



INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

# The Role of Decent Work in Poverty Eradication and Environmental Protection

Mohammed Mwamadzingo\*

Paper prepared for presentation at the  
Trade Union Regional Conference on Labour and the Environment,  
COSATU House, Johannesburg, South Africa,  
28 and 29 July 2006

---

## I: Overview

Over the past years the concept of environment has evolved considerably. From the narrow focus on pollution the concept now entails an integrated approach to environment and development. Emphasis has now shifted more towards development policies and projects which will lead to sustainable development. Furthermore, based on the special efforts of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development (SustainLabour) and other bodies, new approaches to environmental action are emerging. The January 2006 Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment in Nairobi—that brought together more than 150 trade union representatives from developing and developed countries along with environment and sustainable development experts, governments and UN representatives—was a further attestation on the diverse subject ranging from the need for strengthening the links between poverty reduction, environmental protection and decent work; integrating the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development with a rights-based approach; to the establishment of effective and democratic governance to ensure sustainable development. The Assembly also recognised that urgent action on climate change has to be taken, and that sustainable production and consumption patterns will have to be promoted.

A yet important aspect of the concept of sustainable development is that environmental challenges cannot be met without at the same time meeting basic social and economic development objectives. This parallels the ILO's own proposition

---

\* Regional Specialist on Workers' Education, ILO Area Office, Pretoria

expressed in the Declaration of Philadelphia that “poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere.” In addition, the ILO's fundamental principle that “lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice” is also directly related to many of the fundamental environmental challenges of today. Without an equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of environmental protection within and between countries, neither social justice nor sustainable development can be achieved.

The main proposition of the ILO is that social dimension in sustainable development policies and programmes must be strengthened and better integrated by agencies and institutions which have a primary focus on social issues. In particular, the social component of sustainable development requires an enhanced global capacity to implement the ILO Conventions on core labour standards, support social policy reform by developing countries, create more and decent employment, and alleviate poverty.

This presentation also contends that the main difficulties in dealing with the environment are not technical, but political, economic and social. The problems lie in the lack of political will or institutional capacity, the lack of adequate financial resources or unwillingness to devote adequate financial resources to environmental objectives; and the conflicts, divisions, diversity and disparity within our societies which prevent us from reaching consensus on what to do, how to do it and how to pay for it.

When one looks at the environment from these perspectives, the role of the ILO's constituents, particularly the employers and workers, in helping to achieve a constructive consensus on the environment both internationally and within their national societies could be very significant - if not indeed a prerequisite for success. One of the goals of the ILO, therefore, is to identify possible ways in which governments, especially through Ministries of Labour, and federation of employers and trade unions can promote and participate in environmentally sound and sustainable development. In order to play such a role, however, the ILO's tripartite constituents need to be aware of the potentially negative and positive repercussions - or the costs and benefits - of environmental policies upon the world of work, and particularly on employment creation and poverty alleviation.

## **II: ILO and the Decent Work Agenda**

The primary goal for the ILO is to secure decent work for women and men everywhere. It is the most widespread need, shared by people, families and communities in every society, and at all levels of development. Decent work is a global demand today, confronting political and business leadership worldwide. Much of our common future—including sustainable development—depends on how we meet this challenge.

In his first Report of the Director General to the International Labour Conference in 1999 Juan Somavia defined the ‘decent work’ agenda as the ‘promotion of opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity’. Decent work is now the driving force behind the ILO’s conviction that a broad-based strategy for poverty reduction, employment creation and environmental protection is needed.

In translating the concept of decent work into a policy framework, the ILO adopted four broad and interconnected components, namely (i) Standards and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work; (ii) Employment; (iii) Social Protection; and (iv) Social Dialogue. The immediate goal certainly involves a combination of measures to promote productive employment, social protection rights and representation, and the effective functioning of social dialogue among ILO constituents. In effect, this is where the comparative advantage of the ILO within the multilateral system can be brought into effective use. It is imperative to build on ILO's knowledge of the world of work and of tripartite systems of social dialogue as well as to focus on the institutional framework needed to promote decent work and thus enhanced poverty reduction and environmental protection.

The concept of decent work is thus built on the foundation of long experience of working with constituents in a variety of programmes, and in analysis of the interactions between employment, labour market and social protection policies in many different circumstances. Within this perspective, a persistent theme in the ILO's work is the importance of embedding both labour and social policies in an institutional framework that creates opportunities for full, productive, and freely chosen employment. However, the decent work approach also recognises the need for the ILO to re-examine how, based on an enduring set of fundamental principles and rights, existing institutions of and around the labour market should respond to increasing international economic integration while at the same time contributing to a more coherent international architecture for sustainable development and equitable growth.

In a nutshell, these aspects are rooted in the implementation of the four strategic ILO objectives as follows:

**Standards, fundamental principles and rights at work:** To promote and realise fundamental principles and rights at work:

- ILO member-States put into effect the principles and rights concerning the freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the elimination of forced labour, child labour, and discrimination in employment and occupation
- The progressive elimination of child labour, with priority being given to the urgent elimination of its worst forms and the provision of alternatives for children and families
- The provision of services for supervisory bodies, constituents, the Governing Body, and the International Labour Conference, thus enabling existing standards to be supervised and new standards set

**Employment:** To create greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment and incomes:

- ILO constituents are better equipped to analyse trends in national and global employment and labour markets, and to elaborate, advocate, and implement effective strategies for the promotion of decent employment for men and women
- ILO constituents invest more in training and skills' development to provide men and women improved and equal access to decent jobs

- ILO member-States and constituents are better equipped to design and implement employment promotion programmes in the areas of enterprise development and employment-intensive situations, paying particular attention to the situation of women

**Social Protection:** To enhance the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all:

- Member-States broaden the scope and the instruments of social security (including the informal sector and the working poor), improve and diversify benefits, strengthen governance and management, and develop policies to combat the adverse effects of social and economic insecurity
- ILO constituents target and take effective action to improve safety and health and conditions of and at work, with special attention being given to the most hazardous conditions at the workplace

**Social Dialogue:** To strengthen tripartism and social dialogue:

- The representation, services, and influence of social partners are strengthened
- The legal frameworks, institutions, machinery, and processes for social dialogue are strengthened

### **III: Environment protection and its implication in the world of work**

We can identify two important direct linkages between environment and the workplace: (a) decent employment, and (b) poverty eradication.

#### ***(a) Environment and decent employment:***

From the outset it needs to be pointed that analysis of linkages between environmental policies and employment is severely constrained by the lack of comparable and valid data. The situation is even worse in Africa.

Nonetheless, earlier studies undertaken in industrialised countries in the 1970s and 1980s showed limited adverse employment effects of plant closures attributable to environmental policy. For instance, plants that allegedly closed for environmental reasons were mostly small, old and marginal, and probably would have closed anyway. In many instances, environmental regulations simply accelerated the timing.

Plant closures, however, are only part of the environment/employment story. The adverse effects on employment may have been greater in cases where plants did not expand or could not be built at all because of environmental regulations.

Unfortunately, almost no data were available to measure such effects in the past, nor to help predict potential repercussions in the future.

Favourable outcomes emanating from environmental protection and rehabilitation programmes in relation to opportunities for job creation have been recorded mainly in the European Communities, where the level of technology is high. Researchers have argued that improved environmental protection may have a favourable effect on employment thanks to the manufacture, installation and maintenance of pollution abatement equipment, the development and implementation of new environmentally-

sound technologies and the increased need for specialised environmental management staff.

However, in Eastern Europe, on the other hand, urgently-needed environmental protection measures could have led to the closure of obsolete and uneconomical plants, resulting in significant job losses. Some of these losses may, however, be offset by major, though more short-term, employment opportunities arising out of large-scale environmental rehabilitation projects.

There is also the realisation that protecting environmental resources has a direct effect in job maintenance. Examples are the limitations on drift-net fishing to prevent the depletion of fish stocks; the protection of employment in mining through the use of new technologies permitting the leaching of minerals from low grade deposits and mine tailings, and the protection of employment in forestry by preventing forest damage. Conversely, environmental accidents such as oil and chemical "spills" have had adverse effects on employment. In order to be able to protect employment and incomes effectively in such situations policy-makers need an advance warning system so that they can respond early enough and with appropriate resources. Employers and workers could be an important source of information for such early warning systems, as well as promoters of appropriate environmental action.

Furthermore, there are differences between locally and nationally aggregated effects of environmental policies on employment. In other words, while the loss or gain of jobs attributed to environment may be relatively minor nationally, their effects in a local community can be very disruptive. From the ILO's perspective, therefore, special priority should be given to those workers who may lose their jobs or who may require training and adjustment assistance in order to take up new employment opportunities related to new environmental activities or other alternative employment.

### **(b) Environment and eradication of poverty:**

Poverty eradication is one of the main goals of sustainable development. It must be ensured that national development plans include poverty reduction strategies that are consistent with a broad national sustainable development approach.

While the issues related to employment discussed above are primarily focused on formal sectors of the economy, the majority of the population is confronted by different environmental challenges dominated by the complex relationship between environment and poverty and development. In developing countries, and particularly in Africa, the environment plays a very significant role in the daily lives and work of both the rural and urban populations.

It is poverty which is responsible for the destruction of ecological resources - not the poor and landless people who have no alternative but to violate ecological imperatives in order to survive. Given the dependence of the rural poor on agriculture, land degradation and inadequate fresh water supplies have in many areas led to increased poverty and made it impossible for them to survive on the land, particularly the subsistence farmers, women and tribal populations. Such environmental constraints exist not only in the well-known drought and desertification areas like the Sahel, but also in many other ecosystems such as rainforests, and mountain and coastal areas.

Similarly, the urban poor are confronted with severe problems related to housing conditions, the availability of fuel, water and sanitation facilities as well as transport.

The pressures of rural and urban poverty have a direct effect on levels of employment and income rarely revealed in traditional economic and employment statistics. They most certainly exist, however, and require the attention of governments, employers and workers and of the international community.

The linkage between poverty alleviation and employment, for instance, is dramatically and concretely demonstrated by the application of genetic engineering to crops for increasing herbicide resistance. On the one hand, this development encourages the excessive use of chemical herbicides by farmers, thereby degrading the environment in industrialised and developing countries alike. On the other hand, it will not only introduce a new fixed cost to the poor farmers of in developing countries by forcing them to purchase the herbicide genetically tied to the seed, but will also strike a colossal blow at the poor. In the developing countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, manual weeding provides a major source of farm employment and cash income for hired labour, including women from the poorest households who will no longer be required. The current tug of war between the Kenya Plantations and Agricultural Workers Union and major multinationals in the tea sector is a case in point.

It has been seen that most developed countries followed a strategy of resource-intensive (energy and materials) growth which led to significant deterioration of the environment. Later, as perceptions changed, incomes grew and shifts were made to less resource-intensive economic growth, there was an improvement in environmental quality through a combination of corrective and preventive efforts, including new technologies and changes in products and processes. In other words, the trade-offs between growth and environmental quality change over time, particularly as incomes and consumption rise.

#### **IV: Workers' organisations and the environment**

In addition to all their other roles and responsibilities, workers and their organisations are also "environmental" organisations by virtue of the extremely high priority they have given to the protection of the working environment. The traditional view that the working environment existed in total isolation to the general environment has been replaced, particularly in workers' circles, by recognition that the two are closely interlinked.





Consequently, workers and their organisations have become increasingly involved in general environment issues at the enterprise level, as well as through their national, regional, international and sector-based organisations. Some of the activities and potential roles for workers and their organisations at the enterprise level include:

- given their day-to-day experience in the workplace, workers and their
- organisations can make an important contribution to the improvement of the working and general environment and should make a point of ensuring that they are informed and consulted at an early stage on all environment questions;

- ☐ the active involvement of workers and their organisations should be sought concerning the design and implementation of all environmental policies or programmes which might promote new employment, protect existing employment, or lead to the loss of employment (with the consequent need to institute adequate "safety-net" measures);
- ☐ workers need access to information on - if not actual participation in - the establishment of company environmental strategies or policies; the introduction of new technologies; monitoring of chemical emissions inside and outside the plant; environmental audits; inspections and reports regarding compliance with environmental regulations and standards, etc: in other words, they need "the right to know";
- ☐ workers should participate in the design and development of training programmes for workers and management to provide environment awareness and the skills necessary to meet environmental objectives; special efforts should be made to ensure that workers' health-and-safety representatives or special environmental representatives receive appropriate environmental training;
- ☐ workers should promote the setting up of special joint committees to deal with general environment issues or the broadening of the mandate of existing joint committees (e.g. health and safety committees) to encompass the general environment;
- ☐ workers should consider the creation of special, trade union environmental committees, if appropriate;
- ☐ workers should actively participate in environmental activities within the local community, and facilitate exchanges of views on potential problems and activities of common concern;
- ☐ workers may be able to influence the purchasing policies of enterprises, consumers and governments in order to identify and promote products which are safe for the working and general environment, by such means as the establishment of standards on environmental certification or labelling;
- ☐ workers should urge employers to recognise good environmental performance by workers and management and to provide incentives for such performance;
- ☐ workers should co-operate with appropriate government inspection authorities to ensure the improvement and enforcement of regulations and standards on the working and general environment;
- ☐ workers should collaborate with employers, governments and consumers to ensure that the "polluter pays principle" is enforced and that the costs are not simply passed on to consumers without the polluter making investments to prevent further pollution.

Many of these same activities and roles at the enterprise level will also be relevant for national, regional and international workers' organisations, which will need to strengthen their capacity to provide support, including information, training and advice, to workers and their organisations at the enterprise level.

A number of additional activities are also being considered by national, regional and international workers' organisations, for example:

-  active involvement in the development and implementation of environmental legislation, standards, codes of practice and guidelines at all levels;
-  research into and analysis of the implications of environment on the world of work and wide dissemination of the results;
-  the general exchange of information and experience on environment and the world of work as well as advance warning of new potential hazards or problems related to the working and general environment;
-  making national, regional and international policy-makers aware of the positive and negative implications of environmental policies and problems for workers and actively participating in the policy-making process, particularly by identifying and promoting practical and effective measures to accentuate the positive and mitigate or eliminate the negative impacts.

Trade union solidarity with workers throughout the world who are struggling to overcome extreme poverty and injustice is constantly challenging workers' organisations everywhere to support the achievement of sustainable development. Workers' organisations may be able to promote and contribute to new opportunities to strengthen and deepen the process of North-South, East-West and South-South collaboration related to the environment and sustainable development.

## **V: Policy questions**

Should developing countries go through similar stages of development as in the developed countries, that is economic growth with environmental degradation, slowly followed by improvements resulting from environmental efforts?

How can the developing countries absorb an "environmental shock" to their economies under the current spate of globalisation?

Given the high level of debt and poverty in many developing countries today, can such countries be expected to finance the additional costs of the environmental quality standards needed to meet global challenges such as ozone depletion and global warming?

If developing countries must pay a significant share of those additional costs, will it be at the expense of their employment and social objectives, including urgent action to alleviate poverty?