

Decent Work Revisited – Effects, Implications, and Limits of the Concept Twenty Years Onwards

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Dear Readers,

Since the International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched the Decent Work Agenda about two decades ago (ILO 1999), the ILO, its member countries and partner organizations have been mainstreaming it. Globalization and the acceleration of transnationalization processes, digitalization and financialization, flexible working hours and the weakening of employment standards and labor organizations represent important challenges to this agenda. The pressure that the omnipresent buzzword of *competitiveness* has created, has led – amongst many other effects – towards benchmarking procedures and outcomes that in turn have increased pressure on workers and affected working environments. To date, there are still many areas of the world of work (regional, sectoral) where working conditions are far from the ideal of Decent Work.

The present issue of *socialpolicy.ch* is the result of a workshop held at the University of Fribourg/Switzerland in November 2019.⁴ It aims at giving insight into some currently debated topics and questions linked to the *decent work* concept. In order to place the contributions of this issue into the broader context of the decent work concept, we introduce the concept by briefly outlining its origins, normative bases, application levels, and actors eligible to promote it. In a next step, we present how decent work could be used as an organizing tool, especially for trade unions. After discussing the implications of digitalization on the concept of decent work, we reflect on its meaning in the context of care work and gender relations. We conclude that the decent work concept should be integrated into a broader perspective where it relates to questions of decent care work and a decent life.

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Decent Work – Concept, Levels, and Actors

According to Ferraro, dos Santos, Pais and Mónico (2016), various historical milestones led to the emergence and further development of the decent work concept. The most important ones have certainly been the foundation of the ILO in 1919, the substantiation of the ILO's goals and principles in the Declaration of Philadelphia (ILO 1944) and its constitution (see ILO 1946). These documents made explicit that “labour is not a commodity” (ILO 1944: 4). They highlighted social justice and conditions of freedom, dignity, economic security and equal opportunity. Decent work is closely interrelated with basic human rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulated “the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” (United Nations 2015a: 48), including equal and fair pay, the right to form and join unions, as well as social protection. In 1999, the ILO formally defined the concept of decent work (ILO 1999). Ever since, the ILO and its partners have endorsed the concept on various occasions, for example, as a guiding concept of the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (ILO 2008a). The most recent manifestation has been its inclusion in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015b: Goal 8).

Regarding its major principles and contents,

[d]ecent work is defined by the ILO and endorsed by the international community as productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent Work involves opportunities for work that: is productive and delivers a fair income; provides security in the workplace and social protection for workers and their families; offers prospects for personal development and encourages social integration; gives people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all. (ILO 2008b: iv)

The Decent Work Agenda is based on four normative pillars, which are: job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue (ILO 2008b). The decent work concept is a rights-based approach, which promotes social dialogue and – given the nature of the ILO as a tripartite institution – tripartism, encompassing the action of governments, employers and workers/unions. In the context of globalization processes that challenge worker's rights and labor organization on the level of the nation state, this tripartite approach and the broad – and consequently vague – definition of decent work have been subject to criticism and are still major challenges of the concept (see, e.g., Hauf 2015; Burchell, Sehnbruch, Piasna and Agloni 2014; Standing 2008).⁵ This is all the more the case since the ILO aims at an “inclusive and universal approach, applying to all, even to those in the informal, irregular sector, the self-employed and domestic workers” (Ferraro et al. 2016: 87).

In co-operation with other international and national organizations, the ILO stimulates the measurement of decent work and has developed a toolkit to facilitate the evaluation of policies

⁵ It is often emphasized that the ILO, as well as international and national stakeholders, increasingly have to promote decent work in employment relations and conditions that transgress national tripartite structures, as is the case for labor relations in global supply chains. Counterbalancing the above-mentioned points of criticism, Thomas and Turnbull (2018) highlight the potential that the Decent Work Agenda represents in this regard.

and programs at the country level and to share knowledge management and best practices (ILO 2008b). In this overarching framework that the ILO and its international partners provide, we can distinguish different levels of action regarding the promotion, realization, measurement and evaluation of decent work: a societal, an enterprise and an individual level. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) emphasizes the necessity to include all these levels and their relevant actors to achieve a far-reaching implementation of the Decent Work Agenda. It also highlights that “a multidimensional focus that incorporates governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, representatives of employers and workers, international organizations and, in particular, the agencies of the United Nations system and the international financial institutions” (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2007) is required. In other words, various stakeholders on different levels (may) play a role in promoting and mainstreaming the Decent Work Agenda. Following the ILO and its partner organizations, decent work would thus be realized by integrating the overarching guidelines and impulses discussed above into international and national development frameworks, policies and programs (societal/country level), business regulation and policy, codes of conduct, certification and monitoring (enterprise level). In addition, research institutions are called upon to further develop analysis, assessment and evaluation of decent work on all three levels.

The multidimensional and multi-actor focus of the decent work concept is certainly one of the strengths of the concept as it reflects the intention to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted and legitimized approach. A critical argument towards such a broad focus, however, is that it lacks defining clear responsibilities and liabilities to promote and implement decent work. This means that stakeholders on different levels need to define and defend responsibilities (and possible sanction mechanisms).

Nevertheless, despite such criticism regarding the weaknesses of the Decent Work Agenda, various actors around the world use the concept, e.g. as a measuring and organization tool, as will be described in the next section.

Decent Work as a Measuring and Organizing Tool

As laid out above, the concept of decent work was developed to describe and improve the situation of the quality of work and its advancement. Rolf Schmucker’s (2020) contribution on the DGB-Index *Gute Arbeit* in this issue presents an excellent example how the concept can be adapted to different contexts in a meaningful way and how it can be used to measure the quality of work and to further the development of working conditions so as to improve this quality. He argues that progress in implementing decent work requires labor and social legislation as well as normative benchmarks for labor organization. While the ILO has developed the internationally applicable concept of decent work, trade unions in Germany have provided measurable criteria for the organisation of work through their concept of *Gute Arbeit* (“good work”). The survey for the *Gute Arbeit*-Index measures the workers’ perspective of their quality of work. The German trade unions considered the standards of decent work necessary but not sufficient and therefore created their own concept of *Gute Arbeit* in order to have a tool that could be adjusted to the circumstances within the German labor market. While the decent work concept is focused on minimum standards of labor, the concept of *Gute Arbeit* goes far beyond it, as its

standards are substantially higher and more detailed. The advantage of the *Gute Arbeit* concept is that it is adapted to a specific context, whereas the ILO's concept was developed to be used globally in very different circumstances, in particular those of most precarious working conditions.

Moreover, the survey *Gute Arbeit* was conceptualized with the intention to improve the status of labor policy within the trade unions and beyond. Trade unions planned to use the results both for a description of the status quo and for a new labor policy initiative to improve working conditions in Germany. The concept of the survey was to make sure that employees, as the affected party, could describe and decide on their working conditions instead of a top-down approach to decision-making. The participation-oriented approach of the concept *Gute Arbeit* was key; it is considered to be a pre-condition to organize workers to fight for better working conditions. The survey utilizes three different criteria of quality of work (resources; workload and stress; income and security), totaling in 42 questions.

Survey results show that about 13 percent of the employees reach a high index value of quality of work (*Gute Arbeit*); most of the interviewees describe the quality of their work as somewhat above (37%) and below (30%) average. Every fifth employee works under conditions described as burdensome, without prospects, and insecure.

The results of the survey *Gute Arbeit* reveal how and where working conditions should be improved. They can be used for labor policy initiatives at the societal and company level to organize citizens in general and employees in particular to advocate for progress regarding the quality of work.

Similar to Schmucker, Ludwig and Webster (2020) discuss decent work as a measuring and organizing tool, yet in a very different context, namely in the framework of action research done in South Africa. In the context of liberalization in South Africa and the concomitant formation of winners and losers on the labor market, the African National Congress made use of the slogan *Decent Work for all* in its campaign. The ANC government then indeed adopted a decent work program. In the Gauteng Region, a research group at the University of Witwatersrand was commissioned to develop a tool to measure the progress towards decent work at the individual level as well as at the industry and sub-industry level. However, the elaborated questionnaire and policy framework were not taken into account by the ANC government. Asking *what decent work could actually mean in the South African context*, Ludwig and Webster (2020) subscribe to Van der Walt's (2019) argument that reforms need to be won from below and discuss the elaborated diagnostic tool for decent work as an organizing tool for the South African labor movement. For this purpose they examine the use of the questionnaire (respectively, of its core indicators) in two different cases: the project of the *National Union of Metal Workers in South Africa* (NUMSA) to recruit petrol attendants and a campaign of the *Vulnerable Workers Task Team* (VWTT) of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to organize vulnerable workers (e.g. domestic workers, farm workers and street traders). For both cases, the authors discuss the importance of the worker's voice and mobilization in the realization of decent work, as well as the role of critical engagement of research. They emphasize that critically engaged research can contribute to strengthen the agency of labor but should keep an analytical and critical distance.

Finally, two forum contributions to this issue attempt to measure working conditions and labor rights in terms of decent work for two different cases. Schief's contribution uses decent work and *Gute Arbeit* criteria to assess working conditions at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). Using the fictional example of a doctoral assistant's employment conditions, the author shows that part of the university's employees are subject to conditions that do not meet decent work criteria. Schief especially points out the problems of long probation periods, fixed-term contracts, low protection in case of illness, and particularities of third-party funded projects. Buckley's and Eckerlein's contribution deals with the question of China's commitment to promote decent work standards in foreign investment projects in the Asian Pacific. The authors investigate labor rights and working conditions in Chinese-owned firms in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. On the basis of qualitative interviews with workers and trade unionists in the construction, casino and manufacturing sectors, they conclude that decent work standards in Chinese-owned firms are as little granted as in non-Chinese enterprises in Sihanoukville.

Decent Work and Digitalization

Digitalization in general, and especially the platform-based gig economy, is – according to DeRuyter and Rachmawati (2020) – a major challenge to the concept of decent work. The authors take the appearance of a new type of worker as a starting point: the *gig worker*. According to De Stefano (2016), gig workers are either *crowd-workers* – working via an online platform for several firms – or *on-demand workers* – workers who work via a platform for one firm on demand. The description of the phenomenon of gig work oscillates between a more flexible and easy-to-use service work and the latest version of the well-known “highly exploitative, precarious work arrangements that have existed in one form or another since the advent of capitalism” (De Ruyter/Rachmawati 2020: 2). The article discusses the status of gig workers by way of the example of the so-called motorcycle *ojek* taxi riders across several cities in Indonesia. Since their work is not covered by employment regulations, the question is whether those workers are self-employed, agents, or workers of a platform provider. Thus, the authors ask: Who is responsible for these workers' job security, income, well-being, skill developments, and careers? By focusing on four out of ten components of the decent work concept, the scholars want to assess how platform work influences the development of decent work.

By means of qualitative interviews and focus groups the research shows that a majority of *ojek* taxi riders appreciate the freedom and flexibility of the work; moreover, they tend to interpret platform work positively because there is no specific term of contract. A common concern of the workers is that platform providers value customers' satisfaction but do not care about the working conditions of the *ojek* taxi riders. Even if *ojek* taxi riders were to voice their concerns, the platform providers would continue to enact unfavorable policies for them, making industrial action a waste of time.

The authors conclude that gig work is nothing else but a new form of highly commodified, precarious work. Power is very unbalanced in favor of the platform providers. The companies use the non-employee status to save the costs of employment benefits in order to enhance their own profits. The working conditions of platform work are based on the providers' decisions to avoid labor laws by offshoring and purporting work to constitute *self-employment*; yet,

technological requirements do not determine these working conditions. Platform work is mainly an option for workers when more secure work is not available. In the case of Indonesia, gig work might boost the informalization of the formal sector. The authors state that it is highly necessary to reflect on the relationship between state, society and market, in other words on the role of market forces shaping economic and social well-being in a segmented workforce.

The authors conclude that “the essential role of the state in implementing progressive labour market policies [is] to ameliorate the corrosive effects of commodified gig work on the working conditions and wellbeing of platform workers and the wider workforce” (De Ruyter/Rachmawati 2020: 14).

Decent Work and Care

The marketization of paid care work is the focus of Aulenbacher’s, Leiblfinger’s and Prieler’s (2020) contribution to this issue. The authors analyze the marketization of 24-hour live-in care in Austria – and its contestation – as a Polanyian *double movement*. They examine the market-driven provision and organization of caring and care work in the Austrian live-in care model, which they identify as a “forerunner of care marketization in Europe” (Aulenbacher et al. 2020: 2). Aulenbacher et al. (2020) conceptualize labor and care following Polanyi’s (2001) notion of *fictitious commodities* in the framework of a brokered transnational care market that, as they argue, gives rise to contradictions between the promise of decent care and decent work. According to the authors, especially the brokering agencies and the competition among these play an important role in determining the mechanisms of this market. At the same time, these agencies hardly take responsibility for the care workers’ working conditions or their work results. Care workers come mainly from Eastern Europe, where unemployment rates are high and pensions are low. They therefore provide for a relatively cheap labor force for Western European care markets. Personal care workers in Austria find themselves in a model of self-employment that actually translates into forms of quasi-employment characterized by scant regulation, low standards of social protection, and few opportunities for labor organization and unionization. Based on regime, policy, and media analyses, as well as in-depth analyses of brokering agencies’ websites and expert interviews with agencies’ representatives and other stakeholders in the field, Aulenbacher et al. describe various counter-movements that call for greater protection from market dynamics and their consequences, for both care workers and care receivers. The authors identify different positions in the field: while brokering agencies mostly intend to improve the rules of competition in the market, other stakeholders fundamentally question the market dynamics. The “market-fundamentalist Austrian model of self-employment” (Aulenbacher et al. 2020: 14) is considered to be a major obstacle to both decent working conditions and decent care. Many interviewees consider the demands and achievements of counter-movements – such as attempts to collectively organize care workers or developing a state-run quality seal for brokering agencies – necessary, yet insufficient steps towards decent work and care.

Broadening the Concept of Decent Work

As argued by Izquierdo and Jany (2020) in this issue, assessing policy attempts to realize decent working conditions in a given context needs to account for the conceptualization of *work, production and property relations* underlying such policies. Using the case of Cuban social and labor policies, the authors build upon a former critique of the Decent Work Agenda, namely that the conception of *work* underlying this agenda is too narrow, as it primarily conceives work as a commodity. As the authors argue, policies related to the principles of decent work based on such a narrow conception may result in contradictory outcomes, which is what they illustrate with their analysis of the Cuban case. They discuss the past and present conceptual framework of the Cuban models of socio-economic development (based mainly on a system of state ownership, with a recent but cautious opening to forms of private property) and labor relations (characterized by labor organization and unions mainly regulated by the state, where workers are limited in their opportunities to participate in decision-making processes). According to the authors, this framework of property and labor organization does not create favorable conditions for workers to appropriate their work and the wealth it generates. Thus, along with the structural and institutional changes of the past two decades, this framework has rather hindered the development of decent working conditions in Cuba – although Cuban social and labor policy “has taken into account almost all contemporary principles of the Decent Work Agenda” (Izquierdo/Jany 2020: 5), such as the aim of full employment, educational development, free choice of occupation, equal opportunities and safety in the workplace. Moreover, Izquierdo and Jany argue that the Cuban framework of property and labor organization has not only hindered improvements in decent work, but that it made labor realities in Cuba even more complex and contradictory. The authors illustrate this with a detailed analysis of the examples of wage policy and gender equality measures in past and present Cuba. Regarding the latter, they claim that women’s labor conditions in the so-called productive sphere, as also in unpaid household and care work, tended to deteriorate in the past years. They conclude that this is due to “the strong ideational emphasis of the Cuban development model – and its *update* – on economic development and efficiency [which] seem to nourish a general conception of work that understands it primarily in economic or commercial terms” (Izquierdo/Jany 2020: 16). Here, they draw parallels to developments in other countries and question “the ILO’s lacking critical stance on the commercialization of labor” (Izquierdo/Jany 2020: 16).

Conclusion

About twenty years after the launching of the Decent Work Agenda, its effects and implications are of high relevance in multiple parts of the world. The ILO’s concept of decent work is based on four normative pillars: job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue and offers a useful framework to improve the world of work. As the articles in this issue present in greater detail, the concept can be used as an analytical tool. The cases discussed highlight that the concept – once adjusted to the respective regional specificities – also serves to organize people for the sake of improving working conditions. The major developments of digitalization seem to challenge the implementation of the concept of decent work because the growing

number of gig workers or crowd workers working via online platforms have a non-employee status, which gives way to informalization of work. In the field of care work, marketization has the paradoxical effect that decent care is organized at the expense of decent work for the care workers. Finally, the article by Izquierdo and Jany (2020) argues that the underlying definition of work may be too narrow as it reduces work to a sheer commodity. Therefore, an improvement of the definition and an extension of the concept of decent work should be considered.

Picking up the above-mentioned concern about the shortcomings of the concept, we would like to add two more thoughts as to how the value of the concept could be enhanced by broadening it. Firstly, although decent work is without a doubt an important part of a decent life, it is by far not the only one. Thus, it would be beneficial to place decent work within the *quality of life* concept that provides a broader perspective. The World Health Organization defines

Quality of Life as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment. (World Health Organization n.d.)

Many scholars have elaborated on this concept (e.g. Veenhoven 2000; Budowski, Schief, Sieber 2016). All approaches to quality of life have in common that only parts of it are related to work or employment. Therefore, placing the concept of decent work into a broader context is a step forward. The United Nations (2015b) took this step when it proposed to integrate decent work into a list with 16 other important development goals, and thereby emphasized the integrity and complexity of quality of life.

Secondly, depending on country, region and population group (e.g., women, migrants, etc.), large parts of the population are excluded from the labor market completely – be it informal, deficient or decent work. In these countries, regions or groups, many people desperately seek work to make ends meet. Therefore, we also conclude that it is important to embed the decent work concept into the context of ending poverty. The sustainable development goals complement and enhance the decent work concept with the goals #1 (“no poverty”), #4 (“quality education”), and #10 (“reducing inequality”). Putting the decent work concept into the broader context of sustainable development may help prevent it from having blind spots.

We hope that we have succeeded in providing interesting insights into a most important concept, its effects and implications both for the realm of paid work and for life in more general terms. Please enjoy this issue of *socialpolicy.ch*.

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