



Decent Work: A Multiplicity of Meanings of 'Decency' in Work

By Christal O. Spel

While walking along the street in Pretoria, South Africa, one will often come across young men pulling large sacks. From their heads to their toes the men are covered with what appears to be accumulated dirt, brownish, blackish and greyish. Their clothes are either layers of various garments to give warmth during the cold days, or they are bare chested or wearing worn-out T-shirts/singlets. The large brownish and blackish sacks may be placed on rolling boards, or may be simply pulled along on the road. I met one of these men sleeping by the roadside under the midday sun, his large sack strategically placed to prevent pedestrians from walking over him. I met another, at the end of the day, laying his battered mattress on the pedestrian pavement. After carefully placing the mattress, sheets of cardboard, and blankets, all brownish and blackish like the bare soil by the side of the pavement, he lay on the makeshift bed, brought out a cigarette, struck a match and lit it. He turned to a bag by his side and brought out a bright and colourful magazine and appeared to be reading the pages of the magazine as he puffed on his cigarette. At one side, vehicles continued to zip past him; on the other side, pedestrians continued to walk by. Who are these men? Meet the workers at the lower end of the recycling chain in Pretoria: the big sacks they pull contain cardboard, paper, plastics, and other recyclable materials that they have rescued from the bins with their bare hands. They are not crazy people; they are workers, toiling to make a living wage.

There is another man; I walk past him every day on the way to my office. He comes out in the mornings, bringing his stool to sit on, a manually fabricated grill, and a bag of charcoal. He sells roasted corn all day, seven days a week. He said he wakes up very early to go to the farm market, purchases a sack of maize from farmers, and brings it to the city to sell. I asked if he makes enough profit: he responded: 'it is better than stealing'. He says he cuts his profits because buyers are unwilling to pay the right price, so rather than sell one cob of corn for 12 rand, he makes do with selling it for 10 rand. That way he makes enough to keep the trade going and keep 'something' coming in.

At the side of a road sits a woman with her young son. She solicits the drivers of cars for alms. She is called a panhandler. She makes her living income from panhandling. The government warns citizens not to give alms to beggars, rather advising them to give donations to the many NGOs and CSOs that provides food and care for the less fortunate ones. The panhandler sometimes benefits from the services from NGOs and CSOs, but still return to the streets because her needs are not satisfied.

The list goes on. Many people on this side of the world make their living in numerous ways; they do not *earn* their living (gain deservedly in return for one's behaviour or achievements); they *make* it – as self-employed persons. Their very presence provokes strong contestation of the conceptualization of 'decent work' as connoting access to jobs, an employment-centred conception that puts the heat on employers of labour to provide fair pay and safe and dignified conditions for work. Such a narrow conception of work excludes those that do not have 'work', but nonetheless generate a living income from other economic activities. The exclusion of these 'other' workers calls attention to the lopsided definition of work, and to the broader macro-economic and social conditions that gives 'decency' to work, beyond the rules and conditions of big organizations and other employers. In addition, such a narrow conception of decent work stigmatizes other forms of work that do not meet the criteria to be considered 'decent work' in ways that also hurt and demean the individual values that motivates people to engage themselves in such work. By extension, the social value of such labour does not benefit from the formally promoted criteria of what constitutes decent work.

To technicalize the conception of decent work reduces its multidimensionality and renders stagnant the cultural, social, and political dynamism that links the notion of decency to the variety of practical income-making activities in which real people engage.