South-South cooperation builds on the continued growth experienced in Asia Pacific and triangular South-South cooperation should focus on the needs of LDCs in particular (Asia and the Pacific currently has 14 of the world's 49 LDC's).

LDCs/LICs can partner with multilateral agencies to integrate decent work into their broader development agendas, as defined by the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. They can also use expertise and experience available in the region within a specific, broader, ILO support programme. One example of this is the current cooperation between Lao PDR, Singapore and the ILO on the establishment of a labour inspection system, as part of the ASEAN occupational safety and health network.

This approach is supported by the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "The more developing countries can share lessons about what works, from micro-finance to cash transfer programmes, the more we can advance", he said, in a statement (delivered on his behalf by the ILO Director-General Juan Somavia) at the Global South-South Development Expo in Geneva, in November 2010.

The five-day event, hosted by the ILO, was designed to showcase concrete examples of cooperation in the global south, address developmental challenges and find solutions through South-South cooperation.

This approach has also received support from, Michelle Bachelet, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (United Nations Women) and Chairperson of the Social Protection Floor Advisory Group. "Innovative development solutions are coming from the South," she said, speaking at the South-South Expo, because, "solutions are where the challenges are".

There is also potential to support the Decent Work Agenda in Asia Pacific through public-private partnerships (within the framework of the ILO policy on public-private partnerships). Public-private partnerships are used in longer-term cooperation activities, such as the Better Factories Cambodia Programme, which is improving working conditions and productivity in garment factories.