

The Multinational Enterprises Declaration

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The story of the ILO's Multinational Enterprises Declaration goes back more than three decades from before 1977, when it was formally adopted, to the end of the 1960s when the activities of multinationals were first beginning to attract serious attention – and, from some quarters, serious criticism. At the time, the term CSR – corporate social responsibility – had not yet been coined. “The Declaration was ahead of its time,” said ILO Director-General Juan Somavia recently at the 30th anniversary celebration of the Declaration, Multiforum (see cover story). “It is very much part of ILO history: now we have to make sure that it is also part of the future.”

Looking back from today's vantage point, some people wonder just how the ILO managed to achieve the feat of producing the Declaration. As Mr. Somavia puts it, this was an extremely polarized era: “a time when it seemed highly unlikely that the social partners would achieve consensus on an issue as sensitive as multinational enterprises”.

But thanks to the hard work of many from both sides of industry over a period of several years, that consensus did prove possible. The ILO's Governing Body first agreed in 1971 to provide funds to hold an initial meeting on the relationship between multinationals and social policy, a decision endorsed by the ILO Conference a year later. The initial tripartite meeting on the issue was held in October and November 1972, and this was followed by a similar meeting in 1976, when the proposal to work towards a set of guidelines was agreed. Then the hard work really started: the first three months of 1977 saw a small tripartite working group work on the detailed draft of what was to become the MNE Declaration. Their work produced an agreed text, which was submitted to – and adopted by – the ILO's Governing Body in November 1977.

The Declaration has been periodically updated, most recently in 2006. It is more than ever relevant today, as articles in this issue of *World of Work* demonstrate. It can be found online at www.ilo.org/multi in 16 languages.