

Talking weather:

Trade unions and climate change

It's been a way of breaking the ice – but now it's time for real discussions and bargaining to find solutions to save not only the tops of the icebergs, but the whole planet. In order not to be a drop in the ocean the ILO needs to strengthen its capacity to address the issue of climate change and assist its constituents with the transition processes in relation to changes in jobs and qualifications. Lene Olsen of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities reports.

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GENEVA – Climate change will affect not only the way we talk about weather. For many people around the world, particularly in developing countries, climate change will have a deep impact on working life, income and lifestyle. Not only will workers have to adapt to new and cleaner production methods, but in many cases workplaces may disappear due to unsustainable production or even because a particular geographical area no longer exists. In this scenario, whole communities might even be forced to migrate. But even apart from such drastic impacts, the weather is already affecting specific sectors. Tourism is one example.

The tourism sector is highly susceptible to climate change. As a result of rising sea level, many coastal areas and small islands will have to address changes in relation to jobs. Sea-level rise in the Maldives (where tourism provides 18 per cent of GDP, 60 per cent of foreign exchange earnings and 90 per cent of government tax revenue) will mean, at best, severe coastal erosion, and at worst, that a large proportion of the land mass will disappear over the next 30 years and salt water intrusion will make the islands uninhabitable.

Coastal zones are not the only places affected; mountain regions will also face challenges in relation to economic activities and employment. A recent OECD study shows that skiing is sensitive to climate change. The Alps are particularly at risk and climate model projects show even greater changes in the coming decades, with less snow at low altitudes and receding glaciers and melting permafrost higher up. Tourism in the Alps is important for the economy with 60-80 million tourists and 160 million ski days in France, Austria, Switzerland and Germany each year. Winter tourism in the mountains of North America may face the same problems. This will have an enormous impact on employees in this sector – travel guides, workers in hotels and restaurants and even in the transport sector, will be faced with greener pastures than they want.

Challenge to European economies

Climate change will be a challenge for employment in all economic sectors. In February 2007 the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in cooperation with the Social Development Agency (SDA), which includes Syndex, the Wuppertal Institute and ISTAS, presented their joint study on the impact on employment of climate change and CO2 emission reduction measures in the EU-25 to 2030. The study was commissioned by the European Commission, DG Environment, as a contribution to improve current understanding of the relationship between climate change and employment, and was supported financially by six European governments (Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom).

The study examines the impact on employment of global warming in Europe and looks at the challenges for employment of the transition towards a lower CO2 European economy by 2030 in four economic sectors: energy production, transport, steel/cement production and construction/housing. Even moderate climate change will affect economic activity and employment in Europe, with some regions and economic sectors particularly vulnerable. Increased warming is likely to have damaging consequences and there is a need for better coherence between climate policies and employment policies. The study clearly recommends the active involvement of workers in the development of employment transition programmes and policies in relation to climate change. Social dialogue and collective bargaining are needed to implement adaptation and mitigation policies.

The study focuses only on the European Union, but there is no doubt that similar research will also be needed in developing countries in order to sufficiently analyse the social consequences of climate change and its impact on workers.

The role of the workers

It's time to act! More than one-third of the global population is economically active, hence it is important for workplaces to address the issue of climate change and its impact. Workers of the world and their organizations have a key role to play. Not alone, but in cooperation with their employer counterparts, the

community at large and with local regional and international governments. From the local level to the international, from the shop-floor to the United Nations – everybody needs to combine forces.

Chapter 29 of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit's Agenda for Change – Agenda 21 – highlights the importance of strengthening the role of workers and their trade unions in sustainable development: "As representatives of the workers, trade unions are vital actors in facilitating the achievement of sustainable development in view of their experience in addressing industrial change, the extremely high priority they give to protection of the working environment and the related natural environment."

The biggest challenge for the trade unions lies at the enterprise level. To influence the way their company or organization affects their workplaces, lives, surrounding communities and environment, freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively are fundamental. When these preconditions are met, trade unions and employers can jointly improve working conditions in relation to environmental issues at the workplace. They can develop purchasing and recycling policies aimed at environmental protection, favouring low-energy lighting, low fuel-consuming vehicles, biodegradable cleaning materials, wood from environmentally well-managed forests, recycled paper, the elimination of excessive packaging, and so on.

Social dialogue for a just transition

But beyond these environmental issues, many workplaces might disappear completely through structural changes caused by the changing climate. This will have an enormous impact on employment, and workers and their organizations need to address socio-economic policies at national level. In order to have a "just transition", socially, economically and environmentally, from unsustainable industries to more sustainable ones, workers, employers and governments need to cooperate. Social dialogue at national level through planning, education and preparation of changes will make such transition more fair and efficient.

Trade union organizations throughout the world are involved in activities for more environmentally sustainable development. In Germany for instance, the trade unions have been involved in energy policies for reducing CO₂ emissions, and an Alliance for Work and the Environment has been established, accompanied by an investment of US\$1.8 billion to promote such policies and direct them towards the creation of employment. In Spain, Sectoral Round Tables on Social Dialogue have been set up to implement the Kyoto Protocol in industrial sectors, with the participation of the Government, trade unions and business organizations. In Argentina the Government has adopted a programme on work and the environment, and in Brazil the Ministries of Environment and Labour are negotiating the adoption of a similar programme.

With globalization, many national enterprises have developed into multinationals. To ensure that workers' rights and working conditions are respected in all the workplaces of multinational enterprises, more than 50 International Framework Agreements (IFAs) have been negotiated and signed between multinational companies and the trade unions representing their workforces, which are themselves represented by individual Global Union Federations (GUFs). Many of these agreements also include "green" clauses setting out commitments on specific environmental issues.

In recent years trade unions have been significantly involved in lobbying for rights at the UN level in relation to environmentally sustainable development. Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the trade union movement has been involved in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. At the 12th annual Conference of the Parties (COP 12) of the UNFCCC held in November 2006, 32 trade unionists from 12 countries participated in labour activities supported by an extensive programme of lobbying government delegations for the implementation of the Kyoto Treaty.

At the 15th Annual Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) held in May this year, a 50-member trade union delegation from 23 countries participated. Its aim was to put the world of work, workplaces and decent employment at the heart of policy recommendations for industrial development, as well as to ask national governments to assume a stronger role in oversight and services for climate change and atmospheric pollution. According to delegation coordinators, many long-sought references to the world of work, workers, workplaces, decent employment, social transition and trade union engagement were contained in the final text.

The role of the ILO

Success in all these initiatives depends on workers and trade union strength – workers who are organized into free trade unions and are able to bargain collectively at all levels. Respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, especially those set out in the ILO's Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), is crucial if we want to avoid walking on thin ice. The ILO with its comparative advantage – its

tripartite structure and standard-setting activities in relation to labour issues – has an important role to play in addressing the social impacts of climate change, not only in support to its constituents in implementing ILO standards, but also in its technical cooperation activities through its delivery system, the Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs).

Two structural challenges lie ahead for the ILO to address the social impacts of climate change. The first is the use of its delivery system, the DWCPs, and the second is its participation in the UN Reform Process. These challenges do not pertain specifically to climate change issues, but they will raise special concerns as this is a relatively new area for the ILO. As the DWCPs will be important instruments for ILO cooperation with other UN organizations, they will also play an important role for the ILO's influence on decent work and environmentally sustainable development in the UN Reform Process. The ILO's success in addressing climate change issues will thus depend largely on the success of its DWCPs.

A DWCP should work closely with constituents in placing decent work at the centre of national policy. The full involvement of ILO constituents, and partnerships with national and international actors and institutions, are essential to DWCPs and indispensable to their success. The strengthening of the capacity of constituents, and especially the workers, in the development and implementation of its activities through DWCPs is therefore important.

The ILO must ensure workers' participation in DWCPs and provide assistance to enhance their involvement. Awareness raising, training and education are needed, especially for trade unions in developing countries, to address issues in relation to climate change. It is necessary to raise competencies for workers and trade unions at all levels in order to enhance their role in negotiating fair transitions in relation to changes in jobs and qualifications. Practical guides, training materials and information tools need to be developed and translated into different languages. The conclusions from the Committee on Sustainable Enterprises of the International Labour Conference in June 2007 include some guidelines for the ILO on how to direct its activities and include workers and their unions in the promotion of sustainable enterprises. This involvement is important not only at enterprise level, but also at national and international level where major policy decisions are taken on climate change.

Strong unions will strengthen the ILO's tripartite comparative advantage in the UN Reform Process and also prevent the ILO from drowning in a process which includes many actors and interests. Strong and effective unions will, together with employers' organizations and governments at national level, be able to implement DWCPs and also influence other UN organizations to promote decent work and reduce negative social effects of climate change.

Climate change priorities promoted by trade unions at COP12

- Undertake research to establish climate change linkages to employment.
- Establish climate change linkages to sustainable development.
- Promote worker participation as a key to determining sustainability of climate change policies.
- Recognize the workplace as a key field of action for climate change.
- Consider technology options that strengthen social engagement by favouring sustainable and labour-intensive energy solutions.
- Fashion a long-term agreement for equitable sharing of the burden of emission reduction between developing and developed countries to extend beyond 2012.