The Decent Work Regulation Project

The Project on Decent Work Regulation (DWR) responds to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all. SDG 8 is vital to equitable development and cross-cuts many other SDGs, including the elimination of poverty (SDG1), good health and well-being (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5), reduced inequalities (SDG10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG11), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG16).

Effective regulation towards SDG8

To achieve these objectives, effective labour regulation is crucial. Strong labour laws are a vital component of development policies, capable of supporting inclusive growth, sustainable prosperity, and the well-being of workers and their families.

Despite effective labour regulation being one of the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century, regulatory strategies towards productive and protected working lives remain underdeveloped. There is substantial potential for innovative laws that can effectively achieve decent work – especially in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs).

In response to this demand, the DWR Project supports a set of linked research and policy activities towards understanding and improving labour market regulation across the world.
The DWR Project builds on the work of the ESRC/GCRF Strategic Network on Legal Regulation of Unacceptable Forms of Work (UFW) (2017).[1] Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the project initiated a global network that now includes more than 60 research and policy bodies in 20 countries across the world.[2]

Outlined in a 2018 report, these include casual work in a range of forms (e.g. “day labour”, “zero hours contracts”, “on-call work”); forced labour; informal employment; the prevalence of violence and harassment in certain jobs and sectors, including in the care sector and in domestic work; and the weak enforcement of labour standards.[4]

The UFW Network recognised that a growing segment of the global labour force is in work that is unacceptable: low-waged, insecure, unsafe, harbouring mistreatment, beyond the reach of the state, devoid of collective strength. These are captured in the 12 Dimensions of UFW[3]:

A key finding of the UFW Network is that lessons can be shared among nations across the world: countries often face regulatory challenges in regulating labour effectively. The Project generated a set of Research Agendas on regulatory challenges that are present in both the global North and South.

Despite the global character of those challenges, the Project recognised that the nature and magnitude of UFW differ from country to country. In light of this complexity, local knowledge is critical to mapping the severity, extent, and locations of UFW.[5] Reliance should be placed on local stakeholders and researchers to map the incidence and magnitude of UFW and to determine priorities for intervention. Actors involved in this process should include government Ministries and agencies, social partner organisations, and civil society groups that speak for key constituencies.

Decent Work Regulation in Africa (2018-19): Regional Network-Building

In 2018, the DWR Project launched Decent Work Regulation in Africa (DWR-Africa). The Project was centred on effective regulatory strategies for decent work in the in southern Africa, with a particular focus on the garment sector. Funded by Durham University (UK) through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)/Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the Project was a collaboration between Durham University (UK), the University of Cape Town (South Africa) and York University (Canada).

DWR-Africa established a regional network of researchers and stakeholders in southern Africa, conducted research on challenges to labour law enforcement in the region, and generated recommendations for research and regulatory policy.

A Regional Meeting on Decent Work Regulation in Africa was held at the University of Cape Town on 18 June 2018.[6] The event provided the opportunity for a regional dialogue on regulatory strategies that can achieve decent work in the African context, with a focus on enforcement of labour laws in the garment sector.[7]

Building upon the Findings and Recommendations of the Regional Meeting and subsequent fieldwork, the DWR-Africa Project produced a study that evaluates enforcement systems in South Africa and Lesotho.[8]

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DWR-Africa had a particular focus on Lesotho, were it investigated work-life and gender dynamics and how these relate to informality in – or are associated with – the garment sector.

Some of the research findings are reflected in our documentary produced by the Project on the garment sector in Lesotho and South Africa. The film - Rethabile’s Story - was launched at the UN in Geneva (July 2019) and has since been shown to audiences around the world, including as an Official Selection of the Canadian Labour International Film Festival, with a cinema screening in Toronto in November 2019.[9] The documentary is raising public awareness of conditions in the garment sector in Lesotho among audiences across the world.

The DWR network’s findings and recommendations have been used by the UN International Labour Organization to shape global policy on effective labour laws. In Africa, the project findings have been drawn on by the Lesotho Labour Commissioner, the Apparel Manufacturers of South Africa, ILO Pretoria, and by trade unions across the region. The IndustriALL union, for example, has used our findings in capacity-building (Swaziland, Madagascar), collective bargaining (Uganda, Zimbabwe), and advocating for rights in Export Processing Zones (Ethiopia). In Lesotho, the Project has contributed to Labour Code reform and generated a national-level Framework for a Decent Work Training Programme.

Domestic work has been selected as a vital source of female employment and a site of regulatory experimentation. Although Mexican law has traditionally excluded domestic workers, the first domestic workers’ union – SINACTRAHO – was recognised in 2015. On 12 December 2019, the government ratified the International Labour Organization’s Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189). In addition, the Congress has approved a new federal labour law to equalise domestic workers’ rights.

In 2019-2021, we will further develop our South partnerships through extensive engagement with local stakeholders: domestic workers’ organisations, government agencies, trade unions, employers’ associations, informal work NGOs, and local UN offices.

The aim is to generate findings and recommendations that can contribute to policy and legal reform in Mexico, as well as to international initiatives.

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