

Creating model for ensuring human dignity



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The International Labour Organisation's (ILO's) mission is to improve the situation of human beings in the world of work. Herman van der Laan has the experience of working for varied offices of ILO in Europe, Asia and Africa and is at present the ILO Representative in India. Prior to this assignment, he was the Chief of Coordination Unit responsible for relations with ILO donor countries in Department for Development Cooperation in Geneva. Before this, he was the director of the ILO office in Indonesia.

In this interview, Herman van der Laan speaks about the policy and vision of ILO to improve the labour rights and the various programmes to achieve this mission.

One of the primary goals of ILO has been to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work. How much success has ILO achieved towards this goal till now?

Since the ILO was established after the First World War the organisation works to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work. Work ensuring freedom, equity, security and human dignity for all women and men. Decent work is centered around the promotion of rights at work, employment, social protection and social dialogue.

Protection of the rights of the workers in the informal sectors, whose numbers are steadily growing, is an important agenda of ILO.

Women are often forced to work in low-paid jobs in poor working conditions. Decent employment for women is, therefore, a major concern for ILO.

The ILO has at present 178 member countries and works with their government, represented by the Ministry of Labour and with workers' and employers' organisations with the aim to provide sustainable opportunities for decent work. This tripartite structure of ILO makes it unique among the UN organisations.

How effective has the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) of ILO been?

Protection of children is one of the important issues for the ILO. The aim of IPEC is to work towards the progressive elimination of child labour. Through this programme, ILO addresses the key aspects of the child labour problems, such as educational and training opportunities, awareness of the adults and decent income of the family. IPEC's work on child labour is also an important facet of the ILO's decent work agenda.

The ILO generally follows a two-way approach to fight child labour. One way is the legal approach through ratification of ILO Conventions and another way is to build up national capacities to address child labour problems. IPEC's experience shows that to be effective, poverty alleviation programmes must address child labour issues through prevention, withdrawal, and the strengthening of national capacity, especially in the education system. In this regard, the National Child Labour Programme and its bridge schools initiated by the Government of India are a very effective step.

We work with the government, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as with

NGOs to create model and innovative approaches for the elimination of child labour that can be replicated through out the country. In India, our work covers a number of states, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi and others.

ILO has recently launched a comprehensive report on forced labour, which also deals with human trafficking, which is a serious problem in South Asia. What are the strategies of ILO to abolish such practices?

Indebtness to employers force a large number of poor workers to work as bonded labour. In India, projects with ILO support are implemented in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

In the South Asia context, we work in a number of countries, specially Nepal, to stop the trafficking, particularly of children. Women are particularly prone to trafficking. We also look at this from the point of view of migration because trafficking in one sense is illegal migration. So we are working for strengthening the migration policies and procedures of the countries so that there is less scope for illegal migration.

At the next ILO Asian Regional Meeting, which will take place in Korea in October this year, migration is one issue that will be discussed by the ILO member

countries from Asia-Pacific. The members will look for taking better measures for protection of migrant workers and avoiding illegal migration.

What are the strategies of ILO for the protection of the rights of indigenous and tribal people?

Tribals and indigenous people are often the most suppressed and backward sections of the society. ILO works for the protection of their rights and also assist them to find decent income opportunities, which suit their traditions. The ILO is also actively involved in a number of United Nations activities and processes, which are relevant for the indigenous and tribal peoples.

In India, ILO has undertaken programmes for the empowerment of tribal people through self-help groups and micro-credit, amongst others in Orissa. The aim is to generate employment opportunities based on their traditional skills and linking them with the market and economic infrastructure. The new Forest and Land Act of Government of India is an appreciable step for the entitlements of the rights of the tribals. ILO is also working for the protection of their traditional rights.

One of the major ill effects of globalisation has been sub-contracting of jobs to poorer countries for cheap labour leading to major violation of labour rights. What initiatives have been taken by ILO to protect these labours?

Globalisation results in a dynamic process of job losses and gains. We, at ILO, strive to ensure that the rights are protected and those who lose jobs have adequate social protection. To analyse the impact further, the ILO has established the “World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation” to assess the impact of globalisation.

The benefits of globalisation are now reaching only a small group of countries or a small group of the population within a country. The report essentially points to the fact that globalisation is not fair, and that it can and should be made fairer.

Please share with our readers about ILO’s efforts for restoring the employment and livelihoods of people affected by Tsunami.

ILO has a comprehensive approach for the Tsunami affected areas. It is working in the Tsunami affected areas of Indonesia,

Thailand, Sri Lanka and India. In India, we have taken an approach in line with the Government of India’s request that the United Nations system work together and support the government’s efforts.

The fishing community lost significant income opportunities in the Tsunami and that’s why we are concentrating with the worker’s organisations. At present, we are working on a programme for the start of new businesses or improving existing businesses. For the fishing community, we are working very closely with the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), which has specific programmes for the fishing industry, in addition to working directly with women for other skill development.

I must also mention that the government is looking for ways for better functioning of labour market so that government institutions can play a different role than they have played so far and respond better to the needs of the Tsunami affected.

What are the specific objectives of ILO in India?

As far as India is concerned, we have agreed on a number of priorities together with our partners in this country. The first one is looking for ways to provide decent work for informal economy workers. The second one is to address the needs of vulnerable groups like child labours, bonded labours, tribals, etc. The third element, which we are supporting, is improving and expanding social security. Many people of India do not have access to social security and the aim is to particularly reach the informal economy. The last issue, which we address is sound socio-economic policy at the country as well as state level to ensure that the Common Minimum Programme of the Government of India is implemented. It is quite remarkable to see how closely the CMP is linked to the ILO agenda.

How can ICT be used to promote labour rights?

The ILO has looked on ICT and its impact especially on employment from a global perspective. It is also looking at ICT as a potential tool for addressing the poverty.

A major challenge is to make sure that the people in the villages, in the unorganised part of the economy, do find a proper way to communicate with the computer, mobile phones and information

technologies. That clearly needs two things – one is education and another one is the development of suitable computer applications that are as conducive as possible for the poor, in rural as well as urban areas, to communicate. This can be done through special programmes. A large part of the Indian population is poor and is not yet a part of the mainstream economy. With these tools, they can become much faster part of the economy, increase their job opportunities, become a part of the market and become an internal engine for India’s growth.

ICT can for instance be used to inform people of their rights. One could think of use of ICT by the Panchayats (village level administrative bodies) for making the villagers aware of their rights and entitlements. Many of the poor do not know about the various government programmes. They can be provided information through various programmes using ICT. We are working with a group of women in Tamil Nadu to help them realise their various benefits - they simply do not know about these schemes. A lot of government funding is not utilised because people who should benefit, do not know about their rights. In that sense, information technology could play a very important role. It can also be a very important tool in the hands of district administrations and village administrations.

What is the ILO’s vision towards United Nations Millennium Development Goals?

The ILO is fully committed to play its part in realizing the Millennium Development Goals. Poverty reduction is an essential component for the promotion of decent work. In fact, it can be argued that without decent work you cannot fight poverty. It’s only through work, that the poor can realise their aspirations: a decent income, some basic form of social protection and the right to defend their own interests. We do a lot of work promoting right macroeconomic policies, which integrate creation of employment opportunities and decent work for all women and men. We see the Millennium Development Goals related to jobs, decent work and human dignity. People everywhere want to live a decent life with dignity and politicians know this. No politician in the world can ignore this demand for jobs and respect for human dignity. ■