

Making Dignity and Prosperity the Norm

Keynote Address by Guy Ryder, ILO Director General

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Thank you Chair and thank you moderator; forgive me for not saluting all the distinguished women and men here today, not least our panel, it would take too long, but I am delighted to see the great interest the theme of this year's ECOSOC Integration Segment has evoked.

In this session we are invited to discuss how we can integrate the goals of both dignity and also prosperity into our global strategies for sustainable development. This is a huge topic on which I am sure everyone here has an opinion. So I will limit myself to making a few opening remarks in the knowledge that our panel will ably expand on the subject.

Last month, the UN convened the world's statisticians to give advice on how to define indicators to measure progress towards goals and targets. On this session's theme, perhaps the UN should have convened the world's philosophers!

Back in the year 2000, when at the ILO we were forming our goal for the 21st century – decent work for all – we invited Amartya Sen to address our annual conference. He helped us to connect our conviction that labour rights are human rights, to the imperative to raise the living standards of hundreds of millions of women and men who work hard and long but cannot lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

He really liked our short definition of decent work as “opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.”

In a point that is particularly apposite to our discussion today, he saw the linkages between economic, political and social actions to be critical both to the realization of rights as well as to the pursuit of the broad objectives of decent work and adequate living standards for working people. Indeed he argued strongly that there was no necessary trade off between promoting rights at work and in creating jobs for the unemployed or underemployed.

As Sen has convincingly argued, real development requires a package of overlapping mechanisms that progressively enable the exercise of a growing range of freedoms, including eliminating the “unfreedoms” that stem from a life of abject poverty.

The same point is made slightly differently in the ILO’s 1998 Declaration. There it is affirmed that the guarantee of fundamental principles and rights at work is of particular significance to linking social progress and economic growth, because it enables people to claim freely and on the basis of equality of opportunity, their fair share of the wealth which they have helped to generate, and to achieve fully their human potential.

The fundamental rights at work set out in the Declaration are freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Without respect for these basic human rights at work achieving both dignity and prosperity for the world’s working women and men is inconceivable.

So I am very pleased to see that the Open Working Group has also restated the importance to sustainable development of labour rights and safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

The post-2015 development agenda is shaping up to be extremely ambitious. Some might say unrealistically so. I disagree.

The scale and complexity of the challenges the planet and the peoples of the United Nations face demand an ambitious programme of collective action by governments, but not just governments.

The goal of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all requires the full engagement of employers' and workers' organizations in particular, as well as many other stakeholder groups. Engagement is based on voice and dialogue which is realized through the right to freedom of association.

Rights are essential instruments for the implementation of the new agenda; in my view, as important if not more so as finance. Rights enable people without resources to assert their claim to resources.

The open world economy is not currently producing the quantity and quality of jobs that people need. The repercussions of this are politically worrying, economically and socially damaging, and are hampering progress on the environment.

An online rolling opinion poll by the UN with over 7 million participants places Better Job Opportunities third in a list of priorities just after education and health. Support for people who cannot work is not far behind. If you add the two together they would be the no 1 priority. As Jim Clifton the CEO of Gallup concludes "What everyone in the world wants is a *good* job."

Reversing current trends in global labour markets and setting course for achieving the SDGs by 2030 is an essential foundation for the political momentum and cooperation needed to fulfil the promise of the whole agenda.

The Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has suggested that the new post-2015 framework should become a global social contract which connects the peoples of the United Nations to the governments of the United Nations. This would be a fitting way to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the adoption of the UN Charter and reconnect the multilateral system to the everyday hopes and fears of women, men, families and communities.

Making dignity and prosperity the norm is central to such a global social contract for sustainable development and its political glue is surely decent work.

Thank you.