



Governing Body

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GB.309/18/4

FOR DEBATE AND GUIDANCE

EIGHTEENTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Report of the Director-General

Fourth Supplementary Report: Developments in relation to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)

Overview

Issue covered

The paper covers developments in relation to a new field of activity proposed within the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) concerning human resource management systems.

Policy implications

The proposed field of ISO activity potentially concerns a number of issues relevant to the ILO's mandate, international labour standards and areas of ILO action. The ISO has requested the ILO's views on collaboration in the matter.

Financial implications

None proposed.

Action required

Paragraph 10.

References to other Governing Body documents and ILO instruments

No precedent documents on this subject.

1. This document concerns developments in relation to a new field of activity proposed within the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) which potentially raises questions relevant to the mandate or activities of the ILO. On 15 October 2010, the ISO issued a proposal to its members, initiated by the American National Standards Institute, for vote and comment concerning a new field of work on human resource management (HR management). If the proposal is approved, the ISO would establish a new technical committee which would facilitate the development of a management system of standards for the HR management field “associated with all sectors and industries using human labor” (section 7 of the proposal).¹
2. Before circulating the proposal to its members, the ISO contacted the International Labour Office seeking comments on the proposal. On 8 October, the Office responded that it would bring the matter to the attention of the Governing Body at this session, and expected to be in a position to transmit any views after that time. On 15 October, the ISO sent out the proposal to its members for a three-month voting period, informing them that comments from the ILO were expected after review of the proposal at this session of the Governing Body. In a reply to the ILO, the ISO indicated that ILO comments would be brought to the attention of the ISO Technical Management Board which would review the voting results and comments on 23–24 February 2011.
3. The proposed field of activity concerns a number of issues relevant to the ILO’s mandate, international labour standards and areas of ILO activity, including technical assistance and advisory services. The proposal refers to the field of HR management as organizational “policies, practices, and systems that influence employees’ behaviour, attitudes, and performances”. The ISO technical committee, if established, would facilitate, in the words of the proposal, “the development of a ‘management system of standards’ that would codify organizational guidelines, processes, policies, practices, and systems for the HR management field associated with all sectors and industries where human labor is applied”. The work of the technical committee would cover content areas which it identifies as including the following: compensation and benefits, employee relations, legislative and regulatory compliance practices, HR information systems, performance appraisal and feedback, change management, diversity and inclusion management, workforce planning, retrenchment and talent management, training and development, organizational development, workforce readiness and sustainability, human resource communications, and work–life balance programmes. For a full listing, see section E in GB.309/18/4(Add.).
4. Many of the above topics concern issues addressed in ILO Conventions and Recommendations. In relation to the work of the ILO, the proposal states: “International HR management standards would complement the Code of International Labour Law (CILL). The Code is a collection of Conventions and Recommendations that originate from the Constitution of the International Labour Organization. The Code principally describes the relationship between employers and the employed in terms of employees’ rights and the Conventions direct actions to be taken by the ratifying states and not private employers. Another level of workplace oversight is each private company’s codes which are ‘voluntary written commitments to observe certain standards of conduct of business’. ... The gap that exists between national and international laws and the random private codes comprises the area that this proposed Technical Committee would fill.”
5. While proposing to complement international labour standards, the ISO proposal aims to avoid subjects dealing with workers and human rights. It is suggested that the proposed technical committee “would avoid work ... in these areas: freedom of association (i.e. the right to organize and to bargain collectively), equal employment opportunity and non-

¹ The proposal (ISO TS/P 217) can be found in GB.309/18/4(Add.).

discrimination, prohibitions against child labour and forced labour, basic principles concerning occupational safety and health, consultation with workers' groups prior to carrying out substantial changes such as workforce reductions and plant closures, grievance or dispute resolution procedures, or the use of monitors (internal or external) to audit employment practices". Even so, according to the proposal, "the proposed TC may incidentally facilitate the implementation of ratified codes like the ILO Conventions or cause the consolidation of private codes within an industry". The relevant existing documents at international, regional and national levels include both public international standards and various private standards and have been excerpted from section H of the proposal reproduced in GB.309/18/4(Add.).

6. It is not clear how the aims of complementing international labour standards in the areas set out (see paragraph 4) can be done without addressing fundamental principles and rights at work and other enabling or priority areas (see paragraph 5).
7. In general, collaboration with the ISO may be seen to present benefits and risks. On the one hand, there are advantages to be gained by guiding and informing private standards initiatives to achieve approaches that are complementary and do not conflict with international labour standards. This may be the case where, for example, ISO technical expertise provides a clearly complementary input as in the case of the biometric profile for the seafarers' identity document (see paragraph 8), or where the private sector may itself play a distinctive role in giving effect to particular ILO standards and a satisfactory framework for cooperation is agreed (ISO 26000 discussed in paragraph 8). On the other hand, the private standards processes do not possess the type of representative character or procedural safeguards that aim to legitimize the elaboration of public standards such as those within the ILO. As a result, accompanying the elaboration of such initiatives may risk endorsing a private standardization effort which, by its process or result, could compromise the ILO's standards and other means of action.
8. Accordingly, the ILO's approach to ISO activities has varied in the past depending on the type of activity concerned:
 - In relation to ISO technical activities in occupational safety and health, the ILO has participated as a category A liaison organization in a number of ISO technical matters, including through technical committees and subcommittees.²
 - In follow-up to the Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (Revised), 2003 (No.185), the ILO requested the ISO to develop the recently approved ISO/IEC 24713-3 standard (Information technology – biometric profiles for interoperability and data interchange) as a means of providing technical assistance to deploy an international system of biometric-enabled seafarer identity documents.³
 - In the field of social responsibility, the ILO agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with the ISO to seek to ensure that the ISO guidance standard on social responsibility (ISO 26000) would be fully consistent with the object and purpose of the provisions of international labour standards.⁴

² For an overview of areas of participation and gaps, see GB.298/15/5, Part II (Mar. 2007).

³ See GB.306/17/3; GB.306/PV, paras 262–265 (Nov. 2009).

⁴ See GB.309/MNE/1.

- In the field of management systems for occupational safety and health, the ILO requested the ISO to refrain from proceeding with a standard on the subject.⁵
9. In considering whether any communication or other actions should be taken by the Director-General at this time in relation to the present proposal concerning a technical committee to develop a system of standards for HR management, it may be helpful to compare the situation presented in light of the above examples of ILO action. The Governing Body may wish to keep in mind that the results of its decision could be communicated to the ISO, as appropriate, for its consideration when the ISO Technical Management Board reviews the comments of ISO members on the proposal in February 2011. Alternatively, the Governing Body could be kept informed of the matter and, if a technical committee were established, of any standard-setting proposals that may be established within the ISO framework.
 10. The Governing Body may wish to express its views on possible action to be taken in relation to the proposal of the ISO for a new field of technical activity on human resource management.

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Submitted for debate and guidance

⁵ See GB.301/17/7 (Mar. 2008), GB.301/PV, paras 312–314; GB.298/15/5, GB.298/PV, paras 289–295.