



Making the Transition: How to move decent work from aspiration to attainment

By Guy Ryder, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation

Decent work for all is increasingly a point of reference in multilateral declarations and statements. It is moving up the international agenda and continuously receives new plaudits. Yet the policies behind the concept might be just as far away as ever, unless we can effectively translate agreement on its importance into real changes in the actions of governments and international institutions.

The global labour movement, together with its allies in progressive political parties and civil society, has been arguing for some time that decent work for all should be placed at the centre of global governance, as a universal goal throughout the UN system and other international institutions such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank. Surely that should be obvious: to be achieved globally, decent work must be prioritised by all international institutions and they must work coherently to ensure its realisation.

As a universal goal for all international institutions, the achievement of its basic components – employment, workers’ rights, social protection and social dialogue – needs to guide all policies in the economic and social sphere, from development and welfare guidelines to macroeconomic and monetary policies to the regulation of trade, investment and finance. As a guiding principle, the achievement of decent work for all should be the object and the outset of increased policy coherence between the main actors of global economic and social governance.

Over the last couple of years, we have been successful in getting decent work onto the agenda of the multilateral institutions and into their general priorities – highlights being the strong reference to decent work for all in the statement of the 2005 UN Summit of Heads of States and Governments and the conclusions of the 2006 ECOSOC Substantial Session on decent work and productive employment. But we must not fool ourselves. Statements and declarations are one thing; the everyday actions and policies of the most dominant international institutions another. It is the latter and how they impact national policy-making that really matters. And in that respect there is still a long way to go.

International trade negotiations at the WTO are at a stalemate and no effort is being spared to rejuvenate them; none, that is, except talking about what trade is supposed to facilitate: quality employment and all that comes with it. It would not seem daring to suggest that trade negotiations are in a deadlock because trade liberalisation has failed to deliver on its promises far too often. Yet negotiators and other officials still talk in terms of market access and tariff barriers to the exclusion of rights, industrial development and jobs.

Similarly, the international financial institutions – the World Bank and the IMF – while struggling to prove their relevance, too often do more that undermines the creation of decent work than they do that promotes it. Whenever they take one step forward, as when the Bank's private lending arm, the IFC, integrated the respect of core labour standards into its requirements to its lenders earlier this year, it is only to be undone by steps back elsewhere. Hence, this year's main flagship publications from the Bank, the *World Development Report 2007* and *Doing Business*, promoted dogmatic labour market deregulation, argued for the abandonment of minimum wages, and encouraged more atypical employment in the form of temporary contracts, which very often deprives the employee of her or his legal rights. All this while arguing, ironically, that the proposed policies would improve employment prospects if they were implemented.

Indeed, in the eyes of the IFIs and many powerful WTO member states, there is no inconsistency in signing on to the promotion of decent work and continuing doing what they always have. They actually believe that their policies will increase economic growth, enhance private business opportunities and so, by stimulating market mechanisms, promote employment. And they believe that while such employment might not be decent at its outset, it will more or less become so as time passes by.

Sadly, experience shows something quite different. More often than not, such policies create new waves of unemployment, undermine standards and rights related to work and undercut the possibilities of state-provided social protection. They risk making a mockery of the virtues of social dialogue and promote systems that discourage or prohibit the organising of workers.

Over the next years, decent work could perfectly well figure in another eight or ten international statements without getting any closer to being promoted genuinely by the main actors of global governance. A U-turn by these institutions themselves and their main donors is needed. They must forsake dogma and acknowledge that neo-classical orthodoxies are no panacea for social development. Economic prosperity and social progress do not trickle down. For all to have a share in it requires enabling rights, extensive protection systems, effective industrial policies and employment-stimulating macroeconomic priorities.

A shift of paradigm in global governance and policy making is needed if decent work is to be attained. On our side, stepping up our argumentation and getting better at influencing the right decision makers is necessary if we want decent work to thrive in the global economy. We will continue to expose and oppose policy makers that are only paying lip service to decent work and international institutions that do nothing but undermine it. But most importantly, we must ensure that the battle for decent work at the global level is being won in the national arena. Trade deals are made by states and international institutions governed by them, and theoretically accountable to them. If decent work is to make the transition from a broad aim that most will agree on to an objective that guides policymaking and that can actually be achieved, every national trade union, every national progressive party, every parliament and every government must put

it on their agenda and make it a priority. The newly founded International Trade Union Confederation will do its utmost to make that happen.