

What is Decent Work?

Barbados Employers' Confederation

For sometime now we have been hearing persons in the industrial relations arena – employers, trade unionists - and even politicians making reference to Decent Work and you have been probably asking yourself “*what is Decent Work?*”. The concept of Decent Work was introduced by the current Director General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Mr. Juan Somavia, back in 1999 in his first report to the International Labour Conference. He declared that “*the primary goal of the ILO today is to promote full, productive employment and decent work for all globally. Decent work is the availability of employment for both men and women in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human rights*”.

Arising out of this, the ILO formulated the four components of decent work. There are 1) Rights at Work, 2) Employment, 3) Social Protection and 4) Social Dialogue.

Rights at Work

Rights at work the embodiment of the ethical and legal framework for all aspects of decent work, ensuring that work is associated with dignity, equality, freedom, adequate remuneration, social security and voice, representation and participation for all categories of workers. Freedom of association and collective bargaining, forced labour, child labour and discrimination at work has been identified by the ILO as the foundation of rights for the welfare of workers.

In Barbados, successive governments have ensured that workers are protected through the provision of various pieces of labour legislation. These include the Protection of Wages, the Severance Payments Act, Holidays with Pay, etc.

Employment

When we speak of employment in the context of Decent Work we are referring not only to jobs for which we are paid a wage but also self employment and work from home. In addition, full-time, part-time, casual work, work done by women, men and children all fall under the ambit of employment. However, for work to be categorized as decent certain factors must be present. Firstly, there must be full employment within the country. This means that there should be adequate employment opportunities for all persons who are willing and available to work. Secondly, the wage or salary derived from employment should provide the worker with enough disposable income to satisfy his basic needs and that of his family. Thirdly, there should be no forced labour; the worker should be able to freely choose. Fourthly, discrimination in employment should be prohibited.

Social Protection

As human beings, we are exposed to a variety of contingencies and vulnerabilities during our lifetime. Social Protection as a concept of Decent Work is designed to provide security not only to workers but to the population as a whole against loss of income during contingencies such as accidents, unemployment, maternity, and old age. In addition to the situations listed, a comprehensive social protection strategy would also seek to address the needs of the disabled, orphans and single parents. Any government in strategizing its social protection policy, must determine what contingencies they wish to cover and the class of individuals for whom they would be providing these services as well as how the provision of these benefits would be financed. In Barbados, we are fortunate to have a social security and welfare system in place that provides various benefits. Social protection thus attempts to alleviate the hardship that presents itself during times of crises.

Social Dialogue

Social dialogue is an avenue for people to represent and defend their interest, express their concerns, and engage in discussions on social and economic policies with all members of the social partnership which consists of trade unions, government and employers. Barbados has embraced this broad definition of social dialogue through our tripartite consultative and negotiating mechanism and has been hailed by the International Labour Organisation as a model of best practice in social dialogue. In the workplace, social dialogue between the employer and the employee usually takes the form of collective bargaining negotiations through trade union representation. It has been said that the balance of power lies in the hands of the employer. This dimension of the Decent Work concept is therefore critical because it provides the mechanism whereby the “weaker partners” are empowered thus creating a better balance of bargaining power in the workplace.

The ILO in formulating the Decent Work paradigm was cognizant that all countries are not at the same level of development and democracy, however the four components of decent work are ideals for which all countries must strive to achieve over time.