

Summary of findings



International
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Decent work results of ILO employment promotion interventions: Lessons learned from evaluations, 2003–2013

EVALUATION
UNIT

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Summary of Findings

Background, purpose and scope of the study

An employment policy for sustainable recovery and development is the theme for the Recurrent Discussion on Employment¹ during the 2014 International Labour Conference (ILC). This synthesis review aims to contribute to this discussion by synthesizing results and lessons learned from various sources of ILO evidence in order to shed light on what works and why with regard to employment promotion and Decent Work. The synthesis examined evaluations from 2003-2013 regarding employment promotion interventions by reviewing outcomes related to the broader Decent Work Agenda.²

The study focuses on interventions that led to a certain degree of institutionalization of the project outcomes. These outcomes can be identified in terms of change in behaviours, practices, policies or interactions between actors that demonstrate increased attention and efforts towards Decent Work. Identifying such changes is particularly relevant because they are likely to translate into ownership of the Decent Work Agenda.

More specifically, the aim of this synthesis review is to document:

1. *Outcomes and changes observed at country level:* demonstrating effective attention towards the goal of more and better jobs as reflected in labour market-policies, institutions and regulations; and
2. The mechanisms by which *ILO technical interventions* have contributed to outcomes and changes at country level.

These review perspectives have been refined into a number of sub-questions, with a particular focus on the changes observed, the mechanisms used, the sustainability of the interventions, and the drawing of specific lessons learned for the ILO interventions around those themes. The dimensions of Decent Work taken into consideration in this review are workers' rights, social protection, social dialogue, gender, and vulnerable groups. The core research material used for this synthesis review consisted of 44 final evaluations of ILO employment promotion interventions that took place between 2003 and 2013. Five thematic evaluations of ILO's strategies and eight ILO studies addressing linkages between employment promotion and dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda have also been incorporated into the research material. Details about the methodology are outlined in Annex 1.

¹ ILO. *Employment policies for sustainable recovery and employment, Recurrent discussion under the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, Report VI*, International Labour Conference, 103rd Session, 2014.

² In the review, we look specifically at *workers' rights*, *social protection*, and *social dialogue* as core-components of the Decent Work Agenda, together with two themes related to equal opportunities, more specifically, *vulnerable groups* and the position of *women* in the labour market.

Findings and Lessons Learned

Findings

This synthesis review confirmed that using ILO's comparative advantages (tripartite structure and representation, international conventions and expertise in policy support) increases the chance of attaining impacts on countries' Decent Work Agendas. The degree of realism in the planning of project objectives, time-frames and scope was found to be equally crucial to their success. Along similar lines, establishing multi-country projects may result in opportunities for the exchange of good practices, but this also requires a strategic approach for selecting countries, taking into account different national, international and regional contexts. The review also found that many projects are not supported by adequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems which would enable them to take stock of Decent Work outcomes and allow them to scale-up the findings of pilot projects. Finally, although the ILO has developed a broad set of tools and methodological approaches (e.g. on gender issues), the review noticed some deficits in knowledge sharing across ILO interventions.

Employment creation: Support to the creation of employment through policy measures or technical interventions is an unpredictable venture, hard to achieve in the time span of a project cycle, difficult to verify and at all times challenging when it comes to attributing results to the efforts made. Drawing conclusions on the extent to which an intervention has led or will lead to sustainable jobs was sparsely covered in most ILO evaluations. Limitations of project evaluations in this respect can be explained by the requirement that they very often need to be completed before the official closing of the project and therefore rely on estimates or incomplete project documentation of results achieved during the lifetime of the project. Only a few projects provided adequate resources for proper impact assessment or ex-post evaluations.

Whether an intervention has the potential of generating employment was found to depend on three factors:

- the strategy or combination of strategies chosen;
- the quality of the implementation; and
- the extent to which a project was explicitly working towards employment rather than creating pre-conditions.

The most common strategies centred on skills development, labour-intensive programmes, entrepreneurship promotion, social economy promotion, active labour market policies, facilitating local stakeholders dialogue, and policy design support. These strategies differed from one another in terms of the intervention approach chosen (supply-side, demand-side, matching supply/demand, and working towards an enabling environment) and the level of targeting (individuals, businesses, institutions, government). It was found that each of these strategies has its own specific value when applied in the right context.

Skills development (support for technical and vocational education and training, on-the-job training, etc.) is a frequently used strategy to equip people to find jobs. The study showed that skills development is particularly useful as an accompanying measure together with active labour market policies or combined with facilitating local dialogue between social partners and/or other key actors. Interventions that were focused on labour-intensive public

works had immediate effects on employment (often expressed in a number of working days), but prospects for continued employment were often undocumented. Entrepreneurship promotion usually requires an extended time-frame before the employment creation effects become apparent. Thanks to productive co-ownership and accurate targeting, some interventions such as the Start and Improve Your Own Business (SIYB) programme in China proved successful in creating jobs during the project life span. Projects that promoted active labour market policies as a strategy to create jobs resulted in tangible employment outcomes, particularly in middle-income countries. Political stability and reasonable absorption capacity of the formal economy are believed to be important elements for achieving this outcome.

Facilitating for a local stakeholder dialogue, at times a successful employment strategy, could take the form of local economic development. However, it can also emerge from social dialogue between local tripartite partners, whereby skills, job counselling and employment creation are included in negotiations aimed at preventing industrial action. Finally, the effects of establishing an enabling political and institutional environment for employment creation are usually only visible in the long-term. Therefore, a combination of this with components producing tangible short- and mid-term results may work favourably for interventions focusing on policy support and capacity building.

Social protection: Social protection as a complementary component to employment promotion was only explicitly covered in six out of the 44 evaluations. The ILO's technical interventions addressed social protection through three main strategies: awareness raising, capacity building, and strengthening/expansion of existing nation-wide social protection initiatives. There are strong indications that for policy support in the field of social protection to be effective, it requires the full support of national policy makers and has to be aligned with the development priorities of a country.

In terms of building that support base, ILO interventions assisted national ILO constituents to revisit the links between employment, social protection and poverty reduction. The ILO also contributed to developing new comprehensive, sustainable social protection systems addressing a variety of sectors, risks and financial mechanisms. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts where existing social security systems are no longer able to respond to current socio-economic realities and where other schemes (often donor-driven) are operating in silos and without any coordination at the national level. Along the same lines, the review showed that intervention mechanisms which involved non-traditional actors (such as civil society, private sector, various ministries and public administrations other than the Ministry of Labour and/or Employment) can contribute to an improved and renewed articulation of policies on social protection and employment. This approach is even more effective when partner countries can decide on the composition of the national tripartite steering committee and/or the ministry in charge of coordinating projects. For labour-intensive public works programmes, the review identified evidence that re-confirms the importance of well-designed programmes. These encompass both the employment creation and social protection perspectives in order to fully mobilize their potential for social protection.

Gender equity: Applying a gender perspective to employment promotion interventions is a specific ILO requirement which is identified in its policies and guidelines. This would

include generating sex-disaggregated data of the project's activities. Despite the systematic identification of gender aspects in project plans, only seven evaluation reports contained evidence on gender outcomes or changes beyond the output level.

While acknowledging this shortcoming, ILO employment promotion interventions showed that including women and gender issues in labour-intensive employment programmes is feasible, assuming that strategies are well-reflected and contextualized to the specific socio-cultural environment. Adequate and meaningful integration of gender issues requires policies to be internalized by the government, the ILO, and other development partners over sustained periods of time. In addition, the evaluation reports illustrated that gender mainstreaming in employment promotion interventions require appropriate methodologies and explicit strategies. The mere presence of tools is not sufficient: having access to project staff with previous experience on gender mainstreaming, as well as to specialized agencies and ensuring sufficient time and resources, are key conditions for its success.

ILO's tripartite structure represents a comparative advantage to create an enabling environment for women at work by working on gender-aware policies and practices of social partners and other relevant project stakeholders. In this way, ILO can work towards institutionalizing gender mainstreaming at the country level and induce long-term changes rather than limiting the project's achievements to project-bound outputs for individual female employees. Finally, the review observed that gender issues combined with other vulnerable groups (unemployed youth, working children, people with disabilities, indigenous populations, etc.) can pose additional specific challenges to project implementation, unless common issues can be identified.

Vulnerable groups: While half of the evaluation reports (22) made reference to vulnerable groups, only five evaluation reports mentioned vulnerable groups in the context of the project design. Ten evaluations mentioned vulnerable groups when giving an overview of the implementation of the project (output level). Seven evaluations mentioned vulnerable groups at the outcome level, with just a few formulating sustainability prospects of these outcomes. The review demonstrated that effectiveness in addressing employment-related needs of vulnerable groups depends on the ownership of policy-makers and the capacity of implementing partners. Targeting beneficiaries from well-defined vulnerable groups has the best chance to produce sustainable results when this goes hand in hand with i) policy-making authored and owned by the government; and/or ii) capacity building of institutions which brings the policy into practice. Studies showed that the success of targeting specific vulnerable groups depends on the:

- context (subsistence or stagnating versus growth economy);
- type of vulnerability (e.g. stereotype opinions and prejudices versus disability);
- interpretation of what is exactly meant by 'effective' (direct benefits versus long-term results); and
- type of targeting methods used (e.g. targeting versus self-targeting).

Moreover, the degree of effectiveness should be set against the objectives pursued: inclusion in the labour market system, full employment, equal opportunities, etc. If the inclusion of vulnerable groups is to have lasting effects, a specific vulnerable group strategy will have to be designed for each and every component of the intervention. This presents a challenge for

project designers, as well as for the management team, but the rewards are substantial when appropriate strategies are designed. Finally, the ownership, with regard to vulnerable groups, is likely to prove a challenge in post-conflict or crisis countries, as the population ‘at large’ will be given priority over well-defined groups. Interventions should adapt their approach if sustainable impact is to be achieved in these cases.

Workers’ rights: About two-thirds of the 44 evaluation reports contained references to effects on workers’ rights, although these were often limited in terms of scope and evidence. Only one third (15) of reports identified project objectives that made explicit reference to workers’ rights. Within this sub-set, different mechanisms to address workers’ rights were identified, with the majority focusing on improvements at the policy, meso- and, to a lesser extent, the micro-levels. The review found that interventions on employment promotion had substantial impact on workers’ rights when labour clauses are structurally integrated. This was particularly the case in sub-contracts for labour-intensive public works and when projects mobilised or built capacity amongst social partners on the issue of workers’ rights.

On the other hand, the creation of new jobs does not automatically lead to more permanent decent work, particularly when they are created in labour-intensive public works or in the informal economy. Another consistent finding in the review pointed to the relatively high success of ILO’s policy-level work and its expertise in formulating norms and guidelines. Several examples were identified where ILO projects contributed to reforms of labour law and regulations, strengthened the enforcement of labour law, and built the capacity of social partners to work on decent work issues. Insights on critical success factors of policy work on workers’ rights were found to be limited in the evaluation reports. Some evaluation reports referred to the importance of supportive political leadership as a critical factor, as well as facilitation services by ILO between social partners. Others indicated the importance of being able to show “knock-on” successes of one specific area, which then triggered change in other related policy areas, rather than attempting to implement simultaneous change in multiple policy domains through integrated project designs.

Social Dialogue: Almost all projects included a social dialogue component in the sense that social partners are in most cases at least part of the steering groups of projects. About a third (14) of the 44 interventions mentioned activities or outcomes related to social dialogue. Only one of the selected projects (in Liberia) had social dialogue as its main objective. ILO employment promotion interventions are strengthening social dialogue through two main strategies:

- the involvement of social partners in consultative or decision-making processes/structures linked to the interventions (e.g. steering committees, technical committees); and
- capacity building strategies, particularly on emerging themes or innovative approaches which are implemented in response to contemporary employment challenges.

In both cases, these strategies have the potential to contribute to strengthening existing social dialogue structures as well as relations among social partners. In addition, considering that ILO interventions often tackle emerging themes or challenges, interventions can also contribute to awareness raising and agenda-setting among social partners on issues which were largely passing under the radar.

Lessons learned

The review formulated two main lessons learned:

- Capacity building is an essential component of strategies targeted at strengthening social dialogue, and should be adapted to the specific needs and interests of the different partners. The participation of women in social dialogue can be triggered by mechanisms implemented in the framework of employment promotion interventions, such as capacity development of women entrepreneurs, and institutionalizing mechanisms for women's participation.
- Employment promotion interventions can actively contribute to the revival of existing social dialogue structures which need to be strengthened in terms of their ability to address or influence labour market issues and policies. The review noted, for example, that through the participation of social partners in project steering committees, several interventions contributed to a renewal of existing social dialogue dynamics. This is particularly the case when the topics initiated through the interventions were more in line with social partners' interests than their formal – and sometimes outdated – agenda.

General conclusions

The synthesis review identified general conclusions that are related to the specific contribution ILO is making to outcomes at the national level with the social partners and structures.

- Employment promotion interventions constitute potentially rich entry points to address all dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda. Addressing multiple dimensions is particularly powerful when the interventions target the practices and policies of key-stakeholders to mainstream the Decent Work Agenda. One of the strengths of technical interventions is that they not only allow the actors to integrate the Decent Work Agenda at the policy level, but also downstream, to the operational activities in relevant sectors, institutions or regarding specific concerns. Addressing the dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda can follow unexpected pathways, but it never occurs totally by chance. Synthesis findings demonstrated that each objective of the Decent Work Agenda, as well as the cross-cutting issues such as gender or vulnerable groups, all require specific expertise, human resources, conducive institutional settings, and strategic partnerships.
- In addition, the review found that the Decent Work Agenda is not always explicitly addressed in the design or implementation of ILO interventions on employment promotion. This situation is not helped by the often short time-frames and limited budgets available to implement complex multi-stakeholder, multi-component interventions, as well as the frequent absence or poor articulation of strategic theories of change³ for the mainstreaming of the Decent Work Agenda. This sometimes leads to a

³ Theory of Change can be defined as: “Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organizations, or political systems, or eco-systems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme.” (Definition by Rogers, quoted by Vogel in ‘*Review of the use of ‘Theory of Change’ in international development*’, DFID, 2012).

situation where project teams are so challenged and focused on achieving the employment promotion objectives within the available time-frame and resources, that the Decent Work Agenda is perceived as an add-on for which resources, time and political commitment are lacking. Although the research material did not allow definitive conclusions on this, there occasionally appeared to be missed opportunities to further the Decent Work Agenda through a more systematic and longer-term approach in the ILO interventions on employment promotion.

- The review identified several examples where ILO interventions included a “demonstration” component, which allowed for trying out new approaches to address employment promotion and the specific dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda at the micro- or meso-levels. While there can be good reasons to work with pilots or demonstrations, the review showed that pilots tended to be less well designed, without adequate monitoring and learning processes and with no explicit theories of change on how components could be scaled-up or adapted to nationally-owned processes.
- Policy influence is a function where ILO consistently makes a difference, together with its normative function. As an international organization strengthened by international legal standards and solid technical expertise on employment promotion (both in the field and at Headquarters), ILO succeeds in influencing the social partners and national administrations to consider more and better jobs. The effects can be amplified when the interventions are aligned with national processes, involve social partners and provide well-designed capacity development services for key stakeholders. Additionally, policy influence is far reaching and more sustainable when ILO interventions are in line with national priorities or concerns. Several evaluation reports documented the importance of involving social partners in the different stages of project implementation. Finally, Decent Work outcomes tend to be strengthened even more when project strategy supports social partners and labour administration in developing capacity to better understand, discuss and address the way the Decent Work Agenda should be appropriately implemented according to the context, the employment theme or the sector.

Recommendations arising from the study

In order to strengthen the contribution of ILO employment promotion interventions in the implementation of the various objectives of the Decent Work Agenda, this study suggests taking the following recommendations into consideration.

Recommendation 1 - Make ILO employment promotion interventions work more effectively to support the Decent Work Agenda by improving project theories of change and enabling factors in the design of programmes and projects.

In the initial consultation phase between ILO and the partner countries, as well as during the elaboration process of the intervention design (identification and formulation), more attention should be paid to examine which elements of interventions related to employment promotion provide opportunities to address dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda, either through mainstreaming or targeted approaches. This attention should result in balanced theories of change, and be translated in terms of strategies, human resources and financial

resources. These additional decent work components should be part of the monitoring and evaluation framework and retained as periodic discussion points of the tripartite steering groups' agendas.

Recommendation 2 - Avoid the risks of a learning deficit by emphasizing sufficient focus on the issue of Decent Work outcomes in evaluations of ILO projects.

Only a limited number of ILO evaluation reports in the synthesis review sufficiently focused on the outcome level, both for the employment promotion objectives and for Decent Work objectives. This shortcoming limits the potential to learn about progress towards Decent Work outcomes. First of all, improving the availability of outcome-level data requires strengthening of the monitoring and evaluation processes of ILO projects. Secondly, although the available resources for independent evaluations are limited, evaluation terms of reference should include requirements for a more systematic effort to collect outcome-level data, looking at the implemented activities and mechanisms and their possible contribution (or negative inverse effect) to trigger sustainable changes. Project monitoring systems should likewise provide the baseline data to complement this.

Recommendation 3 – Include policy support for the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda as part of all ILO employment promotion interventions.

Based on the premise that ILO has a clear comparative advantage to influence the reflection, formulation and implementation of policies addressing dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda, it is recommended that policy support be a systematic component in ILO employment promotion interventions. Moreover, attention to influencing policies should be mainstreamed in all components, strategies and activities of the interventions. Supported by technical expertise and capacity building approaches, the ILO interventions would bring together more enabling factors which contribute to sustainable outcomes.

Recommendation 4 – Ensure that capacity building of key stakeholders involved in labour market institutions, mechanisms and regulations, beyond the primary ILO constituents, is a key ingredient of all ILO interventions.

How the Decent Work Agenda is addressed and effectively implemented at the country level depends on the role played and decisions made by actors involved in labour market institutions, mechanisms and regulations. From that perspective, supporting the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda through ILO employment promotion interventions implies adequate capacity development of these actors. These capacities should embrace knowledge and skills that allow social partners and the relevant national administrations to make evidence-based, effective decisions. The capacity building strategies should take into account the needs and characteristics of each actor. In addition, capacity building strategies should not be limited to the traditional ILO constituents but should also benefit other relevant stakeholders who, according to the specific issue or policy in question, can potentially contribute to the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda.

ANNEX 1: Methodology

This review was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, based on a range of search criteria, the ILO used its databases to identify a comprehensive list of all relevant evaluations of employment promotion interventions. This resulted in a list of 108 evaluations, as well as a number of other relevant studies published by the ILO and other UN organizations. The second stage used an elaborate checklist to identify all the evaluation reports which met pre-defined quality and relevance criteria developed in collaboration with the ILO Evaluation Unit. At the end of the process, 44 evaluations reports were retained. In the third and final stage, the selected reports were analyzed with a methodological grid to identify and map relevant information on the outcomes regarding employment creation and effects on the Decent Work Agenda. Aside from findings related to the outcomes, the review also mapped important insights into project implementation processes and the context in which interventions take place.

Of the 44 final evaluations selected, nine had a main focus on skills development, 10 on labour-intensive employment creation, 10 on other types of employment creation (excluding labour-intensive public works), 10 on enterprise and entrepreneurship promotion, and five on other themes or strategies (e.g. capacity building). Since most of the projects combined two or more strategies together, projects were for some parts of the analysis grouped according to their dominant strategy, and for other parts according to other characteristics. Due to the specific nature of ILO's technical cooperation programmes, a large majority of the evaluations were situated in low-income countries, and to a lesser extent in middle-income countries.

This review encountered a number of limitations in terms of the lack of data in the evaluation reports that could allow strong conclusions to be drawn on some of the issues under review, and the extent to which these reports provide a full picture of the projects. First of all, the extent to which ILO technical interventions address one or more components of the Decent Work Agenda differs substantially among the project evaluations. Moreover, several evaluation reports only briefly or superficially discussed the effects of the project on the Decent Work Agenda. It was not always clear to the review team whether this is due to missing elements in the evaluation Terms of Reference, to a lack of strong monitoring and evaluation data, or whether it was omitted by the evaluator. Along the same lines, several evaluation reports contained limited background information about the project activities and/or about the broader operational environment of the project. In addition, because ILO project evaluations are nearly always carried out before the end of the project when the expected changes might not have fully crystalized, outcomes and impact are difficult to establish, and causal links with the intervention remain difficult to determine. Finally, the number of evaluation reports in the sample for each type of intervention was deemed generally too low to draw firm conclusions about the overall population, as they cover very different geographical and institutional realities. This limited the possibility of the review team to establish sound theories about what works for whom and in which context.