

The Decent Work Agenda - Looking back, looking forward: A growing consensus

Ten years ago, on 15 June 1999, Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen addressed the 87th Session of the International Labour Conference, commenting on ILO Director-General Juan Somavia's ground-breaking report Decent work. This article presents some extracts from that speech,¹ together with the views of other distinguished leaders and thinkers on the ILO concept of decent work.

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GENEVA, June 1999 – This is a crucial moment in the history of working people across the world. The first flush of globalization is nearing its completion, and we can begin to take a scrutinized and integrated view of the challenges it poses as well as the opportunities it offers...

This is also a historic moment for the ILO as custodian of workers' rights within the United Nations system. Its new Director-General – the first from outside the industrialized world – has chosen to lead the organization in a concerted effort to achieve decent work for all women and men who seek it across the globe...

The first important feature in the new ILO vision is the articulation of its goal: the promotion of “opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity”. The reach of this objective is indeed momentously large: it includes all workers, wherever and in whatever sector they work; not just workers in the organized sector, nor only wage workers, but also unregulated wage workers, the self-employed, and the homeworkers. The ILO aims to respond to the terrible fact that “the world is full of overworked and unemployed people”.

This universality of coverage, pervasiveness of concern and comprehensive conception of goals is a well-chosen alternative to acting only in the interest of some groups of workers... of course, universality implies facing many difficult questions which need not arise if the domain of concern is restricted to narrower groups, such as workers in the organized sector (leaving out the unorganized sector), or even all wage workers (leaving out homeworkers), or even all people actively in work (leaving out the unemployed)... Working people fall into distinct groups with their own specific concerns and plights, and it behoves the ILO to pay attention simultaneously to the diverse concerns that are involved...

The second conceptual feature that needs to be stressed is the idea of rights... the framework begins with acknowledging certain basic rights, whether or not they are legislated, as being a part of a decent society. The practical implications that emanate from this acknowledgement can go beyond new legislation to other types of social, political and economic actions... This is strongly in line with what is becoming increasingly the United Nations' general approach to practical policy through rights-based reasoning...

Another distinguishing feature of the approach is that it situates conditions of work and employment within a broad economic, political and social framework. It addresses, for example, not merely the requirements of labour legislation and practice, but also the need for an open society and the promotion of social dialogue. The lives of working people are, of course, directly affected by the rules and conventions that govern their employment and work, but they are also influenced, ultimately, by their freedoms as citizens with a voice who can influence policies and even institutional choices.

In fact, it can be shown that “protection against vulnerability and contingency” is, to a great extent, conditional on the working of democratic participation and the operation of political incentives... The security provided by democracy may not be sorely missed when a country is lucky enough to be facing no serious calamity, when everything is running along smoothly. But the danger of insecurity arising from changes in economic or other circumstances (or from uncorrected mistakes of policy) can lurk solidly behind what looks like a healthy State... The protective role of democracy is strongly missed when it is most needed.

The comprehensive view of society that informs the approach adopted in the ILO vision of decent work provides a more promising understanding of the needs of institutions and policies in pursuit of the rights and interests of working people. It is not adequate to concentrate only on labour legislation since people do not live and work in a compartmentalized environment. The linkages between economic, political and social actions can be critical to the realization of rights and to the pursuit of the broad objectives of decent work and adequate living for working people.

I turn now to the fourth and final distinctive feature of the approach under discussion. While an organization such as the ILO has to go beyond national policies (without overlooking the instrumental importance of

actions by governments and societies within nations), there is a critical distinction between an “international” approach and a “global” one. An international approach is inescapably parasitic on the relation between nations, since it works through the intermediary of distinct countries and nations. In contrast, a truly global approach need not see human beings only as (or even primarily as) citizens of particular countries, nor accept that the interactions between citizens of different countries must be inevitably intermediated through the relations between distinct nations. Many global institutions, including those central to our working lives, have to go well beyond the limits of “international” relations.

The beginnings of a truly global approach can be readily detected in the analysis underlying the new directions of the ILO: The increasingly globalized world economy calls for a similarly globalized approach to basic ethics and political and social procedures. The market economy itself is not merely an international system; its global connections extend well beyond the relation between nations...

A global approach is, of course, a part of the heritage of labour movements in world history. This rich heritage... can indeed be fruitfully invoked in rising to the challenge of decent work in the contemporary world. A universalist understanding of work and working relations can be linked to a tradition of solidarity and commitment. The need for invoking such a global approach has never been stronger than it is now. The economically globalizing world, with all its opportunities as well as problems, calls for a similarly globalized understanding of the priority of decent work and of its manifold demands on economic, political and social arrangements. To recognize this pervasive need is itself a hopeful beginning.

Decent work is at the heart of peace, because peace cannot be the mere absence of destruction, but rather the struggle to create a dignified and worthy life for all human beings.

H. E. Oscar Arias, *President of the Republic of Costa Rica, speech to the International Labour Conference, 2006*

Decent work is one of the democratic demands of people everywhere. The Decent Work Agenda is an agenda for development that provides a sustainable route out of poverty.

H. E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *President of the Republic of Liberia, speech to the International Labour Conference, 2006*

Development is more than just the accumulation of capital and the enhanced efficiency of resource allocation; it is transformation of society. Equitable, sustainable and democratic development requires basic labour rights, including freedom of association and collective bargaining.

If we, as an international community, are to promote equitable, sustainable and democratic development – development that promotes societal well-being and conforms to basic principles of social justice – we must reform the international economic architecture. We must speak out more loudly against policies which work against the interests of workers. At the very least, we must point out the trade-offs, we must insist on democratic processes for determining how economic decisions are made. We have remained silent on these issues for too long – and the consequences have been grave.

Joseph Stiglitz, *“Employment, social justice and societal well-being”, in International Labour Review, vol. 141 (2002), No. 1-2; and in Working for better times: Rethinking work for the 21st century (Geneva, ILO, 2007).*

Decent work is the best, the most powerful and the most sustainable guarantee of economic development and social cohesion on a global scale. That’s why I can see in the Decent Work Agenda the mobilizing and integrating potential for Europe.

José Sócrates, *Prime Minister of Portugal, speaking at the ILO Forum on Decent Work for a Fair Globalization, Lisbon, October 2007*

The struggle for decent work is in itself a core value... it is a global issue and thus international and local at the same time.

The new ILO Declaration reminds us that on the one hand, labour standards should not be used for protectionist trade purposes and it makes clear on the other hand that violation of fundamental principles and rights cannot be used as a legitimate comparative advantage.

We are thus talking about a potential breakthrough in the coherence of global governance putting social justice on par with economic efficiency, not only as a moral argument but because it makes sense. It is effective and it is modern, paving the way for the sustainable company. I believe there is ample evidence to say that this equation is true and I believe in essence that it represents the core of a social contract for the 21st century.

Only by making globalization more fair can we make it legitimate and only by making it more legitimate can we make globalization sustainable in democratic societies.

Jonas Gahr Støre, *Foreign Minister of Norway, speaking at the Oslo Conference, 5 September 2008*

The concept of decent work, agreed at the international level, facilitates dialogue and cooperation between the industrialized countries, developing countries and emerging economies, as well as dialogue with non-governmental actors.

Vladimir Spidla, *EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, speaking at the ILO Forum on Decent Work for a Fair Globalization, Lisbon, October 2007*

Old approaches and obsolete strategies are no longer adequate and effective. We do not want the Millennium Generation and future generations to pass judgement on our generation... that we have not prepared a better world for them, that we passed on to them an indecent world full of indecent workplaces... Let's make it a fairer globalization. Let's make the world a better place to live through decent work and decent life.

Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, *Secretary-General designate of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), speaking at the ILO Forum on Decent Work for a Fair Globalization, Lisbon, October 2007*

We need a 21st-century way of implementing the Decent Work Agenda, we need a multisectoral approach... we need in fact a broad movement to make the Decent Work Agenda central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and to achieving social justice for a fair globalization.

Mary Robinson, *President, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, speaking at the Oslo Conference, 5 September 2008.*