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Decent Work: a target to achieve the MDGs

Fact sheet

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Fact Sheet - DECENT WORK

I. What does Decent Work stand for?

Work is more than a job - Work is a major part of the life of most people. It takes up much of their time and energy, is one of the main ways to integrate into society and an important factor for creating self-esteem and identity.

Work is also the principal source of income and livelihood for the vast majority of people. The nature of the work they do is thus a fundamental determinant of their quality of life.

From the perspective of societies and economies, work is a driving force of growth and development. Well-being, poverty reduction, social cohesion, the ability to adapt to the forces of globalization and to attain sustainable development all depend to a large extent on work as a factor of production and distribution. Further, social and economic outcomes for individuals, enterprises and economies are determined not only by the volume of work performed but critically by its quality.

The concept of Decent Work - In 1999, the central role of work and its quality was analysed by ILO Director-General Juan Somavía in his first report to the International Labour Conference. The report culminated in the introduction of a comprehensive concept of work and the workplace which he called *Decent Work* (DW). The report broadly defines decent work as: *'opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity'*.¹

The concept encompasses four inter-related dimensions as shown in the below figure:

- § **Employment:** the availability of an adequate number of productive, quality jobs, which provide incomes to cover at least basic needs.
- § **Social security:** protection from work-related injury and from lack of income due to unemployment, illness or old age.
- § **Rights in the workplace:** in particular fundamental rights such as the freedom of choice and equality of treatment, freedom of association, protection from forced labour and child labour, and opportunity at work.
- § **Social dialogue:** the ability to participate in making decisions about working conditions and to represent their interests collectively in all types of negotiations between or among representatives of government, employers and workers.

II. What is said about it?

Decent Work for all - DW is not limited to employees who receive wages or salaries but applies equally to all working people: women and men, young and older workers, nationals and migrants, and though often harder to realize, self-employed, farmers, home-workers and entrepreneurs.

DW is a universal aspiration and a goal but its precise definition will vary from country to country. It contains both absolute values, thresholds, which are non-negotiable minimum standards for DW and more ambitious objectives taking into consideration the historical, economic and cultural context of a country.

Over and above the threshold of the minimum Core Labour Standards² (www.deza.admin.ch/ei) which include freedom from forced labour and from child labour, equality of opportunity and treatment at work, as well as the right to organise and bargain collectively, DW can be seen as a relative, evolving goal. Like the goal of sustainable development, the notion of DW is progressive

¹ As defined for the first time in Director-General Juan Somavía's report to the ILO Conference in 1999, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/rep-i.htm>.

² The Core Labour Standards comprise those enshrined in the ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/declaris/DECLARATIONWEB.static_jump?var_language=EN&var_pagename=DECLARATIONTEXT.

and has changed over time. As a national goal, DW can be defined in the light of national priorities and circumstances and can be reached through different routes.

A global goal - Since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 1999, there has been growing recognition of the vital role of DW for development. Since the UN MDG+5 World Summit in 2005, where world leaders committed themselves to achieving four additional targets to the ones included in the Millennium Declaration³, and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Ministerial Declarations adopted in 2006 and 2007, DW is recognized as essential for achieving the MDGs, a fair globalization and reduction of poverty.⁴ Summits of heads of state of Africa and of the Americas have adopted DW as the goal for their national development and the best route out of poverty. DW for all is accepted as a key element of the international development agenda, a priority objective of international cooperation as well as of national and international development policies.

Today, the DW agenda is no longer only an ILO strategy. Bilateral and multilateral donors, the European Union and other international organisations are now making it an integral part of their policies. The World Bank has also decided to integrate the DW agenda in all second generation poverty reduction strategies.

III. What is being done about putting DW into practice? Who does what?

In order to assess the status, to set targets and to monitor progress, the four dimensions of Decent Work have been broken down into 10 characteristics⁵ which can be measured with statistical indicators (Anker et al 2002). These indicators can be applied to the work and life situations of individuals as well as to enterprises, sectors or entire countries.

The ILO Experience - The ILO has gained significant experience with DW as a development tool in its Decent Work Pilot Programme (DWPP) which has been adopted as its mode of cooperation with member countries. The experiences of eight pilot countries (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dwpp/>) and the general lessons can be consulted at (http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---integration/documents/publication/wcms_079471.pdf). These have showed that there are three broad national development priorities in ILO member countries: poverty reduction; adjusting economies and societies to globalization; as well as democratisation and the realization of human rights

1) **Working out of poverty:** For most people in the world, income from work is the major source of revenue but most poor people are working poor (i.e. not unemployed, but their jobs do not provide living wages/incomes) found in agriculture as well as in the expanding informal economy. Women are disproportionately affected in both groups.

The pilot programme in Ghana has shown that decentralised, pro-poor growth targeting the informal economy and women can be very effective. The integrated approach linking dialogue, institution building, small enterprise promotion, micro-finance and social security provides a policy instrument for the implementation of the national poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP). The emphasis here on local economic development (LED) is compatible with the drive towards decentralization in many developing countries and PRSPs

(<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dwpp/countries/ghana/index.htm>)

It is therefore essential to build DW into poverty reduction strategies (PRS). ILO's advocacy guidebook and corresponding manual on DW and PRS provide guidance on how to do this: (http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/integration/download/tools/6_3_109_advocacy.pdf)

³ The four new targets: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people (under MDG1); universal access to reproductive health; universal access to access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it; Reduce biodiversity loss.

⁴ [<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G06/625/46/PDF/G0662546.pdf?OpenElement>] and [http://www.un.org/ecosoc/docs/pdfs/Revised_Ministerial_declaration.pdf].

⁵ employment opportunities; unacceptable work; adequate earnings and productive work; decent hours; stability and security of work; balancing work and family life; safe work; social protection; social dialogue and workplace relations

(<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/integration/departme/national/prsp/download/prsrefmanual.pdf>)

2) **A fair globalization:** The Pilot Programme in Morocco focussed on the garment sector which is the main exporter and largest industrial employer, in particular for women. It is an example for ways a DW approach helps countries to adjust to the forces of economic integration as well as to upgrade the industry and to maintain its competitiveness through a combination of social dialogue, skills upgrading and improvements in working conditions.

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dwpp/countries/morocco/index.htm>

3) **Democratization and human rights:** Field programmes to abolish slavery in Brazil (http://www.ilo.org/public/portugue/region/ampro/brasil/tbesc_english/brasil/projetos/projetos.htm) and to establish democratic labour market institutions in Bahrain

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dwpp/countries/bahrain/index.htm> are examples of DW applied to advance democracy and human rights. There is also extensive experience concerning child labour and discrimination⁶ (<http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/index.htm>). Building on the experiences of the Pilot, ILO has adopted the Decent Work country Programme as its mode of cooperation with member countries (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/program/dwcp/>). Numerous programmes have been or are being rolled out since 2006.

Y Mainstreaming Decent Work in the UN-system - Efforts are underway to mainstream DW in all UN agencies plus the World Bank and the IMF. At the international level, the ILO has been engaging the WTO (http://www.ilo.org/wcmssp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---webdev/documents/publication/wcms_081742.pdf), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others in a policy coherence initiative to generate an enabling framework for DW in economic and trade policies

(<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/gb/docs/gb295/pdf/sdg-3.pdf>].

UNDP and the ILO engaged a direct partnership strengthen their collaboration in a major new effort to bolster UN actions designed to reduce poverty and create more DW.⁷ A toolkit is assisting the agencies to diagnose the inter-relationships between DW and their mandates and programmes and monitor its integration in their policies and programmes (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dgo/selecdoc/2007/toolkit.pdf>).

Y Beyond the UN-system - A significant development has been the adoption and incorporation of decent work by development agencies beyond the UN-System. A notable example is the European Commission directive on 'Promoting decent work for all'.

(http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2006/may/com_2006_249_en.pdf) The EU development ministers underscored their commitment to decent work as a pillar of development cooperation in the Potsdam Declaration

(http://www.bmz.de/de/service/infothek/buerger/DeutscheEU/Broschuere_Petersberg.pdf)

Y Swiss Development Cooperation - At the conceptual level, rather than endorsing it as a free standing concept, SDC recommends keeping promoting the DW concept as a broad orientation to be integrated in existing strategies (e.g. medium-term orientations) and as per the needs of a given context. Because of the broad nature of the agenda, a certain focusing of interventions is indicated according to the SDC's own organisation and functioning.

The four objectives of DW are already implicitly integrated in SDC's existing priorities and strategies. However, SDC's interventions have mainly focused on the creation of employment opportunities, while striving for a systemic analysis of factors that have a direct and indirect bearing on the poor. To "mainstream" the DW agenda, SDC has to work mainly through its operational units by providing adequate orientation that in addition to keeping a focus on

⁶ <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/declaris/DECLARATIONWEB.INDEXPAGE>.

⁷ <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/february-2007/ilo-undp-jobs-20070209.en.jsessionid=axbWzt8vXD9> and http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/exrel/papers/2005/employment_mdgs.pdf].

promoting employment envisages expanding coverage of formal and informal workers' rights aspects, social protection services and strengthening tripartism and social dialogue.

The E+I Division is developing actions to inform and orient SDC operational staff towards that direction. SDC shall coordinate with SECO in activities concerning the ILO in the area of DW since SECO is institutionally the official ILO counterpart.

IV. Where to learn more from?

In addition to the web linkages that can be found in the text, you will find below key references

Anker et al (2002), 'Measuring decent work with statistical indicators', Working Paper No. , Policy Integration Department, ILO, Geneva

Ghai, D. (2003), 'Decent work: concepts and indicators', in International Labour Review Vol 142 (no 2) pp113-145, ILO, Geneva

ILO (2005), Decent Work and Poverty Reduction Strategies: a reference document for ILO staff and constituents, Geneva, 179 p.

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/integration/departme/national/prsp/download/prsrefmanua1.pdf>

UN CEB (2007), 'Toolkit for mainstreaming employment and decent work', Executive's Board for Coordination, United Nations, Geneva, 66p.

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dgo/selecdoc/2007/toolkit.pdf>

Additional References:

EU Commission (2006), Directive decent work

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ILO (2007), 'Decent work for sustainable development' Director-General's Introduction to the International Labour Conference, Geneva, 2007, 20p.

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