



International  
Labour  
Organization

# ▶ International labour standards

2022

## Key messages

- ▶ Since 1919, the ILO has a unique normative role of establishing and monitoring a system of international labour standards (ILS), Conventions and Recommendations, aimed at promoting opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity.
- ▶ ILS are an essential component in the international framework for ensuring that the growth of the global economy provides benefits to all. They represent the international and tripartite consensus (bringing the views of business and labour) on how a particular labour matter could be addressed and reflect the benefits gained from knowledge and experience from all corners of the world.
- ▶ The ILO has a technical role to support its tripartite constituents in implementing ILS through legislation, institutional mechanisms and capacity building. The ILO has developed an unparalleled expertise with an authoritative power for convoking and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues.
- ▶ The ILO's vision to integrate trade and decent work using the approach and tools detailed below can help to support more inclusive trade for workers and firms.
- ▶ The European Commission and the ILO have established a longstanding and productive partnership on supporting EU trading partner countries to improve the ratification and application of the ILO fundamental Conventions with the objective of promoting decent work in global supply chains.

This programming note offers concise information about the ILO's work to monitor and promote the implementation of ILS, and our approach, tools, ongoing initiatives and partnerships in this area. The ILO's mandate and expertise can impactfully contribute to the achievement of the priorities set within the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

## International labour standards

- ▶ The ILO **elaborates and promotes international labour standards** aimed at making sure that economic growth and development go hand-in-hand with the creation of decent work. An international legal framework on social standards ensures a **level playing field** in the global economy.
- ▶ ILS take form through either **Conventions** (or Protocols), which are **legally binding international treaties** that may be ratified by member states, or **Recommendations**, which serve as non-binding guidelines. The ILO's unique tripartite structure ensures that these **standards are backed by governments, employers and workers**.
- ▶ When a **country ratifies a Convention**, it commits to apply the Convention in national law and practice and to report on its application at regular intervals.
- ▶ ILS have proven to be the tried-and-trusted foundation of the Decent Work agenda, mapping the framework for responding to crises and stabilizing recovery efforts. ILS have proven to be a useful **decent work compass** in the context of unforeseen economic downturns and in the **crisis response to COVID-19**.

► Developed, periodically reviewed and, where needed, revised over the past century, ILS **respond to the changing patterns of the world of work**.

► **Trade** has contributed to **economic growth and job creation**, and has benefitted workers of all skill levels, across different sectors of the economy. However, it has also had **differential effects** on particular groups of workers and types of firms, creating winners and losers. This is reflected in greater job polarization and income inequality in many advanced economies, and in higher rates of informality, exploitative work and inequality in developing and emerging economies.

► One out of three bilateral and plurilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), as well as regional economic integration arrangements, contain **labour provisions related to workers' rights**. A number of these labour provisions contain, among others, minimum commitments for the protection of human rights at work and refer to specific ILS adopted by the ILO.

► Inclusive trade allows all workers and enterprises to take an active role in, and benefit from, the global trading system. The ILO **supports inclusive trade** through several initiatives, including its framework for crisis recovery and sustainability based on ILS.

## Levers of change

ILS are backed by a unique [supervisory system](#) which helps to ensure that countries implement the Conventions they ratify. The ILO has developed various means of supervising the application of ILS. They include a **regular system of supervision** based on the periodic examination by the ILO bodies of reports prepared by Member States and special procedures based on the submission of **representations** and **complaints**.

The ILO regularly analyses the application of standards and points out areas where they could be better applied. If there are any problems, the ILO seeks to assist countries through **tripartite social dialogue and**

**technical assistance**. It provides different forms of technical assistance to help countries address problems in legislation and practice to bring them into line with the obligations under ratified instruments. These include **advisory and direct contacts missions**, during which ILO officials meet government and national social partners to discuss problems in the application of standards with the aim of finding solutions; and **promotional activities**, with the purpose of raising awareness of standards, developing the capacity of national actors to use them, and providing technical advice on how to apply them for the benefit of all. The ILO also provides assistance in **drafting national legislation** in line with its standards.

The European Commission is implementing a **zero tolerance policy towards child labour and forced labour**, putting the eradication of child labour and forced labour as a priority within its comprehensive approach of promoting decent work worldwide. The Commission has referred several times to the relevant ILO Conventions on child labour and forced labour and recalls that all 27 EU Member States have ratified these Fundamental Conventions and are legally obliged to prevent and eliminate the use of forced labour and to regularly report to the ILO's standards supervisory bodies. Under the EU Regulation on the **Generalised Scheme of Preferences** (GSP), the EU can grant unilateral trade preferences on the condition that benefitting countries comply with ILO fundamental Conventions, including on the elimination of child and forced labour.

**Effective labour inspection institutions** contribute to the protection of labour rights as enshrined in ILO's fundamental Conventions by effectively enforcing national law. Through technical assistance to these institutions, the ILO assists Member States in strengthening their capacities to adhere to the obligations of the labour provisions in trade agreements, and to identify potential gaps between national labour law and ILS.

### The Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 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
- the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation
- a safe and healthy working environment – this principle has been added following a [decision](#) by the International Labour Conference in June 2022

Each of the fundamental principles is associated with fundamental ILO Conventions. Under the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, ILO Member States, regardless of their level of economic development, commit to respect and promote these principles and rights, whether or not they have ratified the relevant Conventions.

## What the ILO can offer

Areas	ILO Data, Materials and Resources	Summary
Normlex	<a href="#">Information System on International Labour Standards</a>	NORMLEX brings together information on ILS, such as ratification information, reporting requirements, comments of the ILO's supervisory bodies, etc.
Online database	ILO Labour Provisions in Trade Agreements Hub ( <a href="#">LPHub</a> )	The LPHub is a comprehensive, structured compilation of the text of labour provisions in more than 100 bi- and pluri-lateral regional trade agreements (RTAs), which engage about 140 economies. It provides the main data source for information, research, and comparative legal analysis of labour provisions.
Capacity development	<a href="#">Training on Trade and decent work</a> in specific regions	The aim of this course is to better understand the trade and labour market nexus and its implications for specific regions in terms of decent work and sustainable development. It considers broader labour market implications of trade and investment policies including employment, but also workers' rights, working conditions and other aspects of decent work.
	<a href="#">Building a culture of workplace compliance through development cooperation</a> <a href="#">Training curriculum on modern labour inspection</a>	<p>This compendium of good practices provides a unique set of successful practices from development cooperation projects to share knowledge gained and to help compliance actors improve efficiency with the long-term aim to replicate the positive results achieved and develop them further.</p> <p>Set of 17 training modules addressing labour inspection processes and methodologies to address the subjects under the mandate of labour inspectorates from occupational safety and health to fundamental principles and rights at work, and working conditions in general.</p>
Policy advice	<a href="#">Strengthening labour inspection systems for increased compliance with labour law through development cooperation</a>	This brochure provides a comprehensive overview of how the ILO is strengthening compliance with labour by enhancing the capacities of labour inspection systems through development cooperation projects.
	<a href="#">Guidelines on general principles of labour inspection</a>	The guidelines, approved by the ILO Governing Body, provide policy advice to governments on how to structure and manage labour inspection systems, as well as to effectively conduct labour inspections in line with the provisions of the Labour Inspection Convention (No. 81) and the Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention (No. 129).
Policy research	<a href="#">Country case studies: Trade and Decent Work</a>	Case study assessments of Malawi, Mexico and Vietnam focussing on the distributional effects of trade at the macro, sectoral and micro level
Dialogue forums	Tripartite forums, seminars and workshops	Dialogue and consultations with stakeholders (including tripartite constituents) at the country level
Multi-stakeholder initiative	<a href="#">Alliance 8.7</a>	Alliance 8.7 is an inclusive global partnership committed to achieving Target 8.7 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which is to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour.



## Examples of ILO interventions

Projects	Countries	Duration	Partners	Results
<b>Trade for Decent Work Project</b>  Total budget EUR 7.5 million	Bangladesh Mongolia Myanmar Pakistan Philippines Vietnam  Cabo Verde Côte d'Ivoire Ghana Madagascar Mozambique	2019-2022  24 project staff are working directly on the project	European Union, Finland	<p>The project supports selected countries to overcome challenges in ratifying or implementing fundamental Conventions. This includes bringing labour law and practice in line with their requirements; building the institutional capacity of administrations and social partners to support law reform and reporting; and strengthening institutional frameworks to facilitate social dialogue and conflict resolution.</p> <p>Meaningful achievements have been attained, having the target countries progressed towards the ratification and effective application of ILS.</p> <p>The project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>► provided critical technical support to the Government of <b>Bangladesh</b> in drawing up a roadmap to address the issues raised in an article 26 complaint brought against it for non-observance of Conventions Nos. 81, 87 and 98.</li> <li>► provided technical and advocacy support in the framework of the EU-Vietnam FTA towards the ratification by <b>Vietnam</b> of the fundamental Conventions No. 98 in 2019 and No.105 in 2020.</li> <li>► trained over 60 representatives of 27 national contact points for <b>Responsible Business Conduct</b> (RBC), including 14 EU member States, on ILS and how they relate to enterprises and RBC, including ILO instruments, tools and resources.</li> <li>► aims to strengthen the nexus between decent work, ILS, trade and the environment through tripartite engagement on just transition and the green economy in the beneficiary countries in <b>Africa</b>. (<a href="#">Details</a>)</li> </ul>
<b>INTEGRATE Programme: Integrating trade and decent work</b>	Global	The Programme comprises three interdependent, but separate areas of research, which began in 2019 and are ongoing.	European Commission, Government of Flanders	This is a multi-donor partnership for the conduct of evidence-based research on the labour market effects of international trade and trade policy (at the firm and sectoral level), and on the contribution of institutional frameworks (at the national and regional level) to decent work. The programme also supports tripartite dialogue and the development of interactive tools and training activities with a view to building the capacity of stakeholders and improving the integration of trade and labour market strategies. ( <a href="#">Details</a> )
<b>Towards safe, healthy and declared work in Ukraine</b>	Ukraine	2020-2022	EU	The project aims to improve compliance of Ukraine with key international and European standards on occupational safety and health and labour relations. So far, 455,547 undeclared workers have been regularized, and the project's campaign has reached 4.5 million persons. The ILO's capacity to rapidly adapt to changing circumstances is demonstrated by its important re-purposing of the project in light of recent developments to train labour inspectors on labour exploitation risks and prevent trafficking of displaced Ukrainians. ( <a href="#">Details</a> )
<b>All Hands in Kenya: Advancing ILS through cooperative action</b>	Kenya	2020-2024	USDOL	The project aims to improve compliance with ILS and acceptable conditions of work in the tea and textile sectors. ( <a href="#">Details</a> )

### Contact details

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