

## ► The ILO and the UN Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace

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*Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice.*

*Preamble of the ILO Constitution, 1919*

In September 2021, the UN Secretary-General launched *Our Common Agenda*, the third pillar of which is to promote peace and prevent conflicts. In his report, the Secretary-General notes that in order to protect and manage the global public good of peace, we need a peace continuum based on a better understanding of the drivers and systems of influence that are sustaining conflict, a renewed effort to agree on more effective collective security responses and a meaningful set of steps to manage emerging risks with a view to preventing conflict. The International Labour Organization (ILO) recognizes our modern world's severe challenges and is firmly committed to participating in the Common Agenda to manage risks and prevent catastrophes.

Our Common agenda outlined six potential areas for the New Agenda for Peace, of which the ILO is particularly committed to reshaping responses to all forms of violence; investing in prevention and peacebuilding; and putting women and girls at the centre.

In November 2021, the General Assembly adopted Resolution [A/RES/76/6](#) to follow up on *Our Common Agenda*, requesting the Secretary-General to inform Member States and to engage in broad and inclusive consultations with them, all parts of the United Nations system and other relevant partners.

In the informal thematic consultations organized by the President of the General Assembly on *Our Common Agenda* in February and March 2022, the United Nations system was invited to develop a “New Agenda for Peace” in close consultation with Member States, and in collaboration with all relevant partners, as part of the preparations for the Summit of the Future in 2024.

The ILO already works in all the areas outlined in the Agenda and stands ready to intensify its efforts as part of the international system. The Organization was born and re-born out of conflict, **embodying the universal conviction that peace cannot flourish without justice, and justice must nurture freedom and dignity alike.** It has been working for peacebuilding since its foundation in 1919 by the Treaty of

Versailles, in line with its constitutional principle that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice”. The engagement of the Organization in this area was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969.

In 2017, the ILO reinvigorated its mandate in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDPN) with the adoption of Recommendation No. 205 on Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience which provides guidance for considering the crucial role of decent work in preventing and remedying crisis situations, including health pandemics, armed conflict, natural disasters, environmental degradation, and forced displacement.

The complexity of today’s protracted crises requires the ILO and other multilateral organisations to have a fundamentally different approach to improving the capacities of member States and constituents to prevent and build resilience in the face of conflicts and disasters. The linear model of assuming one can speak of “pre-”, “during” and “post” crisis phases fails to capture the ways in which societal risk factors intertwine to create the dire conditions witnessed in many parts of the world today. At the same time, it fails to embrace **the workplace as a key site for finding durable solutions to societal tensions as well as to preventing them**: conflict drivers related to decent work deficits can be addressed through explicit peace-responsive initiatives that target conflict transformation, thereby contributing more broadly to social cohesion and social justice in crisis-affected settings.

The ILO is in the process of launching a **Global Coalition for Social Justice** in order to give more concrete form to its efforts. The Coalition will be launched formally during the International Labour Conference in June 2023 and will include many of the same partners involved in the Agenda for Peace. As the most recent document<sup>1</sup> on the subject submitted to the ILO Governing Body describes the motivation behind the Coalition:

- ▶ Social justice makes societies and economies function more cohesively and productively by reducing poverty and hunger, inequalities and social tensions. Given its central importance to inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development, social justice should be seen as one of the cornerstones of the renewed multilateralism that is required to overcome current challenges – a rallying point as well as an organizing principle for a more efficient and coherent multilateral system that supports national efforts across a range of policy areas and interventions.
- ▶ In the most fundamental sense, a society is "socially just" if all human beings "have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and

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<sup>1</sup> ILO Document GB.347/INS/4, March 2023, paras. 4 and 5.

equal opportunity",<sup>2</sup> and if there is an essential degree of fairness in the distribution of economic outcomes, including in the context of difficult transitions such as those related to crises and longer-term economic transformations. Such a society has the capacity to provide related universal rights and institutional support, with the rule of law as a cornerstone.

As the ILO has consistently noted, a toxic combination of mutually-reinforcing crises – violent conflict, climate change and disasters - have staggering socio-economic costs, and there is evidence that they are linked to unemployment and other decent work deficits and reduced social trust arising from unresolved grievances often rooted in inequality, failure to respect human rights including labour rights, exclusion, lack of participatory mechanisms and dialogue, and feelings of injustice. Conflicts can also generate refugee and involuntary migratory flows, potentially exporting their destabilizing impacts, particularly in the absence of appropriate normative frameworks.

And these phenomena in turn, fuel unrest, perception of injustice, mistrust among communities and towards governments, conflict, declining economies and even wars. These crises can halt and reverse sustainable economic development, with large implications for the world of work. They may spawn informal, non-contractual and unregistered work, particularly for youth and women, which can prop up illicit economies and lower the opportunity cost of continued violence. Furthermore, conflict also de-stabilizes enterprises and the environment in which they operate. The conflict these generate severely limits the degree to which people enjoy basic social protection and fundamental rights and principles at work, thus contributing to poverty, exclusion and crisis situations.

The Agenda for Peace relies heavily on stability at the national level. A vital element of this stability is the existence of sound governance, including a viable legal order conceived and implemented with respect for human rights and human dignity. The **international labour standards** adopted by the ILO develop in greater detail the broader protections found in the human rights instruments of the United Nations system, focusing in particular on the world of work, and **offer tried-and-tested solutions for resilience and stability.**

They are founded on fundamental human rights, but they also go well beyond expressing these rights, and lay the groundwork for the establishment and maintenance of both the governmental and non-governmental institutions necessary to establish participatory governance and to preserve human dignity.

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<sup>2</sup> ILO Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944, para. II(a).

**The essence of the ILO's mission lies in peacebuilding and sustaining peace at the local, national and international levels.** This takes multiple forms:

encouragement of dialogue, especially among the social partners, at both national and international levels; assistance in the establishment of national legal structures, based in particular on international labour standards and human rights; and the promotion of diversity and equality both between men and women and among different parts of national populations.

In simple terms, decent work strengthens peace and resilience along 3 axes:

- ▶ employment and social protection (both human rights) – a job and a minimum level of income security **stabilizes livelihoods**, restores hope and induces a sense of normality within communities;
- ▶ emergency employment programmes have the unique capacity to bring together people across traditional divides, **enhance trust** and reduce negative perceptions; and
- ▶ promoting social dialogue and labour rights helps to **resolve grievances**.

In the Secretary-General's 2022 report on sustaining peace, the role of social dialogue and participation of employers' and workers' organisations were explicitly recognised as key pathways for peace. The ILO is based on the need to establish and encourage dialogue between employers and workers, and between these social partners and governments. It is the only organization in which these non-governmental partners participate directly in making decisions, and it encourages the same kind of interaction at the national level. Indeed, it is an acknowledged fact that democratic societies, operating with the full consent of their populations, are less likely to engage in armed conflict and challenge international peace. In addition, at times of national crisis – whether caused by internal or international conflict or by natural disasters – in many cases, trade unions and other workers' organizations are the first parts of civil society to emerge to take an active part in rebuilding and governing the country, to protect their members and working populations as a whole. Social partners have an inherent interest in peace – for both employers and workers' organizations, it is critical to play a role in harnessing stability and a predictable business and work environment to protect livelihoods, sustainable enterprises, and workers' rights.

**Recognition of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining**, as well as the other fundamental human rights prioritized by the ILO - elimination of child and forced labour, the pursuit of equality among all elements of the population, and the creation of safe and healthy working places - can only be maintained if these fundamental principles and right at work together with freedom of association and collective bargaining provide for participatory labour market governance, and if

people work in just and decent conditions. Furthermore, in crisis situations, business activities and labour opportunities become scarce, and **in the absence of decent work, inequalities and exclusion are often exacerbated**. Households and businesses may find themselves resorting to negative coping strategies.

As a result, for example, child labour and trafficking may increase, as well as vulnerabilities related to discrimination and lack of freedom of association and collective bargaining. In addition, damaged and insufficient social protection mechanisms are unable to provide adequate livelihood support, particularly for those relying on the informal economy. In line with ILO's Recommendation No. 205, employment and decent work initiatives are key to tackling the socio-economic impact of crisis, including the COVID-19 crisis<sup>3</sup>, such as increased inequalities, but also to addressing potential grievances, discrimination and stigmatization over access to resources, livelihoods and health services<sup>4</sup>.

The rights to freedom of association and protection of the right to organize are at the foundation of the ILO's governance proposition and are also necessary for social and economic peace at the national level. They are an expression of the right to association found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the other instruments adopted internationally. The recent Call to Action for Human Rights of the UN Secretary-General stresses the need “to protect civic space and encourage broad participation” – and in doing so reiterated **the important link between championing rights and promoting social dialogue**. Participation in national governance is an indispensable element of creating and maintaining stability and preventing the kind of social conflict that can boil over into conflict and social unrest. A climate of trust, built through social dialogue and tripartism, is essential for the effective implementation of crisis response measures at all stages.

Unequal treatment and exclusion from opportunities to improve lives is very often the trigger for conflict, internally and internationally. Since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has worked for **the promotion and protection of the rights of women**, and one of its most recent Conventions<sup>5</sup> is aimed at the prevention of violence and harassment at work (a convention that is being ratified rapidly by the ILO's Member States). In addition, the ILO has been a pioneer in attempting to reduce unequal

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<sup>3</sup> ILO (2022): [Social Dialogue Flagship Report](#) has an entire chapter looking at how collective bargaining was used during the Covid-19 crisis in forging resilience (Ch 5). It demonstrates a number of areas where collective bargaining was used as a tool for an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery.

<sup>4</sup> ILO, PBSO, WHO and Interpeace (2021): [“From crisis to opportunity for sustainable peace: A joint perspective on responding to the health, employment and peacebuilding challenges in times of COVID-19”](#).

<sup>5</sup> The Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).

treatment based on race or colour and of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities and excluded populations, including indigenous and tribal peoples.

The ILO is involved in SDG 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies), including indicator 16.10.1 on the "number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists [...] trade unionists and human rights advocates". This indicator draws *inter alia* on the work of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association which examines cases of civil liberties violations against trade unionists and employers 'organizations, including the right to freedom and security of person and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.

Moreover, also in relation to SDG16, rights to information and participation in genuine consultations are granted to indigenous and tribal peoples by virtue of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169). In this context, a recent re-affirmation is the [2022 observation by the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations \(CEACR\)](#) on Honduras according to which: "for indigenous and tribal peoples to be able to assert and enjoy the rights set out in the Convention, governments must adopt appropriate measures to guarantee a climate free from violence, pressure, fear and threats of any kind." This is one of many comments in which the ILO's supervisory bodies have cited the link between respect for human rights and sustainable development, and a climate of security and democracy.

The **elimination of forced and child labour** is one of the ILO's priorities, on which it has cooperated closely with several other international organizations. Forced and child labour are an assault to dignity and contribute to poverty and social tensions, and child labour in particular, erodes the foundations of sustained and sustainable economic growth that could be made by those who suffer from it. In addition, this kind of abuse of fundamental human rights often emerges from situations of conflict and national catastrophe, as can be seen presently in the suffering endured after recent crises by large numbers of displaced and homeless victims and increased vulnerability to trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation. The ILO has been at the center of the international coalitions that have been established to combat these abuses, which have often found a remarkable success. For instance, its recent efforts to eliminate forced and child labour in Uzbekistan, in collaboration with the World Bank and national authorities, has resulted in remarkable improvements in human rights, human dignity and national stability.

**Occupational safety and health** has recently been added to the ILO's list of fundamental human rights and principles. When people are not safe at work, when they become ill or are injured as a consequence of their occupations, successes in escaping poverty are easily and irreparably reversed, and those affected by it often

become a charge on society and thus increase poverty and deprivation. It is quite possible to prevent occupational hazards, including illness and injury, and provide compensation, assistance and rehabilitation when these occur. Like the other fundamental human rights mentioned above, rights rather than charity are the effective approach to national prosperity and stability and to the elimination of injustice that leads to conflict and war.

Another of the ILO's priorities that contribute to establishing and maintaining peace is the creation of employment and livelihoods. Employment is a major contributing factor in achieving short-term stability, reintegration, socio-economic progress and sustainable peace in post-conflict situations. Job creation provides communities and individuals with the means of survival and recovery, and offers a constructive and positive alternative to social unrest. Decent and inclusive jobs can also increase contact among communities, build trust and therefore contribute to social cohesion leaving no one behind.

The ILO also works to help reestablish a viable social order after catastrophes, whether of natural or human origin, as well to assist societies changing to establish stable social and economic institutions. In conflict and disaster situations, livelihoods are weakened or even destroyed, businesses interrupted, workplaces damaged, and people lose their jobs and sources of income. Furthermore, conflict and crisis situations reduce or immobilize the functioning of national and local institutions that usually provide social protection and basic needs and services, as well as law and order. This particularly affects the most vulnerable and poorest people who are trapped in a vicious cycle of inequality and poverty. **As nations emerge from catastrophic situations, the ILO responds in many ways, including training and rehabilitation, employment creation and the re-establishment of necessary legal and social structures.**

Beyond its work on the specific fundamental human rights questions mentioned above, the ILO has taken an active role in international cooperation and collaboration for broader purposes. As was noted in a recent OECD publication,<sup>6</sup> by 2030, two-thirds of the world's extremely poor and disenfranchised - estimated to be 2.3 billion - will live in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. The number of countries experiencing protracted crisis has doubled to 34 in the last six years and the number of displaced people has continued to grow, up 3.4% to 82.1 million.

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<sup>6</sup> OECD States of Fragility 2022: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-fa5a6770-en.htm>.

In a very concrete way, the international community has understood that Agenda 2030's "leaving no one behind" means that addressing crisis and fragility is no longer the exclusive purview and responsibility of the humanitarian community but also implicates both the human rights and development communities. New approaches and partnerships across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace spectrum need to be brokered to eradicate poverty and suffering and unlock development solutions in the most challenging environments.

With COVID-19, the degree of interdependence among our societies was clearly exposed, reaffirming the fact that the modus operandi of working in silos to address the issues of our time is no longer viable. In a series of landmark events, the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus was reignited with a focus on more systematic collaboration between and among humanitarian and development actors to identify and share analysis of needs and conflict, jointly plan and, where possible, programme towards jointly pre-defined collective outcomes. This nexus will necessarily be part of the Agenda for Peace. The ILO's response in the context of fragility is to promote employment, decent work, and social dialogue as a way of "building back better". **The Decent Work Agenda is an essential element of the HDPN through which employment, decent working conditions and social dialogue can contribute to peace and resilience.** In collaboration with member States, tripartite constituents, international and national partners, and with the direct involvement of local populations and stakeholders, a two-fold approach to crisis response can allow for an immediate response centred on employment and social protection, which simultaneously stimulates and assists long-term socio-economic development in an inclusive and rights-based manner to "build back better", while addressing conflict drivers related to decent work deficits.

In sum, the ILO already pursues objectives and initiatives closely allied to the New Agenda for Peace and stands ready to increase its participation in a common effort for this purpose.

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