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Measuring the World of Work – The International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), 1923 – 2023



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Introduction

The world of work is a world of numbers. We try to measure employment, wages, labour conflicts et unionization rates, to give just a few prominent examples. One hundred years ago, in 1923, the first International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) was held with the aim of standardizing these numerical data. Since its inception in 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) – as initiator and organizer of the ICLS – has based its work on the collection of statistical data and their analysis. In article 10.1 of its Constitution, one of the functions of the Organization is defined as “the collection and distribution of information on all subjects relating to the international adjustment of conditions of individual life and labour”². Based on this, statistics developed into a central technique for describing social conditions by the ILO. Over time, the ILO became a clearing house for international labour statistics. From the very beginning, statistical knowledge provided the basis and legitimation for the ILO’s main task: negotiating international labour standards to protect workers.

As early as 1920, a small Statistical Section (which became later the Bureau of Statistics and, as from 2009, the ILO Department of Statistics) was founded as part of the Research Division of the International Labour Office (hereafter: the Office), the ILO’s secretariat in

¹ This article was commissioned by the ILO Department of Statistics and the first draft was authored by Jan-Philipp Horstmann. Responsibility for opinions expressed in this article rests solely with the author, and their publication in this article does not constitute an endorsement by the ILO.

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² Constitution of the International Labour Organisation. See, for example:

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:2453907:NO..

Geneva.³ It was primarily concerned with collecting, analysing and disseminating statistical information provided by ILO Member States which had already established national statistical structures. For the ILO as an international organization, the need to agree on universally applicable statistical standards became immediately obvious, as highlighted in the following statement from 1921 by Albert Thomas, the ILO's first Director: "The reconstruction that has come with peace, the new situations which have arisen, the relations between the various peoples, have one and all increased the necessity for knowledge. Uniform methods of observation and procedure in investigations, standardised principles and practices in statistics, are more than ever indispensable".⁴

In order to utilize the often heterogeneous statistics, the ILO's statisticians examined the definitions, methods, concepts and classifications used by Member States to collect and analyse their data. This, in turn, identified opportunities for improving national statistics by trying to unify statistical categories and adopting best practices. In addition to data collection and the development of statistical standards, practical support to Member States in creating and improving their national labour surveys developed as a third ILO function in the field of statistics.⁵

Only three years after the establishment of the Statistical Section, the ILO decided to convene the first ICLS in Geneva. This Conference established a new form of statistical cooperation among ILO members through regular meetings of national technical experts from all over the world to consult on issues defined by the Governing Body. The Conference's main task was to develop statistical standards that were recognized and accepted by the ILO's constituents – governments, employers and workers. This required a significant effort in terms of methodological harmonization and standardization that has continued until today.

With its development into a distinct scientific discipline during the nineteenth century, statistics has contributed to the development of social policy, establishing the measurement of the world of work as an important part of research. It was in nineteenth-century Europe that first attempts were made to contain the social costs of the accelerating industrialization and the accompanying globalization processes through national labour laws. A broad international network of social reformers emerged who sought to improve the living and working conditions of the working class.

³ It took over the statistical work of the International Labour Office in Basel, which had been created in 1900 as the permanent secretariat of the International Association for Labour Legislation, a forerunner of the ILO. See Maul 2020, 16–19, and Kévonian 2008, 90.

⁴ Thomas 1921, 16–17.

⁵ ILO, "75 Years of International Labour Statistics", 1994; see also Woytinsky 1945.

Statisticians were part of this reform movement. Their classifications, calculations and surveys offered the possibility of making social grievances visible – not only as individual cases on a personal level, but systematically for entire survey groups. Most importantly, they provided evidence that social injustices were committed primarily against the growing class of industrial workers. For the first time, social realities and the world of work could be described by means of statistical science – not only within the borders of the nation state but also beyond. However, statistics are not neutral and nor entirely objective. The history of ILO's statistical work and the ICLS draws attention to this fact.⁶

This review is an account of the ICLS' major lines of historical development and its successes and controversies – a so far almost uncharted area of research. In the process, spotlights will be cast on important moments in the ILO's history and major thematic fields of international labour statistics, using selected statistical conferences as examples. In this way, institutional and thematic developments will be linked and placed in a larger political context. Based on specific ICLS reports⁷, related ILO documents, archival material for selected ICLS sessions and relevant literature, the analysis tries to provide an overview of the rich history of the twenty international conferences on labour statistics that took place between 1923 and 2018. Guiding questions are: Which role did the ICLS play in international relations? How did the ICLS contribute to the work of the ILO? How did the ICLS adapt to the changes in the world of work over one hundred years? What were the most important achievements of the ICLS?

Prologue: The Internationalization of Statistics

Statistics can basically take on two different functions. On the one hand, they can provide scientific evidence by generating quantitative facts. Statistical data thus develop an argumentative power to develop and implement certain policies. On the other hand, statistics have served since their emergence as an instrument of governance. They offer the possibility of overview-like control and coordination. Governments use the potential of statistics to plan, to legitimize, and implement political agendas. The history of statistics proves how closely

⁶ Since the 1970s the scientific history of statistics has therefore insisted on the need for historical and political contextualisation. Guibert, Laganier and Volle 1971. See also Porter 1995, Desrosières 2000; Desrosières 2001; and Espeland and Stevens 2008.

⁷ The reports of the ICLS can be consulted at:

<https://ilostat.ilo.org/about/standards/icls/?playlist=4194a13&video=38313ec>.

emerging forms of political administration and the development of statistical tools are interlinked.⁸

Both functions depend on a certain quantity and quality of statistical data. Without standardized collection procedures and methodological approaches, the informative value of the data remains limited. For this reason, the international exchanges between statistical experts began as early as the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹ The initiative for international exchange arose from the need to increase the informative value of national statistics. Whereas scientific insights had previously remained confined within national borders, statistical conferences became a central element of transnational scientific communication and cooperation.¹⁰ International meetings produced a knowledge of orientation and action that brought new forms of scientific legitimacy into the political negotiation process.

The period was marked by a general popularization of international cooperations, congresses and associations, which came to an abrupt end with World War I (WWI) at the latest.¹¹ However, the process of internationalization continued shortly after the end of the war with the founding of the League of Nations (LoN) and the ILO as its autonomous agency in 1919. The objective was to create and stabilize the post-WWI order and, for the ILO, to promote social justice as an essential condition of world peace.

This development institutionalized, on a new basis, an epistemic community that had promoted more cross-border cooperation before and during the war. The ICLS represented the technical side of this exchange and continued the historical tradition of international statistical congresses. Precursors of the ICLS – the International Congress of Hygiene and Demography and the International Statistical Institute (ISI)¹², as successors to the International Statistical Congress – had emerged from the late 1870s onwards. Thematic and personal continuities¹³, in the effort to harmonize statistical classifications and methodologies, connect the international network of statisticians of the nineteenth century with the statistical work of the LoN, the ILO and the ICLS in the early twentieth century. This harmonization was in turn

⁸ Desrosières 1998; Desrosières 2011, 75. As part of the Keynesian policy in the Great Depression of 1929, a new form of national accounting developed simultaneously; see Vanoli 2002.

⁹ Randerad 2010.

¹⁰ Geyer/Paulmann: *Mechanics of Internationalism* 2001, 1–26; Carle/Schriewer/Wagner: *Transnational Intellectual Networks* 2004, 13.

¹¹ By 1914, over 500 inter- and transnational organizations had been founded, with varying structures and lifespans.

¹² There was a certain rivalry between the ISI and the statistical departments of the LoN and the ILO. The ISI, as a primarily private academic organization, aspired to become the only organization responsible for statistics in the LoN.

¹³ The first chief of the ILO's statistical section, Karl Pribram, was a member of the ISI.

important for the further development of national statistics.¹⁴ Statistical data in a globalized world of work literally reach the limits of their informative value if they are only recorded and analysed in a national context. In this sense, there is not only a contradiction between national particularism and scientific universalism – both perspectives are also linked by a constitutive relationship of dependence.¹⁵

The economic crisis in the interwar period increased the need for reliable and comparable data from the world of work in the different nation states. After World War II, labour and economic statistics were essential for reconstruction plans. With the founding of the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations – such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Community – the institutionalization of international statistics further progressed and diversified. The ILO and its Statistical Department became the focal point of the UN statistical system in the field of labour statistics and participated in an increasingly elaborate measurement of the world.¹⁶

The history of international cooperation is one of constant interaction between the international level with its universalistic aspirations and the national context. In the case of labour statistics, the most important actors remain the national governments, which have to implement the harmonized statistical standards developed in the international arena as a basis for their labour and social policies.

Before highlighting individual epochs of ICLS history, it should be noted that the ICLS represents a special form of international conferencing. On the one hand, it fulfils classical criteria, such as a certain internationality and regularity and labour statistics as a clearly defined problem area. On the other hand, it differs from other statistical conferences because of its close integration in the organizational tripartite structures of the ILO and the selection of delegates by national governments; the latter somewhat limits its position as an independent actor in international relations. At the same time, the ICLS, with its hundred-year history, has become an astonishingly viable institution, mainly due to its special organizational form within the framework of the ILO.

¹⁴ From a normative-theoretical perspective, the challenges of international statistics can be described as a four-stage process in which the steps of standardization ideally build on each other and follow a hierarchical order: drafting of a common programme, definition of terms and classifications, shared survey procedures and, most complex, the development of international indices and key figures.

¹⁵ Horstmann 2023.

¹⁶ Ward 2004.

Setting the Scene for Labour Statistics: The First Conference, 1923 (1st ICLS)

The ILO's Statistical Section began collecting labour statistics in the early 1920s by focussing on national figures of prices and unemployment, which were published in the *International Labour Review* as from its first issue in 1921.¹⁷ The Governing Body approved the convening of a conference of statisticians concerned with the compilation of labour statistics in Geneva in 1923. In creating the ICLS, the ILO, as the first permanent organization in the field of international labour law, established a format of cooperation that increased the credibility of its statistical work. The cooperative approach, which was also reflected in the special tripartite functioning of the ILO with governments, employers' and workers' representatives involved in the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference (ILC), was not only derived from the tradition of reformist internationalism but also a direct lesson from the war period.

After long debates, the Governing Body decided on the organizational structure and the agenda for the first Conference proposed by the Statistical Section. In three areas, the comparability of national labour statistics needed to be improved: classification of industries and occupations; statistics of wages and hours of labour; and statistics of industrial accidents. The agenda was short, but an excessive programme would have gone beyond the limits of the Conference and required extensive preparation.¹⁸

Invitations were sent to all 55 ILO Member States as well as to important international non-governmental organizations and institutions active in the field of statistics, such as the ISI. According to the correspondence, some of the invitations arrived late, so that some states did not have enough time to send a delegate. Other states refrained from sending a national representative to Geneva for budgetary reasons. The costs incurred for participation had to be borne by the delegates themselves or by the states assigning them. In order to achieve the largest possible number of participants, the Statistical Section made an effort to reach out to every country, taking into account the specific political context. For example, the invitation to the newly independent Republic of Ireland was accompanied by the remark and incentive that Great Britain had already confirmed its participation. The scheduling of the Conference also

¹⁷ Article 1 of the ILO's Unemployment Convention (No. 2) from 1919 explicitly asked ratifying Member States to "communicate to the International Labour Office, at intervals as short as possible and not exceeding three months, all available information, statistical or otherwise, concerning unemployment, including reports on measures taken or contemplated to combat unemployment".

¹⁸ The reasoning behind the decision is also reflected in the official invitation letter stating that the Governing Body considered that such a Conference "might lead to useful results if its programme was not too ambitious and was limited to defining certain principles...". ILO Archive (henceforth ILOA) T 105/1/1.

tried to make use of synergies with regard to travel planning. Thus, the 1st ICLS – similar to some of the subsequent ones – was held directly after the 5th International Labour Conference.¹⁹ Some participants combined the trip to Europe with participation in other statistical conferences, such as the meeting of the ISI in Brussels. In the end, a total of 52 delegates from 32 countries took part. Among them were participants from some non-European countries such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Panama. Although these countries did not send statistical experts but rather assigned diplomats or ministry officials already present in Geneva, most of the delegates attending the 1st ICLS were statisticians by profession, working in national statistical offices, in the statistical departments of their ministries of labour or in academic positions. Finally, the LoN sent a representative of its Financial and Economic Organisation, which was a competitor of the ILO in certain areas of economic research and statistics.

The Conference was held from 29 October to 2 November 1923 in the Casino Municipal on the Quai du Mont-Blanc – Geneva’s Kursaal at the time. The session was opened by Albert Thomas, who reiterated the importance of reliable international statistics for creating and negotiating international labour standards. He further referred to the role of the Conference as a scientific advisory body, which should primarily prepare decisions to be taken by the ILO’s Governing Body. The votes would be taken by the representatives in their role as experts and not as representatives of their countries and would therefore not entail any responsibility of the respective governments. Results should be reached solely from a scientific point of view, taking into account an international perspective, but they should also include practical administrative considerations.²⁰

There are basically two types of general outcomes from the conference: resolutions and guidelines. Both are submitted to the ILO’s Governing Body for approval, but they remain non-binding. Resolutions provide detailed guidance on conceptual frameworks, operational definitions and measurement methods for the production and dissemination of labour statistics. Guidelines present more general inputs on specific – and often new – areas of interest.

The 1st ICLS adopted three resolutions, one for each of the thematic areas. At the beginning of the Conference, the first elected president of the ICLS, Armand Julin (Director General of the Belgian Labour Bureau and member of the ISI), set up three specialized

¹⁹ “International Conference of Labour Statisticians,” 1924.

²⁰ ILOA T 105/1/1

committees for this purpose. Based on the draft resolution that had been prepared by a statistical expert panel and the ILO's Statistical Section, the final draft was presented in the plenary session at the end of the Conference. After its adoption, it was transmitted to the Governing Body.

The ILO sought to publish and disseminate the results in the form of a report. To this end, the Statistical Section sought contact not only with the relevant government agencies, but also with national non-governmental organizations, such as the British Royal Statistical Society. In addition to the many positive reactions to the results, the ILO also received suggestions for improvement. The United States Department of Labor, which received the report although the United States was not yet a member of the ILO, criticized very specific blanks in the text of the resolution. For example, it denounced the reference to “wage per day” without a clear indication of the number of hours per day.²¹

After the Conference, India, which, despite its colonial status, had been a member of the ILO since 1919, criticized that the resolutions were mainly aimed at the leading European countries. It requested that the perspective of the economically less advanced countries be taken into account. This criticism from India hit a point that later would become more and more important. Only a few non-European countries like Argentina and Venezuela participated in the early conferences and were able to counter the European dominance that was expressed in the dispatch of high-ranking experts. On the other hand, in Norway and Switzerland, the results of the negotiations were already reflected in the existing statistical standards of their countries.

The following two Conferences in 1925 and 1926 partly continued the work of the first meeting and covered additional areas such as unemployment statistics and calculations of the cost of living. The *October Inquiry*, launched in 1924, was a first data collection system aimed at creating an international cost-of-living index by linking data on wages to food prices. Despite these initial successes, the challenges in standardizing and integrating national labour statistics continued to remain immense.

Cost-of-living Indices and a Convention Project: Times of Crises, 1931 (4th ICLS)

²¹ ILOA T 105/1/1.

After an initial euphoria, the number of Member States willing to send at least one delegate to the ICLS in 1925 and 1926 decreased. In May 1931, 24 (out of 56) Member States, the same number as in 1926, were represented. Travel costs, especially in the context of the unfolding world economic crisis might have played a role, as may the state of national statistics. Norway, for example, declined the invitation in 1931, as it considered its own statistical system too incomplete to be able to make a substantial contribution to the conference.

But there were also positive developments. For the first time, after many efforts, the ILO could welcome an official delegate from the US government. Invitations had been sent to the United States ever since the first Conference, but they had been declined with reference to budgetary restrictions. However, in 1931, Ethelbert Stewart, Commissioner of Labor Statistics in the United States Department of Labor, participated in the 4th ICLS. Stewart had succeeded Royal Meeker, who had become the first Director of the ILO's Scientific Division. Since its inception, the Office had tried to build a close relationship with the United States, and research and statistics turned out to be the appropriate area to consolidate a collaboration. Moreover, it was only for the second time that a woman was participating in the ICLS. Dr. Hilde Oppenheimer, an economist and high-ranking civil servant, joined the Conference as an advisor of the German delegation. Five years earlier, in 1926, Andrée Mayrisch of Luxembourg, Secretary of the Social Service of the United Steelworks of Burbach-Eich-Dudelange, was the first woman to attend the ICLS as a delegate. These were exceptions, as regular participation of women only gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century.

The 4th ICLS differed from the previous ones mainly in terms of content. Up to this point, the Conference had discussed and adopted resolutions laying down general principles of compiling statistics for the different areas of labour statistics. The focus of the ICLS in 1931, however, was mainly on the results of the aforementioned collection of data on wages and the cost of living, which were at the heart of labour policies and of crucial interest for trade unions and employers. The procedure had first been introduced in Great Britain and then implemented by the ILO at the international level (the famous *October Inquiry*, which was carried out until 2010). This involved comparing hourly wages in a range of occupations in numerous capital cities, as well as retail prices for a range of food products in the same locations.

The number of occupations and cities covered in each country was increased over time, and the prices of fuel and light were included in addition to the prices of food.²² The results of the latest *October Inquiry* had just been published in the October 1930 issue of the *International Labour Review*, together with all the national data on which the calculations were based.²³ Since governments had drawn attention to various problems with the data collection, the Governing Body decided at the end of 1930 to call for an ICLS the following spring.

There had been a lot of debate on cost of living statistics in the previous years. Corrado Gini²⁴, President of Italy's Central Institute of Statistics who was then close to the Fascist government, thought that they should take into account "differing physiological needs due to climate and race". Karl Pribram, chief of the ILO's Statistical Section, declined competency of the Office in this respect and stated that the basis of comparison both nationally and internationally should be the same.²⁵ One result of expanding the scope of these figures was that some countries had difficulty providing additional information. The ILO and its Statistical Section were thus in a dilemma. Either figures were not broad enough, but sufficiently comparable between different countries; or, when attempts were undertaken to increase the scope and comparability of the figures, some countries could not provide this information, which made international comparison more difficult. The lack of statistical information had to be remedied. Suggestions on how to achieve this outcome were made from various sides, but they needed to be discussed and agreed upon by the ICLS.

The 4th ICLS was held from 20 to 23 May 1931. Its primary objective was to be the discussion of the exact nature and scope of the information that governments should provide to the Office. However, socio-economic and political changes not only affected the agenda and the group of participants, the whole context in which this Conference took place had changed dramatically. The Great Depression of 1929 and its consequences had a major impact on the ILO. It had to address mass unemployment and its social consequences, and its action was inclined to endorse Keynesian policies. Statistical information gained importance. Governments had to rely on this information if they wanted to intervene in markets and proactively counteract the crisis through public work programmes and social insurance

²² For example, the ILO, with the support of the US government, even collected data on the standard of living of employees of the Ford Motor Company. See ILOA T 1001/4/1.

²³ "Comparison of Real Wages," 1930.

International Labour Review 1930, 22 (4), 542–551.

²⁴ Corrado Gini is today known for the Gini coefficient, which he developed in 1912. It measures income inequality. Corrado Gini resigned in 1932 in response to the government's intervention in the Statistical Institute.

²⁵ ILO/ICLS Report, 1925, 12.

schemes. This socio-economic crisis dynamic became also one of the international multilateral system, with the rise of nationalism and the withdrawal of the Fascist regimes of Germany (in 1934) and Italy (in 1939). Therefore, the ILO turned to the United States. It fully supported the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration. In 1934, the United States, as well as the Soviet Union (USSR), joined the ILO.

An expression of the increased demand for statistical data during the crisis was the *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, published from 1935 onwards, which was also a result of the Conference debates. Another achievement of the 4th ICLS was the paving of the way for an international standard on statistics on wages and working hours in the form of a convention. In December 1928, an International Convention on Economic Statistics had been drawn up under the auspices of the Economic Organisation of the League of Nations. It obliged ratifying member states to compile and publish certain branches of economic and trade statistics at specific intervals. This served as an incentive for the 1931 ICLS to reflect on the question of how to induce governments to provide the ILO with statistics on wages and the cost of living. It asked the Governing Body to take action for the purpose of preparing an ILO instrument in this regard. This led to the establishment of a group of experts in 1932. The group's proposal of a draft convention on statistics on wages and working hours was then discussed by the 5th ICLS in 1937, which was entirely devoted to this topic, before the Convention was adopted by the 24th session of the International Labour Conference in 1938. The Convention concerning Statistics of Wages and Hours of Work (No. 63) was the first ILO convention explicitly devoted to statistics. It obliged ratifying ILO Member States to collect and transmit standardized data at regular intervals. Contrary to other ILO conventions, a country could only ratify this convention in complying with its statistical obligations. It is therefore not surprising that, prior to World War II (WWII), only a few countries – like Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands and South Africa – were able to do so.

From Geneva via Philadelphia to Montreal: The Beginning of a New Era, 1947 (6th ICLS)

The turbulent crisis years were followed by the period of WWII that had far-reaching consequences for the ILO. The turmoil of the war in Europe forced the ILO to move its headquarters temporarily from Geneva to Montreal. Despite this organizational challenge, the ILO succeeded in reaffirming its future role in the post-WWII order with a Declaration, adopted by the International Labour Conference in Philadelphia in 1944. The Declaration of Philadelphia comprised two trend-setting commitments of future ILO activities: strengthening

human rights in the world of work and expanding economic planning. Although statistics were not explicitly mentioned in the declaration, both fields offered scope for continuing the statistical standardization that had begun prior to the war. The ability to plan economic development was, in any event, dependent on empirical data. However, it turned out in the following decades that the definition and enforcement of standards of labour and human rights could also be achieved only with the help of statistical information.

The war had caused enormous destruction everywhere. Governments launched programmes to stimulate growth and full employment to improve economic security and raise the standard of living in both free market and planned economies. Economic and social statistical data became the indispensable bases of targeted government action.

This made it all the more necessary for the ILO's Governing Body to convene the ICLS again, ten years since its last meeting in 1937. More than 50 delegates from 24 Member States met in the Medical Building of McGill University in Montreal from 4 to 12 August 1947. They were supported by 15 technical advisors. This ICLS was still marked by the geopolitical context. Germany and Japan were missing, since they had not yet been re-admitted to the ILO; the USSR under the Communist regime remained absent. However, for the first time, there was a formal representation of the tripartite Governing Body. And there was interest from the emerging international community: The United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Monetary Fund all had sent representatives to participate in committees and plenaries.²⁶

The 6th Conference marked the beginning of a new era in several respects. It was not only the first post-war Conference but also the first ICLS outside Geneva. After the dissolution of the LoN, it was also the first meeting of labour statisticians to take place within the framework of the newly founded United Nations, which the ILO had joined in 1946 as its first technical agency. One of the many challenges it had to take up after the war consisted in defining its role as the custodian of labour statistics. A first step in this direction had been taken in 1946 in an agreement reached between the United Nations and the ILO which provided for as close a collaboration as possible between the technical services. In a context of rather limited post-war budgets it was important to avoid duplications and to use the technical personnel of both organizations efficiently.

²⁶ A delegate from the Research Department of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development – which, along with the International Monetary Fund, was represented for the first time as a result of the Bretton Woods negotiations in 1944 – sent a corresponding memorandum after the conference; see ILOA ST 1006.

In addition, the Governing Body had authorized the Office to share the results of this Conference with the World Statistical Congress to be held in Washington in September 1947. The ICLS results should “take their place amongst the other efforts being made throughout the world at the present time to improve science for the greater well-being of mankind”²⁷.

The standing orders approved by the Governing Body were adopted. They laid down organizational structures and the functioning of the ICLS and promptly provoked suggestions for improvement. For instance, delegates in Montreal criticized that the Conference meetings were not public. Eventually, therefore, it was decided that all plenary sessions should be held in public and all committee meetings in closed sessions.²⁸

The language question was discussed as well. While Spanish was adopted as a third official language after French and English, following the ILO and the UN, it only became a Conference language of the ICLS in 1949, which meant simultaneous interpretation before then. In 1947, Spanish speakers were a minority, and the budget for interpretation was tight.²⁹

The ICLS discussed traditional topics such as statistics on employment and unemployment, cost of living and industrial accidents. Because of the war, the socio-economic situation had changed in many countries and older data, for example with regard to consumption patterns, had become obsolete. New statistical standards were needed, and the ICLS achieved those in these three areas.

The overall ambition of the 6th ICLS, in a context of limited resources, was to “demonstrate again the utility of the series of International Conferences of Labour Statisticians which the International Labour Organisation convened during the period between the wars”³⁰. It wanted the Governing Body to strengthen the Office “as a clearing house for information in the field of labour statistics” and to enable it to provide “expert assistance in this field to Governments on a greater scale than is possible with its present resources”³¹.

As a final resolution, it was agreed that the next Conference should be held in 1949. It thus confirmed the unanimous opinion that regular exchanges not only improved statistical comparability, but also strengthened the role of the ILO within the new international order as

²⁷ ILO/ICLS Report 1947, 7–8.

²⁸ ILOA ST 1006/1.

²⁹ In 1954, Russian interpretation was added, with German following in 1957 and Arabic in 1982. In the same year, and for the first time, documents were also translated into those three languages. Chinese followed in 1987. Today, the working languages of the conference are English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, German and Russian.

³⁰ ILO/ICLS Report 1947, 49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46 and 70.

the main point of reference for governments, employers and workers in the field of standardization of labour statistics.

Classification of Occupation and Underemployment: Between Cold War and Decolonization, 1957 (9th ICLS)

The optimism for peace of the immediate post-war period faded when political and economic antagonisms intensified in the transition from the 1940s to the 1950s. Under the leadership of the ILO's second American Director General, David A. Morse, who took office in 1949, the ILO went through an era of transformation. The Cold War and the process of decolonization, which had started with the independence of India in 1947, changed the ILO's membership as well as the scope and orientation of its activities. With the re-entry of the Soviet Union in 1954, fundamental programmatic debates, for example on tripartite representation, returned to the agenda. The renewed conflict between competing social models in East and West forced the ILO to seek a balance between the different ideas of social justice in the Member States and its commitment to universalism.³²

The conventional contrast between a liberal market economy and a communist planned economy was less recognizable at first. For the reconstruction of their industries, practically all European countries favoured state intervention and economic planning and were committed to increasing productivity and employment. On the other hand, the American government pursued the long-term goal of spreading a liberal economic model with the Marshall Plan, thus competing with the communist concept of a planned economy. In the course of implementing the reconstruction plan, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) was established – which was transformed into the OECD in 1961. It developed an ongoing relationship of cooperation, but also competition, with the ILO.³³ While the OEEC initially benefited from the ILO's statistical expertise, the OECD has become today an important international source for the provision of economic and social data, including for the ILO. The emerging European community took great interest in the 9th ICLS. Not only the OEEC, but also the European Coal and Steel Community and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration sent observers.

In comparison, there was no interest from the ILO's tripartite constituents, who had already not been represented at the previous ICLS in 1954. Maybe the fact that the USSR had

³² Maul 2010.

³³ Maul 2020, 145.

sent a delegation for the first time that year had played a role, since there was a risk of bringing the Cold War confrontation into the arena of the ICLS. From internal correspondence, we only know that the American Robert J. Myers, the Secretary-General of the Conference and Chief of the ILO's Statistical Division, thought that technical conferences should not be a "tripartite affair". But Myers did not object to the participation of trade union representatives if they were carefully selected by their governments and technically skilled.³⁴ The representation of trade unions and employers thus depended mainly on the national governments. In contrast to the majority of Member States, the Swedish government, for example, regularly sent trade union representatives to the meetings. In the Scandinavian countries, the unions were, as a matter of fact, regularly involved in the production of labour statistics.

The Conference took place at the historic Palais des Nations in Geneva, the headquarters of the former League of Nations and home of the United Nations office at Geneva. From 24 April to 3 May, delegates from 45 countries came together, 15 more than in 1954. Socialist countries had more weight now, with Belarus, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Ukraine attending the ICLS for the first time. Also for the first time, we find a woman as officer of the Conference, Carmen Miro from Panama, who became a pioneer in demographic studies in Panama and a high-level expert in population studies in Latin America. Moreover, a first ever African delegate attended the ICLS: Anthony D. Wilson – a Liberian politician and adviser at the national Bureau of Labour.

Delegates from other African states would follow in the course of the 1960s. In addition to the challenges of reconstruction, which were primarily related to Europe, decolonization created a new geographical focus and, naturally, had an impact on the ILO's statistical work. The number of ILO member states started to rise. India, in particular, became the voice of the new UN and ILO Member States from the Global South. The different and heterogeneous economic and social realities in developing countries brought on new challenges for the statisticians as early as the 1950s. Despite the different perspectives, the objective of building the economy and promoting employment was shared by old and new states. Aspects of employment policy and, accordingly, statistics on forms of employment were thus a central theme of the 1950s.

In terms of content, the 1957 Conference continued and expanded the work of the previous ones. The adoption of an International Standard Classification of Occupations

³⁴ ILOA ST 1009-100.

(ISCO-58) was a significant achievement, as major censuses were to take place in many member countries at the beginning of the new decade. In order to ensure the comparability of these statistics, the ILO explicitly pursued its goal of an international coordination function within the UN system. For international comparisons of employment in individual economic sectors or of wage levels, it is fundamental to identify similar occupations. The road to the realization of a universal methodology in this area had been long, starting in the nineteenth century, when international statistical congresses were striving for standardization of industries and professional categories. The ISCO-58 was the concrete result of ten years of research by the ILO's Statistical Department, supported by the inputs received from the two post-war ICLS meetings in 1947 and 1949.

In 1949, on the basis of a study prepared by the ILO's Statistical Division, the seventh ICLS had established nine main groups of an international classification scheme and had called on the Office to provide further details of the groups. Thanks to the work of the eighth ICLS in 1954 and an expert group convened in 1955, the classification was revised and consolidated. An international reference system was thus realized that allowed for a uniform adaptation of national survey categories or at least for a convertibility of national data. Despite the adopted resolution, open questions remained, and the need to further develop the classification became quickly obvious. In 1966, the 11th ICLS adopted ISCO-68, and the 14th ICLS approved ISCO-88 in 1987. During the early years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, it became clear that there was a need to update ISCO-88. Subsequently, this happened in 2008 with the ISCO-08. Today it is widely used but due to the rapid changes in occupations, requires even more continuous updates, an issue which will be discussed by the 21st ICLS.

A second important topic involved social security statistics. Emphasized as a major component of economic security in the Declaration of Philadelphia, social security became a key policy area of the ILO, which adopted its Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention No. 102 in 1952. As early as 1944, the International Labour Conference had adopted a resolution on the need for the development of internationally comparable statistics of social security, and the request had been taken up by the seventh and eighth ICLS in 1949 and 1954, respectively. In 1957, the ICLS finally managed to achieve an international statistical standard based on Convention No. 102.

A third important topic was the measurement of underemployment. This issue was directly linked to the situation of less developed countries, including those created as a result

of decolonization. Underemployment had already been on the agenda of the ICLS in 1947, and the UN had requested with some urgency statistical information on this problem in 1954 and 1955. Based on discussion in the ICLS in 1954 and research carried out by the Office, the 1957 ICLS was able to adopt a resolution on the problem of underemployment in the elaboration of social and economic plans and programmes in a great number of countries. There were many conceptual problems, the major one being that there were visible and a less visible form of underemployment, “depending on the stage of economic and social development of the different countries and on the branches of economic activity”³⁵.

Delegates from the Dominican Republic, Ukraine, the former Yugoslavia, Egypt, Viet Nam, Mexico, India and Morocco stressed the importance of the problem and underlined the need for technical assistance, in order to be able to undertake or to continue studies and to carry out inquiries on underemployment.³⁶

In the 1960s and 1970s, as decolonization progressed, the number of ILO Member States rose rapidly to 121. In 1960 alone, 15 African countries joined the Organization. Development became a major concern of the ILO. It significantly extended its technical assistance programmes. Statistical data were necessary for the assessment of the socio-economic situation and working conditions on the ground. However, the quality of the data in most of the new ILO Member States from the developing world was poor, as their administrations were still in the process of being established.³⁷ The second UN development decade and the ILO’s World Employment Programme launched in 1969 to re-orient the ILO’s development strategies on questions of employment provided new incentives for developing countries to establish and improve their labour statistics. As those in 1962 and 1966, the ICLS in 1973 was attended by a number of developing countries (such as Bangladesh, Sudan, Mauritius, Nigeria and Tanzania, which sent delegates for the first time).³⁸ Delegates from Africa, in particular, drew attention to their fundamental dilemma: extremely limited resources, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a pressing need to develop their statistics, especially in the agricultural sector, the most important one in their case. For instance, the production of wage statistics in the agricultural sector, which was one major topic of this ICLS, was much more difficult and costly than in the non-agricultural sector.

³⁵ ILO/ICLS Report 1957, 35.

³⁶ Ibid., 36.

³⁷ Jerven 2013.

³⁸ In 1962, three of the four officers of the ICLS were from the Global South: Senegal, Pakistan and Indonesia.

The Conference examined a proposal by the Office to have a basic set of labour statistics for the planning of economic and social development in developing countries, limited to primary statistics on manpower, wages and household income and expenditure, and based on sample surveys of households and enterprises. Since it was clear to the delegates that the developing countries did not have enough resources even for such a limited programme, the Conference insisted that “sustained international assistance in the form of expert advice, training, fellowships, technical manuals, etc.” was needed, and that it was essential for the ILO to start a programme of action.³⁹

Survey of Economically Active Population: Time for Revisions, 1982 (13th ICLS)

There was no ICLS between 1973 and 1982, mainly for internal reasons. Forced by the energy crisis of the 1970s, economic conditions worsened worldwide, while it remained difficult to collect reliable statistical data. The representatives of developing countries repeatedly pointed out the problems they faced due to insufficient resources and a lack of skilled personnel. One problem was the classification of occupations and the application of the concept of underemployment. Another, more technical problem consisted of the fact that the survey forms filled out by enterprises and local authorities arrived with considerable delay. In view of this, the Committee on Development Planning of the United Nations Economic and Social Council also noted the absence of a statistical basis for the formulation of an international comparison of employment. It therefore recommended a vigorous expansion of the data base. Earlier ICLS proposals for detailed annual or even quarterly enterprise based surveys, which were intended to ensure a high degree of accuracy, engendered a substantial level of effort. In the Conference reports, it is made repeatedly clear that the delegates were aware of the difficulties, both regarding the costs of the surveys and the necessary human resources required by the standardization programmes. It was also frequently pointed out that the proposals and resolutions embody universalistic ideals that can be an aspiration but that can certainly not be realized in each and every case. In this respect, each developing country set different priorities, depending on the prevailing conditions. Nevertheless, international standardization programmes remained indispensable if administrative planners of economic development and, in particular, executive decision-makers in the field of labour wanted to have sufficient information to analyse the social situation, enabling them to define policies

³⁹ ILO/ICLS Report 1973, 7.

and to evaluate their progress. Although most industrialized countries implemented the proposed procedures for statistical standardization more easily, even among them, some were not able to clearly identify such key indicators as wage trends.

Another important prelude to the 1980s, which also manifested itself at the 1973 ICLS, was the revision of Convention No. 63. Due to the extensive preoccupation with the issue of wages and hours of work – which also dominated the 1st, 7th, 10th and 11th ICLS – the differences between new international recommendations and the existing Convention became untenable. In particular, developing countries that had ratified the Convention faced problems when trying to comply with its provisions. Some of them required the compilation of data that was not actually needed for national purposes or had to be specially transformed, often at considerable cost, in order to meet the Convention's requirements. The contrast between traditional sectors, especially agriculture in developing countries, and the industrial sector in developed countries – reflecting changing realities – was also intensively discussed. In other respects, the scope of the Convention was too limited with regard to its coverage or in relation to other features of a modern statistical system of wages and hours of work. These considerations led the Conference to adopt a resolution requesting the Governing Body to instruct the Office to undertake a substantial review of Convention No. 63.

However, it took 9 years for further work on this issue, and a total of 12 years before the ILC adopted the Labour Statistics Convention (No. 160). It is a revision of Convention No. 63 and has now been ratified by over 50 states.⁴⁰ It sets out the basic scope of labour related information required for national planning and policymaking in the form of a minimum list of nine topics on which ratifying countries are required to collect, compile and publish statistics, including data on wages, hours of work, employment, unemployment, underemployment and the economically active population. In addition, employers and workers' representatives should be consulted on the production of statistics. The Convention was complemented by Recommendation No. 170, which deals with the frequency of the collection and compilation of statistics and the way in which they are conducted and classified.

At the 13th ICLS, which took place from 18 to 29 October 1982, participants from 62 states and over a dozen observers from international organizations took part in the deliberations. As an important innovation, the Governing Body decided in 1981 to strengthen its representation in the ICLS. Both the employers' and the workers' groups were requested to

⁴⁰ This Convention will be abrogated in 2024

regularly nominate henceforth three participants each.⁴¹ This also facilitated the dissemination of the Conference debates and results in the respective constituencies. Another structural innovation by the 13th ICLS was the establishment of a regular Conference cycle. In view of the rapidly changing conditions in the labour markets of all countries and the need to ensure the relevance of national statistical systems for the effective measurement of these changes, the meeting recommended that the next ICLS should take place no later than 1987 – thus institutionalizing a five-year sequence that has been maintained up to the present.

A substantive breakthrough towards a new international standard was the resolution concerning statistics of the economically active population, employment, unemployment and underemployment – mainly a result of the preceding debates on development policy. It replaced the resolution of the 8th Conference on this topic and also parts of the resolution on the measurement and analysis of underemployment and underutilization of manpower, which had been adopted by the 11th ICLS in 1966. The new concept superseded the old categories, which had become inadequate, with the help of a modular approach that could be adapted to different national settings, such as industrialized market economies, centrally planned economies or developing countries. At the same time, it enabled the reclassification of already collected national data into internationally comparable categories. Accordingly, the meaning of “economically active population” was defined broadly. It included all persons of both sexes who, during a given period, provide labour for the production of economic goods and services as defined by the UN *System of National Accounts* (SNA). This encompassed the production and processing of primary goods, whether for the market, for barter or for own consumption. But it also comprised the production of all other goods for sale, as well as for one’s own household. The new concept referred to all employed, self-employed and even unemployed persons. Not included in these categories were either non-economically active (e.g. students, retirees) or underemployed persons. The latter category, in particular, posed a challenge in the coming years.

Other topics included the measurement of various forms of employment (forced labour, underemployment, etc.), paid holidays and the revision of the *October Inquiry*. Furthermore, a second resolution on statistics of occupational injuries was adopted⁴² – an issue that had been on the ICLS agenda since its first meeting.

⁴¹ ILOA ST 1013-1.

⁴² With references to Convention No. 121 and without changing the broad definition of “employment injuries” in the 1962 ICLS Resolution, the use of the narrower term “occupational injuries” is proposed to target more specifically recordable injuries resulting from occupational accidents in the form of deaths, personal injuries and acute diseases which cause some inability to work. See ILO/ICLS Report 1982, III, 2.

The work of the 1982 ICLS illustrates the constant change in the world of work and the delegates' struggle to find adequate forms of statistical description to reflect such developments. At the same time, the Conference was also able to promote progressive ideas. For instance, it addressed the future advancement and use of gender neutral terminology in the Statistical Office's documentation and recommended the formal adoption of explicit policies and procedures. On the initiative of the Secretary General, the Conference produced for the first time a draft proposal for an international coding of labour statistics – which aimed at the development of a computer-based coding system to facilitate the retrieval of bibliographic references, marking an important step by the ICLS into the digital age.

Measuring Informality: Statistical Challenges of a Complex Reality, 1993 (15th ICLS)

The major achievement of the 15th Conference, a resolution on a statistical standard measuring employment in the informal sector, has a rich history, like almost all ICLS resolutions. With the adoption of the Declaration of Philadelphia, the ILO had committed itself to promote full employment in all its Member States.⁴³ To fulfil this mandate, it began to develop a concept of unemployment that was globally applicable, also in developing countries. Despite the difficulties they encountered, ILO officials saw such a statistical construct as the necessary basis for a viable full employment policy. However, in developing countries, many people were not in a formal employment arrangement. But neither were they unemployed, since they were working in subsistence agriculture, as own-account workers or unpaid family contributors. The ILO tried to use concepts such as underemployment, disguised unemployment and labour underutilization to capture and measure these realities. A conceptual breakthrough came in the 1970s, when ILO development economists popularized the concept of the “informal sector” in the framework of the ILO's World Employment Programme, launched at its 50th anniversary in 1969. Employment in the informal sector became the first completely new topic of the ICLS in the second half of the 20th century.⁴⁴ However, efforts to standardize measurements only began in the mid-1980s, in the context of the neoliberal structural adjustment and its social fallouts, including the observation of increasing informality. In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and accelerating

⁴³ ILO Declaration of Philadelphia, para III(a), <https://www.ilo.org/static/english/inwork/cb-policy-guide/declarationofPhiladelphia1944.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Benanav 2019.

globalization, informal work emerged also in industrialized economies and in global supply chains. The ILO needed to address the issue more systematically.

At the ICLS held in Geneva from 19 to 28 January 1993, employment in the informal sector was discussed for the first time. Another important topic was statistics on strikes, lockouts and other forms of industrial action. A resolution adopted on this topic in 1926 needed to be updated urgently. In the slightly modified invitation to the ICLS, the Office pointed out that it was desirable for governments to send only experienced statisticians who would be able to follow the increasingly complex technical discussions. The programme that was already very stringent was shortened in advance by another two days for budgetary reasons. All this did not stop 76 Member States from nominating a total of over 200 participants. Also present as observers were over a dozen representatives of international non-governmental organizations, including the whole spectrum of international trade union organizations and the International Organization of Employers (IOE).

The plenary elected Dassebre Oti Boateng, a Government Statistician of Ghana, as the first African chair of the ICLS since its inception. Coming from a country with a large informal sector, it is not surprising that he diligently undercut the attempt of a European statistical expert to stop what became the Conference's major success: the development of a statistical standard on employment in the informal sector.⁴⁵

In two meetings, the Conference committee on employment in the informal sector discussed a report, as well as a draft resolution, both prepared by the Office. There was an animated debate on definitions. For instance, a proposed distinction between the informal sector and the criminal underground economy was rejected by a majority of the delegates. They sought to develop a definition that was as universal as possible and could be applied in different countries – including in those where the informal sector was not per se illegal.

The conference finally adopted a new statistical standard which was subsequently included in the revised SNA. The definition of employment in the informal sector was enterprise-based. It soon proved to be unsatisfactory, since it could not capture the increasing informalization of employment and the proliferation of non-standard and often unpaid work (especially of women) outside enterprises (such as domestic work, subsistence agriculture, etc.). Therefore, the 2003 ICLS adopted guidelines for a job-based definition covering “the total number of informal jobs, whether carried out in formal sector enterprises, informal sector

⁴⁵ Interview with Farhad Mehran, former chief of the ILO's Bureau of Statistics.

enterprises, or households, during a given reference period”⁴⁶. In order to assist Member States in the establishment of statistics to capture informal work, the Office published in 2013 a statistical manual on the subject.⁴⁷ As a result of all these efforts, a significant part of the work reality and economic performance of many countries in the Global South became visible, and no longer remained hidden.

The growth of the informal economy was one major trend of the 1990s. Digitalization was another. The ICLS of the 1990s pushed the development of an electronic database system – LABORSTA, as it was called at the time. It contained a wide range of statistical data on the world of work from nearly 190 countries, with parts dating back to 1945. In 1998, the Office also established for the first time a database of statistics on employment in the informal sector, responding to increased demand for quantifiable information about this sector of the economy. Since 1999, the Department of Statistics hosts a web-based database, which is now known as ILOSTAT. It brings together all the data collected by the ILO in a central database application and makes it available to users. Today, 15 different databases can be consulted on the ILOSTAT website.

Decent Work: Limitations of Measurability, 2003 (17th ICLS)

The turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century was in many respects the dawn of a new phase for the statistical work of the ILO and the ICLS in particular. The concept of decent work had been introduced shortly before by the new Chilean Director-General, Juan Somavía. It was defined as “opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity”⁴⁸, became the organizing framework for all the ILO’s work and helped to increase its relevance. The decent work agenda defined four strategic objectives: realizing fundamental principles and rights at work; creating greater opportunities for men and women to secure decent employment and income; enhancing and extending social protection for all; and strengthening tripartism and social dialogue. As to the ILO’s statistical activities, decent work set a conceptual framework for the integration and development of statistics both within and outside the ILO.

The new Director-General himself opened the 17th ICLS – a novum which demonstrated the importance of statistics for the new decent work approach. Although the Conference,

⁴⁶ ILO/ICLS. Guidelines concerning a statistical definition of informal employment.

⁴⁷ ILO. *Measuring Informality*.

⁴⁸ ILO, *Decent Work*, Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 87th Session, Geneva, 1999.

which counted a total of 287 participants – 244 being delegates from 85 Member States – did not pass any resolution on decent work, the topic took up a lot of space in the discussions, according to the General Report.⁴⁹ Apart from the fundamental expansion of statistical capacities, measuring decent work was to be the greatest challenge for the statistical efforts of the ILO in the following years. A working group was set up to deliberate on statistical indicators. A pluralistic approach was adopted, which meant that several ILO departments got involved. The result was the definition of 29 statistical indicators for decent work – including indicators on employment opportunities, equal treatment in employment, social protection, working hours and, most importantly, forms of work that are fundamentally contrary to decent work and should be abolished, such as forced and child labour.

Child labour, which is a major topic of the decent work agenda, is a good example for a successful cooperation between the Office, the International Labour Conference, the ICLS and the ILO's Statistical Department. Together, they tackled a problem that the ILO's founders had already addressed in the early years with some labour standards on minimum age. It had returned to the agenda in the early 1990s, when child labour became more visible in global supply chains and triggered a larger public debate. Its elimination moved to the top of the ILO's agenda with the launch, in 1992, of a large, integrated programme, the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). The adoption of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998 and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) in 1999 defined the legal framework of the programme. Statistics were needed to capture child labour in its various forms and measure the success of the programme, given that ILO donors were asking for quantifiable results.

The challenge was to define and identify child labour and to develop a methodology that allowed to probe into the work of children which, for the most part, was informal and “hidden”. The results of experimental surveys conducted by the ILO in four countries indicated that household sample surveys, complemented by surveys of employers (establishments and enterprises) and surveys of street children, were appropriate methods of data collection. Following pioneering work by the 16th ICLS in 1998, the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) was launched in 1999.⁵⁰ In 2008, the 18th ICLS adopted a resolution which set standards for the collection, compilation and analysis of national child labour statistics. It was amended by another resolution in 2018 to bring it in line with new international standards on statistics of work,

⁴⁹ ILO/ICLS Report 2003, 21–46.

⁵⁰ Lieten 2010, 453 ff.

employment and labour underutilization. In the larger framework of the decent work approach, the statistical work on child labour was certainly an achievement.

Data like the one on child labour was to be used in the calculation of a decent work index. However, the difficulties in creating measurable indicators for decent work were numerous and also related to the broad indeterminacy of the term. It only gained concrete content in the attempt to translate the concept into measurable categories, but also revealed definitional boundaries. Thus, the development of the statistical methodology to measure decent work not only became a technical challenge, but also assumed a political dimension to be negotiated within the ILO.⁵¹

At the 18th ICLS in 2008, the statisticians were aware of the fundamental need for access to decent productive work with adequate pay, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis – and against the backdrop of the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, which embodied the decent work approach. But many were not convinced that it would be possible to develop comparable indicators across countries. National data collection practices and legal requirements differed too widely. In the end, the ambition of creating a single-value composite decent work index was abandoned since member States were not comfortable with the idea of having a composite index.

Despite the statistical challenge to measure it, progress in developing robust indicators was made, the decent work concept was increasingly adopted worldwide and by many international organizations and finally was fully integrated into goal No. 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN that were adopted in 2015. The UN General Assembly approved in 2017 the SDG Indicator Framework, consisting of around 234 indicators measuring all 17 goals and the 169 targets of the 2030 Development Agenda. The negotiations of these indicators were facilitated thanks to the availability of the Decent Work Indicators framework which the Office published in 2011. The ILO was given the custodianship for 14 SDG indicators related to decent work, including indicators like the labour rights indicator 8.8.2 based on the ILO textual sources but also indicators measuring other goals beyond Goal 8. The 20th ICLS, which convened in 2018, continued to work on the measurement of decent work and adopted two resolutions on the methodology of two related SDG indicators, on labour rights and youth employment.⁵²

⁵¹ Hauf 2015.

⁵² ILO/ICLS Report 2018, 69–93.

Enabling flexibility and responsiveness in a World of Uncertainties: The Last Decade, 2013–2023, (19th & 20th ICLS)

The 2010s were marked not only by continuing and accelerating transformation of the world of work, driven by digitalization and artificial intelligence, but also by a major reorientation of the global development agenda away from the model that prioritized macroeconomic growth, to one that recognized the centrality of advancing social justice, gender equality and environment protection. Towards the end of the decade, military conflicts, the rapidly worsening climate and environmental crises, which both provoked massive refugee flows, and the global Covid-19 pandemic have put to the test the most recent statistical standards and underscored the need for flexible frameworks and resilient statistical systems capable of adapting to the changes and data needs on a timely basis.

At his opening of the 19th ICLS in 2013, the new ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder, who had succeeded Juan Somavía in 2012, committed himself to investing in statistics. He stressed the need for a new statistical framework capable “to meet the challenges of the post 2015 agenda for more inclusive, sustainable development and that should remain relevant over the coming next two decades”.

This was achieved in 2013, when the 19th ICLS adopted a ground-breaking resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization. The resolution updated the previous standards from 1982 which up to then had served as the basis for employment and unemployment statistics globally. Those standards had anchored labour force statistics on the concept of economic active population which, in turn, tied the measurement of employment to the System of National Accounts production and to GDP measurement, leaving aside many unpaid productive activities, disproportionately performed by women.

The 19th ICLS resolution sought to redress this by introducing the first ever international statistical definition of “work”, which recognized all productive activities, paid and unpaid, as work, giving due recognition to women’s unpaid work. It also introduced a new framework that greatly expanded the scope of labour statistics by recognizing the need to produce data on unpaid forms of work alongside employment on a regular basis.

The new framework defined employment more narrowly than before as “work for pay or profit” to better support monitoring access to employment opportunities that generate income and to inform policies aimed at job creation. It also identified other forms of work for separate measurement, which for too long had not been recognized or valued: unpaid trainee work,

volunteer work, and own-use production work, including subsistence food production and unpaid domestic and care work. Bringing together paid and unpaid forms of work under one common framework has opened the possibility to use the statistics to compare women's and men's participation in employment alongside unpaid forms of work and to shed light on how participation in unpaid forms of work impacts employment. It also supports generating consistent data to value the social and economic contributions of paid and unpaid forms of work to households, communities and the economy, further contributing to the development of beyond-GDP measures. To address the data gaps made evident by the 2008-09 financial crisis, the resolution also defined other ways to measure labour underutilization beyond unemployment: time-related underemployment (persons impacted by insufficient work hours) and potential labour force (persons impacted by a lack of job opportunities or resources to start their own businesses). The relevance of these innovations in the statistical standards became ever more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when many people lost their jobs, or saw their work hours dramatically reduced; companies had to implement job hiring freezes, halt production or close doors; workers faced prolonged periods working from home, taking on additional housework to cope with closed schools, restaurants, and other services; and communities mobilized through volunteers to assist and provide care to the most vulnerable and those in need.

Another achievement in the field of work statistics was the adoption of a resolution on work relationships by the 20th ICLS in 2018. With rapid and dramatic changes in the world a broad discussion had emerged inside and outside the ILO on many aspects of the future of work, including the effect of technological change such as digitization and the emergence of new business models and evolving work relationships.

Existing data based on statistical standards were generally inadequate to describe this evolution. In 1993, an international statistical standard (ICSE-93) on classification of status in employment had been adopted, which reflected the traditional distinction between (paid) employment and self-employment. However, this distinction proved less and less satisfactory with the increase in various forms of non-standard employment arrangements which had emerged as a consequence of continuing flexibilization of labour markets. These work arrangements such as employees with zero-hours contracts or workers with commercial agreements working on similar terms as employees didn't fit comfortably in any of the categories provided by ICSE-93. Some of these arrangements increased significantly the economic risk for workers and created uncertainty about the boundary between self-employment and paid employment. There was a strong demand for statistical information to

monitor the development of these work arrangements as well as to provide a more granular statistical picture capturing a more diverse set of work arrangements.

The *Resolution concerning statistics on work relationships* which was finally adopted by the 20th ICLS represented an important step forward to address this changing reality. It recognized a new type of employment relationship in the *international classification of status in employment* (ICSE-18), lying somewhere between the previous concepts of paid employment and self-employment. It is called “dependent contractors” and included a wide array of workers that have traditionally formed part of countries labour markets even though they haven’t fitted within the more traditional boundaries ending up as nearly invisible in statistics as a result. Some common cases can be found among home based workers, hairdressers who rent a chair in a salon, or those who provide delivery or transportation services through digital platform. Depending on their situation these people share characteristics with both self-employed and employees as defined under ICSE-93 but are now separately identified in ICSE-18. In addition, ICSE-18 also included new and more detailed categories of employees, employers and own-account workers, enabling the production of more diverse statistics that better capture any shifts in the labour market that might impact the economic risk faced by the workers.

The 20th ICLS resolution was not only groundbreaking in relation to the new categories of status in employment that were introduced, but also because, for the first time, it provided an International classification of status at work (ICSaW-18), designed to encompass all forms of work. This important alignment to the 19th ICLS resolution I highlights the uniqueness of the different forms of work and enables a classification of not only jobs within employment, but also of work relationships in relation to for example volunteer work or own-use production work.

Importantly the 20th ICLS resolution also introduced definitions on several essential characteristics that cut across multiple different types of work relationship and that, until the adoption of the resolution, had not previously been explicitly defined in any statistical standards. The identification of homeworkers, seasonal workers or workers in multiparty work relationships that might include several different categories of employed persons enables the provision of statistics that better reflects the conditions and different situations within constantly evolving labour markets.

In the past decade, the ICLS has drawn attention to other areas of labour statistics which reflect the ongoing problems and crises. They demonstrate the need of ILO Member States to gather new data in order to take action as defined by the ILO’s mandate of decent work and

social justice. A few of those areas should be highlighted since they will remain or become more important in the future. In 2013, the ICLS discussed for the first time the problem of integrating the environmental crisis and climate change, fields that had so far been unexplored, into its statistics. It was a reaction to the growing public debate, the ILO's commitment to environmental sustainability and the need for statistical data arising from the ILO's green job programme which had started in 2008. Following discussions which highlighted the various problems of definition, the Conference adopted Guidelines concerning a statistical definition of employment in the environmental sector, including green jobs, as a first step towards a future resolution. Five years later, in 2018, it became clear that an international statistical standard would be difficult to develop, when delegates shared their problems to identify boundaries between green jobs and non-green jobs, between green activities and non-green activities. This was particularly difficult, since the environmental nature of work was not built into existing standard classifications of industry (ISIC) or occupation (ISCO) – a challenge which the Conference would also need to address.

Forced labour and human trafficking – the most obvious human rights violations in the world of work along with child labour – became areas where, in the early 2000s, ILO's action and the publication of global estimates had triggered a strong demand by Member States to have a clearer definition and guidance for data collection. The latter was based mostly on (costly) surveys and limited to identified victims. After an initial discussion in 2003, the ICLS picked up the topic again in 2013. The Member States voiced their need for a standard set of criteria, standard survey tools and sampling procedures. The ICLS adopted a Resolution to continue work on forced labour and human trafficking and produced a set of guidelines in 2018.⁵³

Labour migration is another important area of statistics that has gained in importance over the past decade. Despite the ILO's constitutional mandate to protect “the interests of workers employed in countries other than their own”⁵⁴ and notwithstanding two conventions adopted in 1949 and 1975 to protect the rights of migrant workers, the ILO started only in the early 2000s to address labour migration more seriously, giving priority to improving information and knowledge on global trends. The delegates to the 2013 ICLS adopted a Resolution recommending further work on statistical standards and data collection methods for labour migration that could inform labour market and migration policies of countries of origin and

⁵³ ILO, Guidelines concerning the measurement of forced labour, 20th ICLS, Geneva, 2018. ICLS/20/2018/Guidelines.

⁵⁴ ILO, *The Labour Provisions*, 1.

countries of destination. Five years later, in 2018, it adopted Guidelines concerning statistics of international labour migration. In the meantime, labour migration had become a priority in the policy of numerous countries.

Finally, in 2018, the 20th ICLS turned its attention to violence and harassment in the world of work, which had previously received little attention from labour statisticians. Despite the importance of the problem, especially for workers, there were barely any statistics, and no common method of measurement existed. The most important challenge in the eyes of the delegates was the formulation of an internationally recognized definition of work-related violence and harassment, and based on this, the development of statistical indicators. This task has become all the more important as the ILO, in 2019, on the occasion of its 100th anniversary, adopted a Violence and Harassment in the World of Work Convention (No. 190), which can only be implemented by the Member States when a common set of definitions and statistical guidance for its measurement is developed and agreed internationally.

Conclusion

The original aspirations of the ILO as a leader for global social justice required a uniform technique of describing the multiple challenges in the world of work from the perspective of social justice. Over the course of 100 years, the ICLS has become an important feature of this struggle, but its achievements often remain in the shadows, even though its resolutions have contributed significantly to the continuous improvement of labour statistics.

While the Conference itself is an element of continuity in the history of the ILO, its working methods have been continuously adapted. Today, each resolution is the result of extended preparatory activities, including: (1) the establishment of an international working group which meets several times; (2) the establishment of a virtual online platform for exchange and discussion; (3) consultations with regional offices; (4) the holding of a tripartite meeting of experts; and (5) additional consultations and research.⁵⁵ A distinctive characteristic of the ICLS compared to other statistical conferences continues to be that participants actively discuss and amend resolutions and guidelines. Until today, the ICLS provides a rare opportunity for labour statisticians from around the world to meet face to face and exchange statistical knowledge. National statistical experts, representatives of international organizations and the specialists of the ILO itself can share opinions and experiences directly.

⁵⁵ ILO/ICLS Report 2013.

With the growing membership of the ILO, the participation in the ICLS has grown as well, both with regard to the number of Member States represented and the total number of participants. Delegations have also included more and more technical advisors, and we find representatives of a growing number of organizations with observer status. In 1923, 32 out of 55 Member States attended, with a total of 52 participants; one of them represented of the LoN. In 2018, we count 374 participants from 135 out of a total of 187 Member States; 42 representatives are delegates of various UN agencies and international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Women's participation, which was negligible in the interwar period and has only increased rapidly since the 1960s, has reached almost 50% in 2018. Overall, diversity improved in the second half of the twentieth century due to the growing participation of representatives of old and newly established states from the Global South. With the expansion of participants from national statistical offices, the expertise at the Conferences also increased over time. ILO constituents became more interested and also knowledgeable. As a result, they have regularly attended ICLS meetings over the past decades.

The history of the ICLS reflects the importance of labour statistics in a multilateral system that seeks to promote peace and global cooperation through policies based on statistical descriptions. The participants identify and compare social and economic facts and developments as objectively as possible. They do so in a way that is verifiable throughout the world, with numbers. Even if the Conference's universal claim could not always be fully realized, the scientific standardization and quantification promoted by the ICLS nevertheless means an enormous contribution to an international solution of methodological problems. Over time, the scope of the ICLS has expanded considerably, ranging from traditional areas, such as labour market statistics or occupational safety and health statistics, to more recent topics like green workplaces, cooperatives and violence at the workplace.

The retrospective of the ICLS and the ILO's statistical work has highlighted not only the achievements but also the limitations, or at least the constant challenges, of labour statistics and their comparability. Measuring informal work, child and forced labour remains a methodological problem. And so far, the ICLS has not addressed the problem of measuring discrimination at the workplace, even though its elimination is at the core of the concept of decent work and a fundamental human right at work.

Labour statistics will always have to follow the rapid processes of change and diversification in the world of work. There will be important changes in the sources for data

collection. The role of (digital) administrative records will become more important, given that data collection based on sample surveys has become costly, is sometimes sensitive (e.g. for forced labour and child labour) and compliance to provide statistical information, especially from enterprises, is declining.

If this trend continues, some of the ICLS resolutions and guidelines will need to be revised to make the underlying concepts more suitable for measurement based on reporting systems. In the end, the ICLS takes on a translation function between the ILO's constitutional mandate which is continuously adapted to changing realities in the negotiation between the constituents, on the one hand, and its technical-practical translation into policies on the other. The ICLS develops the instruments that we will need in the future to measure the world of work – and to improve it. A lot of work is waiting for the ILO's Statistical Department and the ICLS, as it will celebrate its 100th anniversary in October 2023.

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