Decent Work and Development

Note: To facilitate better communication between field and HQ colleagues, this session of the Decent Work Forum was videotaped for dissemination through RealPlayer. Subregional Office Directors were invited to ask colleagues to submit questions or comments in advance of the Forum.

The panel consisted of the following colleagues, speaking in their individual capacities for 7 to 10 minutes each:

Lee Swepston, International Labour Standards Department
Ajit Ghose, Employment Strategy Department
Ifthikar Ahmed, International Labour Review
Susan Leather, InFocus Programme on HIV/AIDS and the Workplace.

From a standards perspective (Swepston), decent work is necessary for development. Decent work has to be informed and fueled by standards. Yet discussions on development in human rights circles often leave out work/economic activity. Constituent-inspired standards reflect the best way to organize the world of work.

Hence the Asian Development Bank came to the ILO when it wanted to incorporate rights at work on child labour, gender and occupational safety and health into its own activities. Results of the work: ignoring labour standards carried a definite and measurable cost for development. ILO supervisory work can be used much more to design decent work programmes. Rights are part of the shared vision of decent work.

In relation to decent work, what appear to be absolutes are actually relative (Ghose). This is an innovative approach, but risks arbitrariness. The traditional definition of development has been economic growth; more recent thinking sees it in broader terms, and includes decent work. Decent work is a set of goals; a goal cannot be an instrument. (This was contested during the discussion.)

Objectives like employment and social protection only have meaning in relation to particular categories of workers (sub-categories of formal and informal). If standards are promoted for formal sector workers, does this have adverse effects for others? More research is needed for convincing arguments relating to decent work.

Regression analysis (presented by Ahmed) suggests that a 1% reduction in decent work deficits boosts the Human Development Index by 0.24%. High levels of decent work can be achieved without high levels of income. Social policies and sectors probably explain why. These results and others on decent work indicators will appear in the next issue of the International Labour Review.
If the linkages between issues are not understood, interventions will be wrong (Leather). The Millennium Development Goals, for instance, lack connections between them: the gaps between the Goals is development. The Decent Work Agenda recognizes connections, with work as the motor of growth, seen from various angles. Employment is the bridge between growth and poverty. Social dialogue is a more valid concept than partnership.

However, the looming tidal wave of HIV/AIDS will make nonsense of all of these efforts. It is impacting on food production and malnutrition, school attendance and child labour, production and services in key sectors ("one half of the professionals in health services and security in Malawi will be dead by 2005"). Uniquely, AIDS affects the productive population, with severe loss of human capability. We need our collective expertise working together to tackle this disaster.

Discussion involving some of the approximately 40 people present brought out comments such as:

- growth in relation to decent work,
- the gender gap,
- the neglected rural sector,
- the disastrous effects of falling commodity prices and unfair trading regimes,
- social dialogue as a means towards the goal.

Statements included:

- ILO responses have to be based on more than moral injunctions; more economic arguments are needed, backed up by evidence on impact
- Development is broader than poverty reduction; there is underdevelopment within rich countries too
- Having an index would stimulate discussion and ask for refinement
- Achieving the goals of decent work needs action on issues beyond ILO mandate
- It’s useless to be overly scientific about measurement; people in developing countries live the reality every day.

Further observations:

- Decent work is to a large extent about inequalities (not only of income and consumption, but in relation to exercise of rights, etc.)
- No one is “too poor” to benefit from international labour standards
- Social dialogue has to expand beyond tripartite discussion to unrepresented sectors
- There can be considerable value in attacking a problem in a non-direct way.

*The next Decent Work Forum will be on “Is Decent Work a Rights-Based Approach?”*

*The Decent Work Forum is intended to stimulate thought and interchange among staff about the Decent Work Agenda.*