In early 1950, ILO Director-General David Morse addressed the Organization’s first regular Asian Regional Conference (ARC) in Nuwara Eliya (Sri Lanka, then Ceylon): “The cry of misery that rises from throats of the millions of people of Asia” had been heard in Geneva, he assured his audience. Self-critical about the ILO’s past activities, he promised that from now on the Organization would turn its face toward the problems of Asia.¹ What lent credibility to Morse’s words at this point in time was that he could refer to one of the major programmatic shifts in the ILO’s history that had taken place under his leadership a year earlier in 1949, when the Organization had embarked on a programme of technical assistance in areas like vocational training or the raising of productivity, tailored to the needs of the “developing” countries.²

This chapter discusses the “Asian” origins of the ILO’s technical assistance programme (TAP). Motivated by the looming Cold War and the nation-building imperatives generated by decolonization in Asia, this ILO initiative reoriented the Organization well beyond its rather narrow pre-war focus on standard setting for workers in the industrialized nations of the West. The chapter will further demonstrate how Asia³ became a laboratory for the specific “integrated approach to development” promoted by the ILO from the very beginning of its operational activities, in which standard-setting and technical assistance were propagated as being “two sides of the same coin.” It was mostly in Asia where this concept would be put to the test and adjusted accordingly.

The ILO’s shift toward an emphasis on technical assistance and Asian economic development clearly sprang from the rapidly shifting international political environment of the late 1940s. In this context the American David Morse, who took over the office of Director-General of
the ILO in late 1948, played a central role. He was an internationalist
and a New Dealer-turned-Cold War liberal, who saw the Organization’s
new focus on development both as a chance to win new “clients” in the
form of postcolonial states and as a means of enabling the ILO, on the
side of the West, to play an important role in the global fight against
communism, particularly in Asia.

Born in 1907, Morse had devoted almost the whole of his professional
life to the problems of labour and social policy, first in the United States
and then at the international level. As a young Harvard-trained lawyer
he had entered government service during the early New Deal years,
become an expert on labour law, and served first as a regional attorney
for the National Labor Relations Board in the crucial New York metropo-
lar area, and then, after the war, as general counsel for the Board
at its Washington headquarters. In these posts Morse helped facilitate
the dramatic expansion and institutional security of American trade
unionism. During the Second World War he served in the US military
where, as head of various departments occupied with labour affairs,
he was responsible for drafting the plans for the re-democratization
of labour relations in Germany and Italy. Like many other liberal New
Dealers, Morse’s domestic and wartime experiences informed his later
activities in the global arena. The time he spent in the occupation forces
in Europe confirmed his internationalist convictions and his belief
that the United States must play an active and positive role beyond its
borders once the war was over. As Assistant Secretary of Labor for Inter-
national Affairs in the Truman administration, a post he held from 1946
to 1948, Morse had a chance to put this conviction into concrete action.
His duties included securing the support of the American Federation of
Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the two American
trade union federations, as well as their European counterparts, for the
implementation of the Marshall Plan. Indeed, Morse was ultimately one
of the most important early advocates for extending the reindustriali-
zation policies at the heart of the Marshall Plan to the world beyond
Europe. He saw in the Plan an effective means of shaping the domestic
policies of the “developing countries” in such a way – basically by
raising the productivity of their economies – as to render them immune
to the rise of communism. By the time this idea took concrete shape in
1949, in the form of Truman’s “Point IV Program,” Morse was already
heading the ILO, and the idea that he might be able to make effective
use of the new position to gather support for these policies on an inter-
national level was undoubtedly one of the main reasons why the US
Government had pushed for his appointment. Thus, the new approach