



## 'Decent Work' – Historical and Cultural Varieties

### **Introduction**

by Andrea Hollington, Tijo Salverda, Nina Schneider, Oliver Tappe (GSSC)

Past ideas and present experiences concerning acceptable forms of work are broad and varied. Opposition to slavery, child labour, and long work days vividly illustrate how formerly acceptable notions of labour have changed over time and across cultures, even if none of these forms have been totally abolished. In 1999, in response to the persistence of coercive working conditions around the world, the International Labour Organization (ILO) linked its main institutional goals to a specific definition of 'decent work'.<sup>1</sup>

The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. This is the main purpose of the Organization today. Decent work is the converging focus of all its four strategic objectives: the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue. It must guide its policies and define its international role in the near future.

Though the ILO definition is heavily employed in many political and media debates, the ways in which people define 'decent' work vary across societies, and have also changed throughout history. Decent work also appears to be intimately bound up with ideas of a 'good life', yet

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

another category that varies widely across times and places. While specific relations of coerced and precarious labour may appear as aberrations in the context of so-called 'regular employment', they are hardly exceptional when viewed through historically-informed perspectives from the Global South.

Beyond conditions of work itself, what is considered 'decent' work often relates to work's perceived contribution to society. In his recent book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*,<sup>2</sup> David Graeber examines how some people consider the content and effects of their jobs to be useless for society at large, for example, because they profit from selling products that jeopardise consumers' health or even the entire planet. Financiers involved in speculation, may consider themselves as performing an essential social function, but there is a long history of others who judge their practices as socially undesirable and even pathological. But who decides what is a meaningless job and what is not? How and why does this change over time?

It is not surprising that especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, these and other questions regarding the purpose of work and the 'decency' of the conditions in which it is performed are regaining (the much deserved) attention. Karl Marx has once again become prominent in mainstream discussions, while also a concept such as universal basic income<sup>3</sup> neatly fits the increased attention. A basic income, after all, is about the connection between decency and work – or better said, lack of work, because the aim is to also offer the ones who may not be able to find employment, decent or not, to live decently.

For this issue of *Voices from Around the World*<sup>4</sup> we have gathered contributions that explore and critically reflect on notions of decent versus indecent work from a global and comparative perspective, with the aim of achieving a more detailed understanding of labour relations worldwide. By bringing different discourses of (in-)decent work into dialogue, we aim to stimulate debate on the values and ethics of work as viewed through a comparative perspective. On the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ILO in 2019, we consider this issue a timely contribution to general questions of work and the good life worldwide. In particular, socioeconomic transformations in the Global South and growing inequalities appear to create new exploitative labour relations and precaritization.

Reflecting on the history of ILO debates and initiatives, Oliver Tappe discusses colonial indentured labour as one of the key fields where discourses of forced labour and 'indecent' work were played out. 'Coolie' labourers in the colonial plantation economy often had to endure terrible working conditions, racialized violence, and legal insecurity. This reminds us of the precarious conditions of present-day contract workers, for example in the Arab Gulf States.

In her contribution on labour relations in Vietnam, Angie Ngoc Tran illustrates how neoliberal tendencies in a late-socialist environment create particular challenges for the workers. She

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Bullshit-Jobs/David-Graeber/9781501143311>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic\\_income](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_income)

<sup>4</sup> <http://voices.uni-koeln.de/>

focuses on a specific aspect of the 1999 ILO Decent Work Report – the ‘social dialogue’ goal – to show the difficulties of implementing ILO frameworks on the ground. So far, this dialogue seems to serve the interests of the management rather than to increase the bargaining power of the Vietnamese workers or improve their working conditions.

Gerda Kuiper, in her contribution, discusses labour conditions at the global hub of flower production around Lake Naivasha, Kenya. She demonstrates the complexities of defining (in)decent work conditions in a global industry, not least because what is considered ‘decent’ is often decided by (global) actors who are not directly involved. To gain a better understanding, Kuiper argues, we need to also pay attention to how local workers perceive the content of their work (and related conditions), instead of portraying them as actors without agency.

Introducing another example of a global commodity chain and related labour relations, Oliver Pye, Dominik Hofzumahaus, and Panitda Saiyarod take us to industrial banana plantations in Southeast Asia that mainly serve the huge demand of the Chinese market. They show how banana-related work has transformed from small-scale peasant production to a system of alienated wage labour. They conclude that this alienated labour cannot be decent, and that it is bound up with an alienated relation to nature.

Christal O. Spel takes us to real-life workers in the streets of Pretoria. She describes the rough yet structured everyday life of cardboard collectors and self-employed street vendors. These street workers, Spel argues, do not fit into conventional, narrow definitions of work, decent work, or other concepts based on formal employment relations. Her reflective piece is at once poetic and at the same time realistic – detailing how these people invent labour to survive in the streets.

Finally, Gilles Reckinger alerts us to look at our own societies to find the predicament of decent work today. Taking the example of Italy’s orange plantations, Reckinger shows how the current European border regime promotes slavery-like working conditions for migrants. His descriptions of precarious working and living conditions of African refugees in Europe are just another illustration of the manifold challenges that the ILO and other actors concerned with decent work are facing at the moment.