

The ILO at 90: Working for social justice

As we mark the 90th anniversary of the ILO, the Organization's values and mandate endure.

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The ILO has defined the standards that have become a reference point for so many dimensions of work. It has played a major role in economic and social policy development. We have put standards into action through our technical cooperation programmes and we have developed knowledge on the world of work.

We must continue to be in harmony with the times, respond to new challenges and seize new opportunities while remaining true to our values.

This has been the driving force as we have together crafted and pursued the Decent Work Agenda which expresses the mandate of the ILO in the reality of the 21st century.

The challenges loom large. We are living through tumultuous times. We don't know how long and how serious the current financial and economic crises will be. But we do know that the impact on people's lives, jobs and living and working conditions will be strong, global and systemic.

And before this crisis, there was already a crisis of massive global poverty, rising informality and precarious work.

As economic globalization proceeded and brought considerable benefits and opportunities, the ILO flagged the need to pay attention to the social dimension of globalization in order to address the prevailing imbalances and growing inequalities, to help break the vicious circle of poverty and to tackle the anxieties and insecurities of the middle classes.

We set out the role of work in strengthening the social dimension of globalization and the role of the productive sectors in placing the global economy on a solid foundation. We highlighted the location of the world of work and the workplace at the intersection of economy, society and the environment and consequently the central role it must play in sustainable development.

The crises that emerged as we approached our 90th anniversary clearly revealed the validity of the ILO's position.

As we look ahead, our challenges include:

- Supporting sustainable enterprises because this is where jobs are generated and particularly in small and medium-scale enterprises. Our concept of the sustainable enterprise connects the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the world of work. The search for new ways of producing and consuming that are more respectful of the environment provides enormous potential to create large numbers of decent jobs and more vibrant economies.
- Seeking viable options for responding to increasing pressures to achieve greater diversity, adaptability, and flexibility in working hours and methods while responding to the legitimate demands of individuals and of societies for security, in terms of access to employment, working conditions, pensions and other forms of social protection.
- Keeping up with the pace of innovation which will demand constant improvements in education, training, productivity and knowledge-sharing systems.
- Strengthening tripartism and sustaining the social dialogue model that has been the foundation of our Organization and drawing on it to facilitate adaptation in different areas to the evolving world of work and to markets, while ensuring that the fundamental rights at work are respected. And applying this model to new areas – including sectorally.
- Working with the multilateral system to ensure that our collective efforts, together with national action, serve to establish a socio-economic floor of opportunity and protection that delivers on peoples' basic social and employment needs at the country level.
- Developing better global governance of globalization based on the convergence of the following policy areas: finance, trade, investments and job creation, labour and social, environment and development. The relevant international organizations in each field must work together for a fair globalization.

As we pursue these and other challenges, we can take strength from the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, a major statement of principles and policy that builds on the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 and the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of 1998.

This Declaration reaffirms the universality of the ILO objectives: all Members of the Organization must pursue policies based on the strategic objectives of the Decent Work Agenda – employment creation and enterprise development, social protection, social dialogue, and rights at work.

At the same time, it stresses a holistic and integrated approach by recognizing that these objectives are “inseparable, interrelated and mutually supportive” and sets out the role of international labour standards as a useful means of achieving all of them.

This Declaration embodies the balanced approach that has resonated beyond our Organization and encapsulates the contribution we can make to meet the growing demand for an architecture of global fairness based on decent work.

“Working for social justice” is more than just the theme of our 90th anniversary. It is our assessment of the past and our mandate for the future.

By Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office.