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SEVENTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

ILO Research Strategy

Purpose of the document

This document sets out the ILO's proposed Research Strategy for the period 2020–21 as discussed during the 334th Session of the Governing Body. Building on the existing commitments outlined in the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21, it sets out five goals for the proposed research strategy and identifies the specific actions and evaluation mechanisms required in order to achieve them, including a consultative process to increase the relevance of ILO research to constituents' needs in conformity with the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work. The Governing Body is invited to endorse this proposal and provide guidance relating to its implementation and evaluation (see the draft decision in paragraph 31).

Relevant strategic objective: All.

Main relevant outcome/cross-cutting policy driver: All.

Policy implications: None.

Legal implications: None.

Financial implications: Those arising from the implementation of the strategy upon approval.

Follow-up action required: As set out in Part IV of the document.

Author unit: Research Department (RESEARCH).

Related documents: GB.334/PV; ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work; GB.331/PFA/4.

Introduction

1. The Governing Body at its 334th Session in October–November 2018 discussed the need to develop a new, comprehensive statement of the research strategy for the ILO. While the core features of ILO research are elaborated in the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21,¹ there is a need to clarify and modify the approach adopted in the light of constituents' views and the new priorities of the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work. The current moment is especially pressing in view of the many challenges and opportunities relating to the future of work that were highlighted during the discussions of the 108th (Centenary) Session of the International Labour Conference.
2. In particular, digital technologies and robotics pose major questions for the nature and availability of work, skills prospects and productivity growth. The causes and consequences of inequalities are much debated, including with regard to the relationship with productivity growth, persistent gender inequality and ways of reducing poverty. Perhaps of greatest consequence, the world of work must proactively contribute to a new path of sustainable development, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), in order to avoid global warming and environmental degradation. The ILO is not only committed to managing the negative impact of transformative changes but has also declared the need “to act with urgency to seize the opportunities” for the world’s workforce.²
3. The Centenary Declaration reaffirms the urgency of the ILO’s mandate in the light of these challenges. It calls for “the highest levels of statistical, research and knowledge management capacities and expertise in order to further strengthen the quality of its evidence-based policy advice”.³ With a stronger evidence base, the ILO will be better able to exert greater influence among its constituents and multilateral partners and promote the principles of decent work in economic, environmental, financial, social and trade policy debates more effectively, in the manner envisaged in the Centenary Declaration.⁴ In particular, robust and relevant research will strengthen the ILO’s position to shape national, regional and international policies that can fulfil the 2030 Agenda, to argue for inclusive trade and financial agreements that ensure decent work and to reinvigorate the knowledge and policy dialogue capabilities of its tripartite constituents. In this context, this paper sets out five goals for the proposed research strategy, identifies the specific actions and monitoring mechanisms required in order to achieve them and proposes new collaborative research programmes on frontier issues, in the spirit of the Centenary Declaration.

I. Five goals for the ILO Research Strategy 2020–21

4. The Knowledge Strategy 2018–21 underscores the strategic importance of strengthening ILO research as essential for the provision of evidence-based policy advice for ILO constituents, whether for effective policy formulation to advance decent work at country level or to debate policy at international level, including with other multilateral agencies. In its design and outlook, therefore, ILO research must capture both the knowledge and the

¹ [GB.331/PFA/4](#).

² [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#), Part I(B).

³ Centenary Declaration, Part IV(E). Similarly, the Strategic Plan for 2018–21 states that the reinforcement of the ILO’s research capacities is indispensable for the levels of excellence that it must attain in its technical and analytical work. ([GB.328/PFA/1](#), para. 60).

⁴ Centenary Declaration, Part IV(F).

concerns of constituents. Indeed, such an approach enhances the quality and relevance of ILO research and constitutes a distinctive comparative advantage in the production of world-leading research that can influence policy, in the framework of the ILO's overarching objective to advance social justice through decent work. The proposed ILO research strategy is consistent with the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21. Furthermore, the proposed Programme and Budget for 2020–21 ascribes specific responsibilities to research in supporting outcome A (Authoritative knowledge and high-impact partnerships for promoting decent work), along with statistics and capacity development functions, and in strengthening the quality of evidence-based advice for all eight policy outcomes.

5. In the light of the views expressed by constituents, this paper calls for the existing strategy that guides research for the whole of the ILO to be renewed while continuing to fulfil the core objectives of the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21. The proposed strategy reflects the priorities set out in the Centenary Declaration. It also responds to issues raised by constituents during the 334th Session of the Governing Body regarding key features of the design, organization and impact of ILO research, including transparency, opportunities for input, geographical research focus, disciplinary balance and opportunities for synergies.
6. The proposed research strategy emphasizes five goals, namely, relevance, innovation, international policy engagement, quality and dissemination. On this basis, ILO research must:
 - (i) be relevant and responsive to the needs of the tripartite constituents;
 - (ii) apply innovative, cutting-edge thinking to the rapidly evolving challenges facing the world of work;
 - (iii) strengthen research relationships with United Nations (UN) agencies and other international organizations;
 - (iv) invest more in the highest standards of quality in research practice, methodology and analysis in order to consolidate the ILO's role as knowledge broker; and
 - (v) improve messaging, formats and dissemination tools.
7. The first goal is relevance and responsiveness to the needs of the tripartite constituents. Tripartism requires continual reflection on, and response to, the diverse needs and interests of workers, employers and governments. The ILO's recognition that social dialogue is indispensable to delivering social justice marks it as unique among international organizations.
8. It follows that the design and organization of ILO research must be guided by the knowledge of the tripartite constituents. The aim is to establish regular consultations that ensure research is relevant and balanced in response to the varied needs of constituents, while not compromising the independence and integrity of research design and analysis. With regard to the social partners, a key role needs to be played by the Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP) and the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV).⁵ Further details on the proposed consultative processes are provided in Part II of this document.

⁵ According to the Director-General's announcement of 5 October 2018, contained in IGDS No. 536 (version 1), para. 6c, ACT/EMP and ACTRAV act as the Office's "interlocutors and primary communication channels with the secretariats of the Employers' and Workers' groups". Guidelines for consultations with ACT/EMP and ACTRAV are contained in the Annex to the announcement.

9. The second goal is to apply innovative, cutting-edge research design and analysis to the rapidly evolving challenges facing the world of work articulated in the Centenary Declaration. This goal underpins the capacity of ILO research to provide evidence that can inform the eight policy outcomes described in the proposed Programme and Budget for 2020–21. The ILO will develop agile, multidisciplinary, cross-Office expert teams able to anticipate and interpret fast-moving trends, exploit value added from strategic external partnerships and learn quickly from mutual exchanges between headquarters and field offices. This may entail the investment of resources in a limited number of frontier issues for research that require collaborative teams to produce research products to meet the necessary timescales (see Part III of this document).
10. The third goal is to strengthen research relationships with UN agencies and other international institutions. The ILO must reinforce its position as leader in the international system for research and analysis on future of work policies. The challenge is to develop stronger institutional arrangements with other organizations in the multilateral system in order to improve the quality of evidence to inform policies for the “human-centred approach to the future of work” envisaged in the Centenary Declaration.⁶ A reinforced position on the international policy stage will also advance the ILO’s evidence-based contributions to achieving the 2030 Agenda, which is especially vital given new evidence which suggests that the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 (Decent work and economic growth) is critical to the achievement of all 17 SDGs.⁷
11. The fourth goal is to invest more in the highest standards of quality in ILO research methodology and analysis in order to consolidate the ILO’s role as knowledge broker. The ILO’s impact on policy at national and international levels depends on the quality of its research. The Knowledge Strategy 2018–21 calls for more rigorous application of the ILO publishing policy and a review of the impact of the Research Review Group;⁸ new, revised and improved work processes, outlined in Part II of this document, are now required to improve, where necessary, the quality of ILO research.
12. The final goal is to improve messaging, formats and dissemination tools. To that end, and with a view to ensuring that research products are designed for a diverse range of users and achieve greater uptake, the coordination of flagship reports (including topic, timing and format) will be improved to maximize research impact. The research dissemination strategy must also encompass the full range of publications across traditional and digital formats, including high-quality summaries and briefs adapted to meet the needs of those who rely on ILO research but may lack the time or resources to read traditional technical reports.

II. Actions to achieve the five research goals

13. New and revitalized work processes are required to achieve the five goals of the research strategy. The proposed set of actions is mapped out in the table.

⁶ Centenary Declaration, Part I(D).

⁷ ILO: *Time to act for SDG 8: Integrating decent work, sustained growth and environmental integrity* (Geneva, 2019).

⁸ GB.331/PFA/4, para. 23.

Table. Goals, challenges, proposed actions and monitoring mechanisms

Goals	Challenges	Proposed actions	Monitoring mechanisms
1. Be relevant and responsive to ILO constituents	Make constituents' research needs more visible	Hold regular meetings to understand research needs of tripartite constituents and Bureaux	Consultations with constituents will include feedback on relevance and responsiveness of research
	Engage at earlier stages in flagship research programmes	For flagship research projects, host Bureaux consultations at early/mid-/late stages	
2. Apply innovative research to evolving world of work challenges	Develop innovative research synergies on frontier issues	Support multidisciplinary research teams, mixed-method techniques, strategic partnerships with leading research institutes and research secondments	Annual discussion in the Publishing Committee
3. Strengthen research relationships with UN agencies and other international institutions	Strengthen the ILO's role among international organizations in researching future of work policies	Deepen research relationships with international organizations and UN agencies	Monitor breadth and scope of interactions with international institutions on research topics of mutual interest
	Enhance the ILO's contribution to research related to the 2030 Agenda	Invest in SDG research (complementary to statistics capacities) and strengthen research relations with UN agencies	Monitor evidence of new SDG research products with other UN agencies
4. Invest more in the highest standards of quality of research	Ensure high quality of all ILO research	Strengthen flagship reports, utilize enhanced academic peer reviews, and make recruitment and training investments	Publishing Committee to monitor
		Research Review Group to review and assess research	Research Department (RESEARCH) to evaluate impact of reforms on quality of research
5. Improve messaging, formats and dissemination tools	Make ILO research more useful	Adopt research uptake guidelines and continue improving the substantive work of the Publishing Committee	Agree new uptake guidelines at Publishing Committee during 2020
	Improve current governance processes and transparency		

14. Actions to achieve the first goal will involve a twin-track approach to research consultations. A first track will involve structured consultations with the constituents on an annual basis, with follow-up sessions where needed, designed to improve mutual learning and better understand their diverse viewpoints and research interests. These consultations will become the vehicle for constituents' inputs into ILO research priorities, in conformity with the Centenary Declaration and the ILO's Strategic Plan for 2018–21. A second track will involve regular consultations with ACT/EMP and ACTRAV in order to solicit their views and discuss their research needs.

15. In addition, all research programmes leading to a flagship report will conduct regular consultations with ACT/EMP and ACTRAV colleagues at early, mid- and late stages of the programme's life cycle, in line with the Guidelines contained in the Annex to IGDS No. 536

requiring the “[e]ffective involvement of the Bureaux at the time of the conception and design of policies, programmes, strategies and activities”.⁹

16. In order to achieve the second goal of innovative research, in particular with regard to frontier issues (see Part III of this document), the ILO must develop work processes to support cutting-edge analyses, methodologies and concepts. In the field and headquarters, the ILO must support a creative and robust research culture within the framework of the Centenary Declaration. This will entail improving communication flows among research teams across the Office and strengthening collaboration. Because innovation and creativity are strongly associated with thinking across traditional academic disciplines, multidisciplinary teams will be encouraged to produce world-class research. Frontier issues will be designed to bring together expertise across policy departments and field offices and made operational by means of strategic partnerships with leading research institutes and secondments of experts. Annual meetings with constituents will provide an opportunity to discuss frontier issues.
17. Existing relationships with other UN agencies and international institutions have improved overall in recent years. However, the third goal requires the ILO to leverage the momentum of the Centenary Declaration in order to reinvigorate these relationships around a stronger research focus. One way in which the ILO can play a leadership role in providing the evidence to support mutual initiatives is by convening regular meetings in order to identify significant research objectives that could benefit from joint research at the global level, as well as national-level actions. Evidence of successful research relationships includes the use of ILO research in flagship reports published by colleagues at other international organizations and UN agencies. It is proposed that the number of citations should be monitored, with a view to increasing their number over the periods 2018–19 and 2020–21.¹⁰
18. The ILO must also step up its research efforts to inform policy contributions in order to deliver the 2030 Agenda. Building on its 2019 report on SDG 8¹¹ and a commitment in the proposed Programme and Budget for 2020–21 to strengthen statistical capacities to produce SDG indicators, the ILO should capitalize on its expertise by extending the reach of SDG 8 research across other SDGs and the wider 2030 Agenda, as emphasized in its Strategic Plan for 2018–21.¹² This will require continued interdepartmental collaboration as well as between headquarters and field offices and strengthened research relationships with other UN agencies.
19. For the fourth goal, work processes are largely in place, in accordance with the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21. Quality standards should be further improved and monitored. This will require the appointment of internal and external expert advisers for major research programmes leading to flagship reports. Other actions include strengthening the peer review process by the inclusion of two academic reviewers for all major and flagship ILO reports, encouraging co-authorship with leading experts in the field where appropriate, and supporting strategic investments both to attract new talent in research on frontier issues and to develop in-house expertise. With regard to the Research Department, the multidisciplinary

⁹ IGDS No. 536, op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁰ The proposed Programme and Budget for 2020–21 includes a target of a 20 per cent increase in citations of ILO research in flagship reports published by multilateral agencies from a suitable baseline year. See [GB.337/PFA/1/1](#), p. 78.

¹¹ ILO: *Time to act for SDG 8*, op. cit.

¹² [GB.328/PFA/1](#), para. 30.

Research Review Group provides a supplementary quality-enhancing function. Its remit was revised in 2018 to ensure maximum value for the Department.

20. The fifth and last goal of improving dissemination is vital to delivering the overall objective of the ILO research strategy. The organization of the flagship reports will be revised to improve both the format and timing, in order to maximize impact. The Publishing Committee will continue to coordinate the ILO's publishing strategy and to ensure the highest quality publications, from books and peer-reviewed journal articles to policy research briefs and working papers. Varied formats will be emphasized in order to maximize impact on social media.
21. In addition, in conjunction with other relevant units, the Policy Portfolio will aim to develop research uptake guidelines for the Office in order to encourage research teams, in the design stages, to formulate the objectives and expected impact of their research, identify the intended audience and design a targeted dissemination strategy, and generally improve the impact of publications. There is a special need to generate high-quality summary research products for key stakeholders and consumers of ILO research.

III. Principles for research and new collaborative research on frontier issues

Guiding principles for ILO research

22. In striving to achieve the five goals of this new ILO research strategy, clear principles should guide the design and operationalization of all research. These principles are designed to foster a culture of research that is inclusive, creative and stimulating, and to ensure that research products achieve the maximum impact and relevance, as articulated above.
23. Where appropriate, ILO research should:
 - use a multidisciplinary conceptual framework;
 - utilize quantitative and qualitative data methods and inductive and deductive approaches, in addition to drawing on available resources from ILO and other databases;
 - mainstream issues of gender inequality in research design and analysis;
 - provide evidence that informs the policy outcomes specified in the proposed Programme and Budget for 2020–21 and/or cross-Office, integrated areas of research;
 - ascertain its particular relevance for constituents worldwide and ensure regional diversity, such that a developmental focus is explicitly considered at the outset and regional perspectives are incorporated into the research design; and
 - involve both Office-wide and external collaborative relationships as far as possible, creating synergies and maximizing efficient use of resources.

Collaborative programmes to research new frontier issues

24. Given the need to deliver innovative ILO research, improve the agility and responsiveness of research to a constantly evolving policy agenda and provide constituents with the most relevant products, the ILO should commit suitable resources to conducting research on a limited number of frontier issues. An individual frontier issue ought to respond directly to the issues articulated in the Centenary Declaration, align with the guiding principles for research described above, fill a knowledge gap and contribute to an important area of policy; research into such issues is likely to require collaboration between research experts working across policy departments and between headquarters and field offices. Consultations with constituents and with ACT/EMP and ACTRAV will feed into the Office-wide process of identifying three or four frontier issues.
25. In that regard it would be useful to receive the guidance of the Governing Body as concerns some specific topics, drawn from the Centenary Declaration, which illustrate the scope and ambition necessary for the ILO to deliver in areas of innovative research that can keep pace with the rapidly evolving policy agenda. Further proposals of frontier issues are also welcome.

(i) Technological progress with decent work

26. There is no single, deterministic impact of technological change on job creation and destruction. Nor is there a fixed effect on production processes, economic growth, skill needs or the quality of work. By better understanding these impacts and remaining attentive to institutional, organizational and developmental circumstances, the ILO can generate innovative research that informs workers, employers and governments. Research could address the extent to which digital technologies enable transitions into decent work, including formalization pathways for enterprises of all sizes; the global distribution of the sectors, jobs and skills on which automation and artificial intelligence have the greatest impact; and how human resource management is redesigning work to balance staff retention, work fulfilment and productivity goals.

(ii) Decent work for sustainable development

27. Building on previous ILO studies and drawing insights from the ILO's Green Jobs Programme, new research could focus on developments at the regional and sectoral levels in order to obtain a better understanding of how decent work interrelates with the goal of sustainable development. Such research could include a specific focus on agriculture in order to investigate the impact of heat stress on productivity and the health and well-being of workers. Other potential issues could include the role of social dialogue in integrating decent work in climate policies; the technological opportunities to shape decent work with environmental integrity; and the varieties of business environments (including cooperatives and social and solidarity enterprises) that enable or hinder sustainable development. The latter issue might include research on those business practices in the context of the just transition related to investment, human resource management and greater energy and material efficiency.

(iii) *Effective institutions to reduce inequalities and reduce poverty*

28. Collaborative research could bring together new data and analysis on inequalities to develop a unique ILO evidence base that tests the degree to which decent work, in different country and developmental contexts, might serve to counteract inequalities. Research could address whether and how social dialogue institutions are able to distribute income and decent work opportunities; the degree to which productive growth in the formal economy, with attention to firm size, is a necessary and/or sufficient stage for reducing overall levels of in-work poverty; the variety of equality-inducing effects of different social protection systems; and the association between international labour standards and measures of intra- and inter-country patterns of inequality.

(iv) *Dynamic skill formation systems for decent work transitions, productivity growth and diversification of economies*

29. Transitions between jobs, as well as in and out of work, are expected to increase and career paths to become more heterogeneous. However, there is no guarantee that transitions will foster decent work and little is known about the consequences for skills, productivity and the ability of developing and emerging economies to diversify. State-of-the-art research could investigate the characteristics of labour market transitions and explore the relationship between the institutional context, business type and key outcomes (decent work, productivity growth and economic diversity or complexity). Research might also focus on different workforce groups at specific life stages, including youth, family formation and older workers.

IV. The way forward

30. The ILO has a significant opportunity to modify and further improve its research strategy in order to respond more systematically to the needs of constituents and directly to the Centenary Declaration. The ILO has already taken significant steps following the adoption of the Knowledge Strategy 2018–21. This paper offers a basis for further development, as called for in the 334th Session of the Governing Body. It is therefore proposed that the Office should work towards implementing the suggested actions to support the five goals for the proposed research strategy and consider operationalizing new research on frontier issues.

Draft decision

31. *The Governing Body endorsed the proposed research strategy for the period 2020–21 and requested the Director-General to take into account its guidance in implementing the strategy.*