First Decent Work Forum, 25 September 2003, Geneva

Building the Decent Work Agenda: Trade-offs and synergies among the four Strategic Objectives

A panel of five staff members, speaking in their individual capacity, led off the discussion:

Catherine Brakenhielm-Hansell (International Labour Standards Department) – A Standards Policy Perspective

Duncan Campbell (Employment Sector) – Premises of the Global Employment Agenda

Wouter van Ginneken (Social Protection Sector) – Social security, labour protection, employment and socio-economic development: Linkages and policies

Lucio Baccaro (Social Dialogue Sector) – Social dialogue and the three other Strategic objectives

Evy Messel (GENDER) – Mainstreaming the Decent Work concept.

Each one did a 5-7 minute presentation, annexed to this summary. A general discussion followed the presentations.

The event was attended by around 80 staff members. Feedback after the Forum suggested that staff welcome the chance to exchange ideas about what the Decent Work Agenda entails, seen from a variety of perspectives.

The idea of synergies and trade-offs was seen by different colleagues in different ways. Some colleagues looked at it from an economic viewpoint, while others took a more institutional approach. Three of the presentations were of a more theoretical bent, and two were more oriented to practical application.

Many comments touched on the need for national action plans and policies that take account of culturally sensitive national circumstances. Gender mainstreaming was a way to frame Decent Work activities in an integrated manner.

From an economic point of view there were statements such as:

- “Discrimination lowers productivity, but wage repression shown to increase exports.”
- “There is a trade-off between unemployment benefit levels versus employment promotion.”
- “Maternity/child benefits, working and life conditions create gender synergy and productivity.”
- “Ending bonded labour constrains future growth (and measurable negative growth impact evident in the present)”

From the institutional point of view there were statements such as:
• “The general knowledge we have of the Decent Work paradigm and how each construct affects the other needs to be complemented with a more contextualized knowledge of particular institutional systems.”
• “What is the evidence that we will have better outcomes by integrating?”
• “Do we measure these things? Why do we want to measure and what we will do with that information?” “Do we want to chart progress within a country? Between countries?” “Measuring progress vs. measuring deficiencies”
• “Why are we using different labels – Decent Work Pilot Programme, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Global Employment Agenda, etc. for the same kind of work?”
• “Building up our knowledge gives us ammunition to convince those who do not agree with us.”

There will always be trade-offs. It was suggested that there are three possible responses:

1. We don’t care because one will always take precedence.
2. We should try to find ways to overcome that trade-off by looking for a new institutional agenda.
3. All trade-offs are inter-related. Only the systemic view of how things fit into the whole will show how to reach all objectives simultaneously. Using benchmarks and indicators will have a locomotive effect and help identifiable obtainable goals.

The third option involves policy integration – the best means of pursuing the Decent Work Agenda.

The next Decent Work Forum will be on the topic of “Decent Work and Development.”

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