

: Conference Report

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Governing the Future of Work The ILO Report's Implications for the EU

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Gig economy, digitalisation, sharing economy, artificial intelligence, internet of things – these are just a few buzzwords often used in connection with the future of work. It promises a brave new world where borders lose their meaning, where creativity and flexibility are key, where innovation accelerates and economic welfare spreads around the globe. But there are challenges as well. Less-qualified workers run the risk of being left behind, new forms of workforce exploitation are already emerging, and social protection schemes run the risk of being sidelined by new forms of informal, self-employed or flexible work, leaving people without protection when they need it most.

On the occasion of its centenary in 2019, the International Labour Organization (ILO) appointed a high-ranking Global Commission on the Future of Work which presented its final report on 22 January 2019. What answers does the ILO report offer to the challenges outlined above? What is their potential from a European perspective? In February 2019, sef: hosted a Policy Lunch at the Representation of North Rhine-Westphalia in Brussels to discuss these questions.

In his welcoming words, Dr Gerd Harms, Deputy Chair of sef:’s Executive Committee, emphasised that the future of work offers many opportunities. However, it needs an appropriate policy framework at the national and the international level to avoid increasing inequality and to preserve social justice.

Defining global guidelines for such a framework was the difficult task of the Global Commission on the Future of Work. Commission member Thorben Albrecht, former Permanent State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, presented some of the main findings of its report. To begin with, he shared his observation that the transformation of work is not driven solely by technology and changing patterns of globalisation but also by changing values and preferences of workers, who are demanding more flexibility and a better work-life balance. Whether this development is for better or worse depends on us, he added. The challenge is to create decent jobs and to reduce informality.



Dr Gerd Harms welcomes the audience.

Striving for a universal labour guarantee

The Global Commission advocates a human-centred agenda, Mr Albrecht continued. This is not only a development agenda; it also includes, for example, the use of technology in support of decent work and a “human-in-command” approach to technology. The Commission furthermore called for measures to combat (gender) inequality, for investment and job creation in sectors that are of particular value to human well-being such as the care economy and, in particular, for lifelong learning. He asked: “Why should companies be allowed to deduct costs of investment in machinery from their tax bill but not investment in people?”

Another key demand made by the Commission is a universal labour guarantee that includes the fundamental workers’ rights defined in the ILO core labour standards, an adequate living wage, limits on working time, and safe and healthy workplaces. Workers’ rights must be universally acknowledge and implemented, Mr Albrecht said. “This will be a long and difficult path.”

Platforms that are active across the world need global regulations, Mr Albrecht concluded. The ILO has an important role to play here, but the EU is an influential actor as well and should use its power to convince other organisations, for example the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, to subscribe to the decent work agenda.



Dr Hildegard Hagemann in dialogue with Thorben Albrecht

EU: Focus on lifelong learning and social protection

The European Union has had its own debate on the future of work, leading, among other things, to the Social Fairness Package, Ruth Paserman, Deputy



Thorben Albrecht, Member of the ILO Commission

Head of Cabinet of the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, said. The EU’s involvement in the ILO process on the future of work was only informal, however. The preconditions differ substantially, she explained, as social cohesion within Europe is much stronger than elsewhere in the world. Therefore, the EU can be more specific in its recommendations than the ILO. In some areas, she saw complete conformity with the ILO report, in particular with regard to its emphasis on lifelong learning. In other fields, for example gender equality, starting points differ between the ILO and the EU, where gender equality is a core principle already, at least on paper.

Another core aspect for the EU is access to social protection, Ms Paserman explained. Here, the EU could be a model for the world. Although home to just 17% of the world’s population, it accounts for 50% of the spending on social protection. Social protection is the responsibility of member states, but their policies are monitored through the European Semester, for example, and the EU makes recommendations. Clearly, more flexibility in the working world makes social protection even more important, she said. The European Social Fund can provide

important impetus, along with legislative initiatives such as the proposed Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers.

What role for civil society organisations?

From a civil society perspective, Dr Hildegard Hagemann from the German Commission Justitia et Pax welcomed the fact that the Commission declared the social dialogue to be a public good. However, the gig economy is leading to a further informalisation of work and more precariousness in labour relations. For labour unions, it is difficult to reach out to these people. As a result, the social dialogue is often not inclusive enough and does not take into account the needs of diverse groups of people. Dr Hagemann criticised the fact that the Commission is lagging behind the ILO's recognition of the importance of civil society organisations as an additional partner in the tripartite dialogue. Her intervention led to a heated debate on whether the social dialogue should be opened to other actors (tripartism plus). Mr Albrecht argued that labour unions should not be absolved of their obligations to represent all workers and that they have to assume responsibility for new forms of work as well.

With regard to the EU, Dr Hagemann stressed the fact the EU is an important global actor, e.g. in development cooperation, and that it should use existing political dialogues to advance the decent work agenda. She criticised the fact that in development policy dialogues, the private sector is always present but never the labour unions. Their involvement is necessary to find a proper balance between the pri-

vate sector and people's interests, she said. Furthermore, the EU has to do its homework to be credible. Violations of migrant workers' labour rights, for example, are not being addressed adequately at present. Ms Paserman agreed that deficits still exist. That is why the Commission proposed a European Labour Authority to enforce labour rights, particularly of mobile workers within the EU.

Finally, Ms Hagemann reminded the audience that 2019 also marks the 20th anniversary of the decent work agenda. We do not need more legal frameworks, she concluded, but we do need better implementation of existing norms.



Ruth Paserman, European Commission

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