

Disability Studies Quarterly
Fall 2002, Volume 22 No. 4
pages 212-217 <www.cds.hawaii.edu/dsq>
Copyright 2002 by the Society
for Disability Studies

Employment as Promoted by the
International Labor Organization

Erin Martz, CRC, PhD
University of Missouri, Columbia

Abstract

This article describes the historical and current focus of the International Labor Organization (ILO), which is a United Nations subsidiary that focuses on employment. The ILO has a history of policies related to vocational rehabilitation and disability, which are reviewed briefly. Selected ILO resources and publications are listed, which rehabilitation counselors and professionals may find useful for understanding disability legislation on a global level.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) is a United Nations subsidiary that has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. There are 175 countries that currently are members of the ILO. The ILO was created in 1919, along with the League of Nations by the Treaty of Versailles. The ILO became the first specialized agency connected to the United Nations. From its inception, the ILO has focused upon employment and social reform on an international level (ILO, 1998a). It has maintained a tripartite structure, consisting of government representatives, employers, and workers (the latter typically represented by trade unions). If disability-related issues are involved, then an additional component of disability organizations is added, forming a quadripartite representation in the ILO (ILO, 1998b).

The purpose of this article is to provide information about the activities of the ILO both in general and as specifically related to disability and employment. This article will end with a listing of publications and brochures produced by the ILO. This information may be useful to rehabilitation professionals and researchers, in order to help understand disability-related employment concerns from an international context.

The historical focus of the ILO

The ILO was created to promote social justice and through

its history has advocated for standards of labor and fundamental rights in the workplace. For decades, the ILO has asserted that equality in employment is "a fundamental prerequisite for human dignity and social justice" (ILO, 1998b, p. 27). The ILO ratified the following conventions, which may be viewed as landmark employment legislation:

1. Number 29 ratified in 1930, prohibiting forced or compulsory labor.
2. Number 87 in 1948, establishing the freedom of association and the right to organize for both workers and employers.
3. Number 98 in 1949, protecting against anti-union discrimination and promoting collective bargaining.
4. Number 100 in 1951, asserting that men and women should receive equal pay and benefits for work of equal value.
5. Number 105 in 1957, prohibiting the use of forced or compulsory labor for political means.
6. Number 111 in 1958, prohibiting employment discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, political orientation, nationality, or social origin.
7. Number 138 in 1973, prohibiting child labor.

The current ILO focus

At the "Global Employment Forum" (November 2001) at the ILO, the phrase "decent work for all" was promoted as an agenda for the 21st century. The ILO defined decent work as containing the following four elements: employment growth, respect for fundamental rights at work, the promotion of social dialogue, and the bolstering and extension of social protection. According to the ILO, decent work is employment that occurs in the conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity.

Many of the speakers at the ILO's Global Employment Forum focused on macroeconomic policies and the activities of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, especially those of developing countries. Such a focus on macroeconomics may not be interesting for some people (e.g., those who are accustomed to helping others on an individual level). However, this emphasis on world economic forces is understandable and necessary, in view of the statistics cited by the ILO (2001) that one-third of the world's labor force, or 3 billion people, are unemployed, underemployed, or receiving poverty wages.

The poverty of many individuals, according to the ILO, is more a result of the lack of decent incomes than unemployment. This is one reason why the ILO takes initiatives in creating programs to help developing countries in employment and sustainable growth, due to workers' wages often being intricately connected to their country's economic health and stability. These perspectives suggest that rehabilitation counselors and professionals should also take into consideration the larger social and economic contexts in which vocational rehabilitation clients function.

One strength of the ILO is that it encourages dialogue

about employment from a global viewpoint. Another strength of the ILO is its long track record of advocacy for the establishment of fundamental rights at work. Currently, the ILO is asserting that employment should become the focus of economic and social policies in the international, national, and local legislation, in order to encourage growth and prosperity throughout the world.

The 1998 ILO declaration on rights at work

The ILO tripartite coalition of governments, employers, and workers adopted the "ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work" that included four principles and rights: 1) the freedom of association and collective bargaining, 2) elimination of forced or compulsory labor, 3) abolishment of child labor, and 4) elimination of employment discrimination. Hence, rehabilitation professionals may be interested in the fourth principle because it mentions discrimination due to disability (ILO, 1998a).

In this fourth principle of the ILO declaration, a distinction was made between direct and indirect discrimination. Direct discrimination, according to the ILO's declaration, may occur when laws or rules explicitly state conditions that deny equal employment opportunity. Indirect discrimination may occur when laws appear neutral, but in fact lead to employment discrimination (ILO, 1998a). Indirect discrimination, according to the ILO, may be a result of rules that exclude individuals based upon a quality that is not essential to the performance of a job.

Vocational rehabilitation and the ILO

Disability issues in employment have been a part of ILO's work since 1921 (ILO, 1998b) when the ILO examined the reintegration of servicemen into the workforce. The ILO states that over 500 million individuals in the world have a physical or mental impairment and that 350 million of these individuals live in areas that do not provide access to assistance for overcoming their limitations (ILO, 1998b). The ILO noted that even when assistance is available to individuals with disabilities many of them are exposed to physical, social, and cultural barriers that may act as barriers to their functioning (ILO, 1998b). Further, in developing countries, most individuals with disabilities live in extreme poverty according to the ILO. Women with disabilities are described as doubly disadvantaged in their struggle for equality due to their gender and disability status. Most of them, according to the ILO, are unemployed.

The following is a brief listing of some of the milestones of the ILO in disability policies:

1. Recommendation no. 22 in 1925, proposing compensation for industrial accidents.

2. Recommendation no. 99 in 1955, outlining that individuals with disabilities (no matter what the origin of their disabilities) should be provided with services such as vocational guidance, training, and job acquisition and should

be assisted in integration or reintegration into a normal working environment.

3. Convention no. 159 and Recommendation no. 168 in 1983, asserting that social integration of individuals with disabilities is based upon vocational rehabilitation, freely chosen work, and the opportunity for employment advancement.

These policies contain practical suggestions of actions that governments can take to create vocational rehabilitation programs for individuals with disabilities and to assist them in becoming employed and integrated into the community (ILO, 1998b). Recommendation no. 99 in 1955 even included an outline of the process of vocational rehabilitation that could be tailored to both the circumstances of governments and of individuals with disabilities (ILO, 1998b, p. 101).

Other aspects of work that the ILO conducts in relation to vocational rehabilitation include giving assistance to governments in the creation of vocational rehabilitation programs, technical cooperation projects for the development of community-based rehabilitation programs, and technical support for the creation of informal-sector work for individuals with disabilities who could not obtain jobs (ILO, 1998b). Further, the ILO consults with countries that are emerging from armed conflict and therefore have a high need for rehabilitation of injured veterans and civilians. Finally and possibly most importantly, the ILO includes disability organizations as an additional component in their tripartite meetings with governments, employers, and workers (ILO).

Information resources

The ILO general website is <www.ilo.org>. The website related to disability is: <www.ilo.org/employment/disability>. Emails can be sent to: <disability@ilo.org>. Labor standards are available on a trilingual database which contains ILO Conventions, Recommendations, and other documents: <<http://ilolex.ilo.ch:1567/English/index.htm>> or go to the ILO website and click on "International labor standards."

The ILO has produced a wealth of resources about employment, including the following publications and brochures, all of which have the ILO as author and published in Geneva, Switzerland, unless otherwise noted. Some resources were undated.

Selected ILO monographs and publications

1. A global agenda for employment: Discussion Paper (2001) and A global agenda for employment: Summary (2001).
2. An ILO code of practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work (2001).
3. Employment-intensive investment in infrastructure: Jobs to build society (2000).
4. From want to work: Job creation for the urban poor (1993).
5. Generating opportunities for young people: The ILO's decent work agenda.
6. Human resource management practice: Adaptation and

change in an age of globalization (by L. Entekin & M. Court, 2001).

7. ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work (1998).

8. International colloquium on job retention and return to work strategies for disabled workers: National problems and responses (1999).

9. Job creation in small and medium-sized enterprises: Guide to ILO recommendation no. 189 (1998).

10. Job quality: It's just good business.

11. Mental health and work: Impact, issues, and good practices (by G. Harnois & P. Gabriel, 2000).

12. Realizing decent work for older women workers.

13. Stopping forced labor (2001).

14. Vocational rehabilitation and employment of disabled persons (1998).

15. Working together with the media: A practical guide for people with disabilities (by B. Kolucki, 1994).

16. World employment report 2001: Life at work in the information economy.

17. Your voice at work: Global report under the follow-up to the ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work (2000).

Selected ILO brochures

18. About the ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights to work and its follow-up.

19. Building for the future: Investing in jobs for development.

20. Gender equality, employment promotion, and poverty eradication: An ILO capacity-building program.

21. Generation of equality: A life-cycle approach to rights and action.

22. ILO/AIDS: Contributing to the global response.

23. Mental health, disability, and employment: InFocus program on skills, knowledge, and employability.

24. Stress, tobacco, alcohol and drugs, HIV/AIDS, and violence (SOLVE): Managing emerging health-related problems at work.

References

International Labor Organization (2001). *A global agenda for employment: Summary (2001)*. Geneva: Author.

International Labor Organization (1998a). *ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work*. Geneva: Author.

International Labor Organization (1998b). *Vocational rehabilitation and employment of disabled persons*. Geneva: Author.