

The ILO and the Millennium Development Goals: Questions and Answers

Interview with Alice Ouedraogo, Deputy Director of the ILO's Policy Integration Department about the International Labour Organization's efforts to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in particular the first MDG on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

Ten years after the Millennium Declaration, what is the status of efforts to achieve MDG targets on poverty and employment?

Alice Ouedraogo: The ILO has been very active in contributing to achieving the MDGs, particularly the first goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. One of the most powerful messages we have learnt over the past 10 years is that employment is the best route out of poverty. The world cannot do away with extreme poverty and hunger without creating jobs in substantial numbers. But not any jobs--jobs that provide dignity, family security, protection, voice and recognition and that bring peace and security to the community.

Progress has been made, and the UN report shows that the target of reducing poverty by half by the year 2015 is likely to be achieved. But if you look at the situation of individual countries you realize that there's another story. The global positive assessment is due to the fact that countries like China have made enormous progress in reducing poverty during the past 10 years. Without China in the picture, the situation would be different and efforts to provide full employment and decent work to all, in the majority of countries are far from being fulfilled. So there is one challenge that remains, that is very important: how to get people back to work, and how to create enough jobs to absorb the 45 million new comers to the labour market every year.

How did the economic crisis affect these targets?

Alice Ouedraogo: Whatever is going to be done, all efforts that are going to be done to achieve the MDGs by 2015 have to be taken in the context of the crisis. The crisis has had a very negative impact on all MDGs in all countries. In the area of employment, it translated into sharp increases in lay offs, in drastic slowdowns in hiring, and this led to unemployment, under employment and informality, and it also led to more gender discrimination.

Can you give us a few examples for strategies and measures that work?

Alice Ouedraogo: In the context of a crisis, there's something that is very important: The poor and the most vulnerable groups of the population have to sustain themselves during the crisis until the economy recovers. One of the most powerful ways of doing that is by providing the basic social protection floor to the poor and vulnerable, with two main objectives: first, to reduce poverty among very poor parts of the population, and second to break the vicious circle of transmitting poverty from one generation to another.

A good example is the Bolsa Familia programme in Brazil which provides a stipend to the poor families, for them to continue consuming, but under certain conditions including sending children to school, going to the health care etc. Using this formula, Brazil was able to lift some 50 million people out of poverty, 50 million people who belonged to 12 million households.

How can we realize the ambitious target of achieving full and productive employment for all?

Alice Ouedraogo: The ILO has been very active both at a policy level but also at an operational level. At a policy level, I think the ILO has played a very important role in bringing to the forefront the message that decent work has to be a central element of development policies if we really want to reach MDG 1 and also the other MDGs, because decent work is also relevant for all the MDGs.

The second thing is that in order to respond to the crisis, the ILO has adopted the Global Jobs Pact in 2009. The Pact is a portfolio of policy responses and recovery measures that are proposed to countries, so that they can pick the ones that are more relevant to their situations, in order to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis. Maybe it's too early to come up with a final kind of conclusion, but some countries that are implementing the Pact were able to save jobs, and to retain people on their jobs. Some others embarked on programmes aimed at promoting small and medium enterprises with a lot of success.

This is not the time to start reducing expenses on the social front. The ILO has made some research work that has proven very clearly that investing in extending social protection, providing global social protection floor to the poor and the vulnerable is not that expensive over time and is affordable even by the poorest countries. We are asking countries to invest in themselves and to look at the long-term and not at the immediate term, because in the long-term a social protection floor can only benefit a country.