

Fair globalisation: a call to action

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JUAN SOMAVIA studied law at the Catholic University of Chile. After graduating in 1962, he studied economic development at the School of Law and Economics at the University of Paris. In 1971, he was appointed Professor of International Economic and Social Affairs in the Department of Political Sciences at the Catholic University of Chile. Between 1976 and 1990, he was Founder, Executive Director and President of the Latin American Institute of Transnational Studies (ILET). He has been Director-General of the ILO since 1999.

The picture is fixed clearly in my mind – two men holding a sign reading: ‘Wanted, a decent job’. Yet more victims of the global economic crisis? In fact, it is a photograph taken more than 70 years ago during the Great Depression. Millions of workers today are echoing this call.

Before the crisis 190 million were unemployed. In addition, some 500 million workers were not earning enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$1 per person per day poverty line and 43 per cent were living below the US\$2 per person per day threshold. This situation is likely to be aggravated by the impact of the economic crisis. Global unemployment could rise to 241 million by the end of 2009 while the number of vulnerable workers and working poor could increase by up to 108 million and 222 million, respectively.

With 45 million new entrants to the global jobs market annually, some 300 million new jobs will need to be created from now to 2015 just to keep pace with the demographic growth in the labour force. Meanwhile, the number of people suffering from hunger has surpassed the one billion mark for the first time in history. Very likely, the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed development goals will be adversely affected.

Behind the statistics are the human tales of the global decent work deficits – women and men working hard in the informal economy for bare survival, children put to work because parents cannot afford school, migrants leaving their communities and families, often ready to risk their lives in search of a decent job, youth losing hope of finding their first job, workers with no protection for themselves and their families when they are unable to work because of illness, injury or old age.

Decent jobs support decent lives: decent work is a useful point of departure for charting a people-centred recovery and people-centred development. The ILO’s Decent Work Agenda – a contemporary statement of its founding mission to promote social justice through the world of work – stands on four pillars: employment, social protection, fundamental principles and rights at work and social dialogue with gender as a cross-cutting theme. It embraces all workers – wherever they work, for wages or as self-employed. It captures the aspiration of women and men for dignity through their work, for

opportunity and income to support themselves and their families, to have their voices heard and to have some protection at times of vulnerability.

The Decent Work Agenda is a development agenda, a productive route out of poverty through investment, enterprise development, productivity, jobs. It is a means of achieving equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. Decent work can be pursued at different development levels, with the threshold of what is seen as ‘decent’ advancing according to societies’ priorities and possibilities. There is a floor of fundamental principles and rights at work, basic human rights to be universally respected. All countries – developed and developing – face decent work challenges.

At the intersection of people’s lives, society and the economy, work underpins the stability of families, communities and societies. This pivotal role is well recognised, yet policies tend to focus on growth first with the expectation that jobs would materialise later and decent jobs still later on. This approach has failed too many, too often.

The prevailing model of globalisation has fallen way short on delivering on people’s aspiration for decent jobs. In an ethical vacuum, markets and market values were pre-eminent. The dignity of work and the quality of work, the principles of solidarity and social justice became side-lined, reward systems skewed, poverty worsened, inequality deepened. For many economies and globally, this has meant growing imbalances in investment, consumption, and savings. The ILO has long been concerned that globalisation was on a course that was morally unacceptable and politically, economically and environmentally unsustainable. Events have not proved us wrong.

The magnitude and upheaval of the crisis has encouraged the recognition that ‘business as usual’ is no longer an option. The global crisis has pushed employment, or the lack of it, to the headlines. There is far wider recognition today that a genuine recovery means a recovery in employment.

In June 2009, the ILO’s constituents – representatives of governments and employers’ and workers’ organisations of 183 member states, adopted a Global Jobs Pact. Founded on the Decent Work Agenda, its central aim is to provide countries with a portfolio of tried and tested policies for employment and social protection to reduce the lag time between economic

recovery and employment recovery. The Global Jobs Pact received strong support from leaders at the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, at the G8 in L'Aquila, and by the UN's ECOSOC.

Responses to the crisis mark a beginning, not an end. They can help to prepare the ground for a new model of sustainable development and a fair globalisation. Economic objectives cannot be reached only with economic policies and social objectives cannot be attained solely with social policies. The interdependencies need to be reflected in new approaches bringing together the different dimensions of the real economy. Trade policies work better with accompanying employment and social policies. Likewise for climate change policies, and so forth. The coherence between sectoral policies must be enhanced in order to produce better results for people.

Our common challenge is to build a framework for a balanced and sustainable world economy providing opportunities for all, with balanced growth, efficient market economies, socially just and environmentally sustainable outcomes. It must cover diverse areas including trade, finance, environment and climate change, decent work, development cooperation, health and education. It requires policy convergence as opposed to policy parallelism.


Realising the decent work contribution to a more equitable and sustainable future requires us to:

- Keep true to a vision founded on social justice, respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, embedded in a productive vision of investment, enterprises and jobs;
- Ensure that policies reflect our inter-connected world, in its global, regional and national dimensions;
- Connect the role of the state, the dynamism of markets and private enterprises, the expression of people and their representative organisations along with the satisfaction of the basic needs of families and communities;
- Create space for local initiatives while seeking the benefits of open economies;
- Strike a balance between the financial economy and the real economy with a financial system supporting productive enterprises that generate jobs;
- Make the employment intensity of growth a direct policy objective and maximise the job creation potential of green growth;
- Support the adaptability required by production systems by providing for the security of people;
- Develop a social protection floor that is appropriate to each society and empowers as well as protects; and
- Value social dialogue and building the relevant institutional frameworks involving government, business, labour and civil society to permit the engagement of those most concerned by decisions affecting the work and lives of people.

Realising decent work is a major challenge but there is sufficient experience to signal that it is possible – for instance examples of countries that are now rich but had developed social protection systems when they were poor; governments and social partners who have successfully put social dialogue to the test in good times and bad; others who are making green growth and green jobs the basis of their strategies for recovery and growth. And there is a growing global demand among consumers for social justice at the workplace and in production processes.

Realising a fair globalisation must be grounded on solidarity within and between countries. Partnerships to share knowledge, experience and resources will be key to making a new globalisation work. The work of the multilateral system and regional institutions and development banks must be mutually reinforcing in support of this objective.

The Commonwealth brings together a diverse membership drawn from all continents in a community of values. It can give strong leadership and reinforce the political will to drive towards a fair globalisation. As a community of action it can also lead by example.

The success of a new globalisation will be measured by the difference it makes to the well-being of people. Decent work for all will be a key indicator of success. Let's work together to make it happen! 

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