

THE DECENT WORK AGENDA

Definition

Decent Work is a globally accepted goal and instrument for improving the lives of people. The term was first introduced by the Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Mr. Juan Somavia, in his address to the 87th International Labour Conference in 1999. Mr. Somavia defined decent work as *‘productive work in which rights are protected, which generates an adequate income with adequate social protection. It also means sufficient work in the sense that all should have access to income earning opportunities. It marks the high road to economic and social development, a road in which employment, income and social protection can be achieved without compromising workers’ rights and sound standards.’* He indicated that one of the objectives of Member Countries should not only be to create jobs but to create jobs with acceptable quality.

A decent work **deficit** is said to occur when:

- there is involuntary unemployment and poverty;
- there are abuses of rights at work and forced child labour exists;
- basic income security is missing, and workplace anxiety, depression and exhaustion are commonplace;
- workers and employers are either not organized to make their voice heard or have obstacles to effective dialogue; and
- life at work cannot be properly balanced with the claims of the family.

It should be noted that although the term ‘decent work’ was coined by the ILO, it has received international commitment and has been endorsed as a global goal at various high-level meetings including the Fourth Summit of the Americas (2005), the OAS General Assembly (2005) and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (2006 and 2007). At the Sixteenth Americas Regional Meeting (May 2006), a *Decade of promoting Decent Work* was declared where the Americas committed to taking action aimed at realizing the decent work agenda.

The Decent Work Agenda

Decent work is promoted through the Decent Work Agenda. This Agenda comprises the following four pillars namely:

1. The Promotion of Standards and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work

The ILO, in its tripartite approach to setting basic international standards of work, adopts instruments in the form of Conventions and Recommendations. Conventions are international treaties, subject to ratification by ILO Member States while

Recommendations are non-binding instruments, often dealing with the same subject as Conventions, which set out guidelines orienting national policy and action. The adoption of Conventions and Recommendations, (collectively referred to as international labour standards) and the promotion of their provisions by Member States are key strategies in the promotion of decent work internationally.

Certain Conventions are regarded as **core** or **fundamental** in that adherence to their provisions ensure certain basic rights of workers. These Conventions are set out in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work which was adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 1998. The Declaration marked a reaffirmation of Member States' willingness to "respect, to promote and to realize in good faith" the principles concerning four (4) categories of fundamental rights at work. The categories and associated Conventions are outlined in Table 1. These eight core Conventions are accepted as forming the decent work framework. Trinidad and Tobago has ratified the eight core Conventions.

Table 1

International Labour Organization Core/Fundamental Conventions

Category	Core Convention
Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining	No. 87 – Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, 1948; and No. 98 – Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining, 1949
The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour	No. 29 – Forced Labour, 1930; and No. 105 – Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957
The effective abolition of child labour	No. 138 – Minimum Age, 1973; and No. 182 – Worse Forms of Child Labour, 1999
The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation	No. 100 – Equal Remuneration 1951; and No. 111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958.

2. The creation of employment

Decent work cannot be achieved without sustainable jobs. As such, employment creation is a central objective in the promotion of decent employment.

3. The enhancement of social protection

This objective seeks to protect workers from the vulnerabilities and contingencies at work whether these arise from unemployment, loss of livelihood, sickness or old age.

4. The strengthening of social dialogue

Social dialogue refers to meaningful and deliberate consultations among Government, Employers' and Workers' representatives. This is an ongoing process used to achieve conflict resolution, social equity and effective policy implementation. It is the means by which rights are defended, employment promoted and work secured.

Role of the MOLSMED in promoting decent work

The MOLSMED plays a critical role in promoting decent work in Trinidad and Tobago and working towards realization of the Decent Work Agenda. One of the Ministry's six strategic objectives is that of the promotion of the application of the principles of decent work in the workplace.

All of the Ministry's services are intended to foster decent working conditions. Specific activities are also being undertaken to this effect such as the strengthening of the Labour Inspectorate, modernization of labour legislation in areas such as occupational safety and health, development of policies to address HIV/AIDS and the promotion of social dialogue through the establishment of tripartite Committees. The focus on strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Labour to promote and ensure decent work is also critical.

The representation of country's intended actions in a coordinated manner to achieve the decent work agenda is that of Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs). The MOLSMED, with the assistance of the ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean, intends to commence the process of formulation of Trinidad and Tobago's DWCP in consultation with the social partners in the near future.