

## Decent work as a sustainable development goal: any benefits?

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The original United Nations Millennium Development Goals did not include any reference to labour challenges. However, in 2008, the International Labour Organization (ILO) succeeded in convincing the UN to include the target to 'achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people' (MDG 1, target 1B). This target reappeared in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG) as Goal 8: "... to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all".

While this mainstreaming of labour concerns into the UN agenda can be attributed to the ILO's strategic focus on decent work, the world is no closer to fulfilling the decent work agenda. Job insecurity and vulnerability to exploitation remain widespread across the globe. Is the integration of the ILO's decent work agenda into the SDGs therefore without benefit?

The literature on compliance with international standards is divided on the binding nature of international agreements and international organisations. I will present the different arguments below, concluding with the claim that rights must be fought for by workers, but that mainstreaming contributes to the legitimacy of their struggles.

### **Scepticism about the normative impact of SDGs**

For the realists in international relations, the central categories in the context of rule compliance are national interests and the structural balance of power in international politics. From the structure of the international system, realists derive the cost-benefit calculations that states always make when considering whether to comply with rules. Realist theorists assume that international institutions do not have a self-regulating effect on states. Rule-breaking behaviour is mainly 'purposeful disobedience by actors who choose defection from the rules' (Hafner-Burton 2005: 597).

A contrasting view can be found in sociological and historical institutionalism. From this perspective, international organisations can be effective. Social cooperation is possible in an international society characterised by norms and rules. By means of persuasion in the form of "monitoring", "shaming" and "blaming", the normative order of preferences can be changed through the internalisation of norms.

International law develops its binding force through the diffusion of norms. This norm diffusion can itself be understood as a trickle-down process. Ideally, the diffusion of norms is followed by the internalisation of international norms (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998).

These authors have a point. However, even from their own theoretical perspective, they overlook an important fact, namely that these international norms are not the only norms that guide important actors in the field of industrial relations. While in today's business world the main social obligation is to comply with the relevant laws, it is also accepted that business people will try to interpret the law in their favour or find loopholes that exempt them from the law. Some governments, in the interest of attracting foreign direct investment or maintaining authoritarian rule, either fail to enforce the ILO Conventions they have ratified or fail to ratify them at all. Moreover, the social norms that shape organisational cultures can influence behaviour more than laws. There is a widespread expectation that business people will pursue profit. More often than not, the profit motive takes precedence over other goals, such as caring for the wellbeing of the community.

Governments and business organisations do not challenge the norm per se, but they deflect responsibility, prevent the norm from being strengthened and present the norm as a functional means to an end.

Normative institutions prescribe socially acceptable behaviour. When applied to business practices, a widely shared cognitive framework in the business world comes to mind: technical rationality. The focus on the efficient achievement of a given objective (i.e. increasing sales and reducing costs) leaves less room for objectives that may not easily fall under the efficiency dictates, such as providing a voice for all stakeholders. Technical rationality tends to favour the interests of top management at different points in the chain.

### **The legitimacy-enhancing effect of SDGs**

However, the mainstreaming of ILO Conventions could make a difference. Ulrich Mückenberger (2016) has convincingly argued that the fact that the core Conventions have found access to other sources of law has increased their global legitimacy and effectiveness. When other legal instruments incorporate ILO Conventions, the Conventions come under the

jurisdiction of these legal instruments and thus gain access to additional means of enforcement. While the inclusion of the decent work agenda in the Sustainable Development Goals does not give them additional enforcement powers, it does give them additional legitimacy. This enhanced legitimacy increases the likelihood of their inclusion in legal instruments that commit nation states to their enforcement. A prominent example is the growing number of trade agreements that include labour rights chapters that explicitly refer to ILO Conventions.

While the example of labour rights clauses in trade agreements supports Mückenberger's argument, it also shows its limitations. The inclusion of labour rights clauses was certainly helped by the legitimacy of the ILO Conventions, but they were mainly the product of intense lobbying by trade unions and labour-oriented NGOs. Most of these clauses do not provide access to the dispute settlement procedures reserved for the other chapters of the trade agreements, i.e. they lack the sanctioning power usually ascribed to trade agreements (Scherrer 2025). In the very few cases where the activation of labour rights clauses has had a positive impact on workers whose rights have been violated, this positive outcome has been the result of workers' resistance and trade union campaigns.

The need to mobilise workers to secure their rights points to the limitations of the mainstreaming process. Its positive contribution is to give legitimacy to workers' struggles for their rights, but it does not replace them. Webster and Ludwig (2020) have argued convincingly that the Decent Work Agenda and its mainstreaming are important organising tools for workers, but not a substitute.

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## Literature

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