Chapter 4

Decent Work, Standards and Indicators

MONIQUE ZARKA-MARTRES
International Labour Office

AND MONIQUE GUICHARD-KELLY
International Labour Office Consultant

1. Introduction

1.1. General Remarks

The mandate of the International Labour Organization is to promote social justice. The preamble of its Constitution, established in 1919, begins with these words that are still fully pertinent today:

Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice; And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required.

In 1999, the Director-General of the ILO, Juan Somavia, defined the mission of the ILO in today’s world in the following terms:

The ILO’s mission is to improve the situation of human beings in the world of work. Today, that mission finds resonance in the widespread preoccupation of people at times of great change: to find sustainable opportunities for decent work. The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.1

The international labour standards were the first tool developed by the ILO to implement its mandate. Today, this tool remains the most important means the Organization has at its disposal to achieve its objectives. As stated by the Director-General in 2001,

firstly, normative action helps to clarify the meaning of decent work: standards provide an authoritative answer to the question of what decent work implies in concrete terms as regards the preconditions (fundamental principles and rights), its content (work that meets certain criteria of

quality and security) and the process where by it can be achieved (social dialogue). Secondly, it helps to put the Decent Work Agenda into practice: standards are a stern indicator of progress towards the achievement of ILO objectives, not through lip-service but in law and practice.²

The strength of the international labour standards, in comparison to other international instruments, is that they are developed and adopted through a tripartite process involving governments, employers and workers. Their adoption at the International Labour Conference (ILC), supreme body of the Organization, to which the 178 member States are invited to be represented by tripartite delegations, guarantees the universality of the values contained in the instruments.

To date, the International Labour Conference has adopted 185 Conventions and 195 Recommendations, which globally cover the following subjects:³ freedom of association, collective bargaining and industrial relations; forced labour; elimination of child labour and protection of children and young persons; equality of opportunity and treatment; tripartite consultation; labour administration and inspection; employment policy and promotion; vocational guidance and training; employment security; wages; working time; occupational safety and health; social security; maternity protection; social policy; migrant workers; seamen; dockworkers; indigenous and tribal peoples; and specific categories of workers. Conventions and Recommendations in these 21 subject areas provide constituents with a number of detailed provisions enabling them to build a solid platform for regulating decent work.

Given the multi-faceted nature of standards and the differing levels of development and priorities in member States, we cannot expect all countries to be able to immediately, and in all areas, implement the international labour standards. For the standards to have real impact, they must be progressively implemented through national programs, taking into account the institutional and economic capacity of each country as well as national priorities. A tool needs to be developed to assist member States to do this by identifying areas where there are gaps or lacunae in national laws and practices with respect to the principles that underlie decent work as contained in the standards.

### 1.2. From the Integrated Approach to Standards-related Activities to a Methodology for “Normative” Indicators

Since the 1990’s, the ILO has been undergoing a process of modernising and strengthening its standards system. In particular, the Working Party on Policy regarding the Revision of Standards (WPRS) was created in 1995 to examine the contents of each of the Conventions and Recommendations and decide on whether

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