

## "We need to back that dialogue with some action" – Programme and Practice of Decent Work in Ghana

by Joyce Abebrese

The rise of globalisation and economic growth, evolving throughout the last decades, brought about several forms of inequality and injustice among and within the different countries of the world. Not all economic growth can be assigned to decent and productive employment for the people, since it has not led to a reduction of poverty and informal labour (International Labour Organisation (ILO) 1999). Developing countries, in particular, struggle because they often lack efficient social security and social protection systems to care for the unemployed, diseased and vulnerable parts of society. Jütting and de Laiglesia (2009, 9) find that "informal employment is the norm, rather than the exception, in most developing countries". Poverty reduction and creation of decent employment need to be followed by national strategies to achieve better economic and social development.

### Informal workers show a high risk for poverty

The ILO finds that in many African countries, farmers and informal workers are the groups which are affected most by poverty (ILO 2004). In sub-Saharan Africa, countries show informal non-agricultural work proportions of more than 80% (Jütting/ de Laiglesia 2009, 18). As opposed to the formal economy, informal workers have little or no social security, battle with lower incomes, and deal with precarious work. Most of the newly created employment in the informal economy inserts people into a "vicious circle of low pay, high risks and limited mobility" (ibid. 18).

### Decent Work to improve working conditions

In terms of employment creation to reduce poverty, the challenge is not simply to create jobs, but to create better and more sustainable jobs, which implies the availability of reasonable payment and efficient social protection. Therefore, the question arises of how to improve the social and employment situation of workers.

In 1999, the ILO presented its new agenda: Decent Work for all in a Global Economy (ILO 1999). The four strategic objectives of the Decent Work Agenda are connected and interdependent to each other (in addition, gender equality is a crosscutting objective (ILO 2012)):

- 1) Creating employment
- 2) Guaranteeing rights at work
- 3) Extending social protection
- 4) Promoting social dialogue.

### The role of the trade unions within the tripartite setting

Based on the Decent Work Agenda, several Decent Work (Pilot and Country) Programmes (DWPP, DWCP) were developed by the tripartite partners which involves government, workers and employers in different country-specific contexts. The question arises as to what role the trade unions played during the agenda-setting and implementation process of the Decent Work Programme (DWP), since they are responsible for representing the workers, the directly

affected people.

### Ghana as role model for establishing Decent Work? – The Decent Work Pilot Programme

For illustrating the influence of trade unions, the example of Ghana was chosen. Within this context, the difference between talk and action, on the side of the constituent tripartite partners, needs to be highlighted. In addition, the necessity to deal with other organisations such as political foundations or Global Union Federations also came up within this context. The following results are based on a study conducted by the author with experts on the topic of Decent Work in Ghana, integrating the viewpoints of trade unionists from the Ghanaian umbrella organisations, the Ghana Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL), employers and the ILO itself.

The evaluation of the DWPP highlighted the progress and success of the programme concerning efficient local development. Awad (2005, 15) evaluated the Pilot programmes as:

*"proved to be forceful mechanisms for revealing and discussing competing objectives and what has been seen as trade-offs. In some cases, it has brought out potential contradictions and inconsistencies of action that in turn have generated further policy debate. Examples are the formality/informality debate, the revision of the reform of labour codes, labour market policies in the context of open economies and the flexi-security debate".*

That is also the case for Ghana: The policy debate concerning the amendment of the informal workers is not yet solved; labour codes and labour market policies are at least discussed between the social partners. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Decent Work Programme in Ghana is complicated and is further accompanied by several problems and challenges, particularly addressing the actual involvement and influence of trade unions into the agenda setting, as well as the specific challenges arising from the informal economy (Abebrese 2013). Since Ghana has a high share of informal employment (about 80% of the workforce), the challenge of bringing Decent Work to this particular section of the economy is vital and necessary.

### Factors for success and failure of the programme: The importance of locality

The Pilot Programme was implemented in the informal economy in two pilot districts in the Central Region of Ghana, where the results showed that the interrelationship between local economic development and national development was very important for the success of the programme. Although the interviewed experts evaluated the Pilot Programme as effec-

tive, they emphasised the project-character of the programme by stating that those involved saw it as a short-term project from above initiated by the ILO, and not from below and therefore not long-term-oriented.

### **Dependency and lacking financial resources impede the trade unions' work**

The problem of an effective and long-term-oriented Decent Work implementation was mostly ascribed to the disqualification and reluctance of the Government of Ghana (GoG), which was accused by, interviewed experts, of not being committed to achieving the aims and objectives of the Decent Work Agenda. The role of the Ghanaian trade unions was indicated as very active in terms of informing and training their members. However, limited trade union influence was found in terms of integrating their concerns into policy setting; since the GoG needed to fulfil several external expectations. The government found the most important ones in the claims of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) concerning privatisation, labour market flexibility and the attraction of foreign investors. This due to the fact that, the IFIs, still provide a lot of financial means to Ghana. The costs for an effective Decent Work Programme, which is supposed to primarily address the informal economy, are too high, particularly because of lacking financial resources for trade union contributions of informal economy workers. Especially in this case, the difference between the talk on the one hand and action on the other hand, becomes obvious: The government, as one of the constituent partners, firstly agrees to implement certain mechanisms and to invest in the effective promotion of Decent Work but when it comes to real implementation and (financial) support, the government is no longer accountable for the workers' concerns. This can be traced to the government's dependency policy on the IFIs recommendations on the one side and the need implementation of Decent Work and its financing on the other side.

### **Decent Work in Ghana – Where talk misses action?**

For the GoG, agreeing to certain aspects and issues concerning the integration and implementation of the four Decent Work pillars in a country programme is simple, though, in practice the achievement of the objectives is not combined with other stakeholders' claims, such as the conditions of the IFIs to refund the country's debts. The trade unions are still keen to push and promote the Decent Work Agenda, in collaboration with the Labour Research and Policy Institute of the TUC. They are still engaged in policy formulation and implementation processes to ensure the representation of worker and community interests.

### **The need for organisations to work together in a network frame**

The relevance of the topic concerning changing environments due to globalisation needs to be highlighted by stating that a need for a network texture within the national frame, as well as between various partners beyond the single nation-state, could be ascertained. Inside the country, it is important to also integrate informal economy associations into the agenda setting and implementation process of the Decent Work Programme, otherwise the concerns of informal workers will be poorly addressed.

Beyond the single-nation state, the cooperation between national trade unions, Global Union Federations, political foundations such as the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and other NGOs needs to be further pushed and promoted. This is done with the purpose of guaranteeing a global amendment of working conditions and Decent Work in general within nation states but also across borders. That is where the work of the trade unions continues, in cooperating with other organisations and stakeholders to integrate different viewpoints and to further promote the Decent Work Agenda. Furthermore, the second Ghana Decent Work Country Programme is in process of planning and is supposed to improve the settings of the first programme.

### **Talk needs to meet action for an amendment of working conditions**

"We need to back that dialogue with some action" is the most suitable citation taken from one trade unionist's interview, intending to show the concrete relevance of bringing together talk and action of the tripartite partners and installing concrete activities to care for more responsibility of the deciding stakeholders and to "make the policymakers sit on their toes". The aim should be to improve the situation of the most vulnerable groups of the society by providing decent work to them. Therefore, the tripartite partners are responsible to care for an amendment in many people's lives and the goal should be to give a hearing to the struggles faced by trade unions and to successfully implement a long-term Decent Work Programme.

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