

**Emerging Issues Pertinent to African
Countries
on
Trade and Labour Standards
Under WTO Negotiations**

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Executive Summary

Conditions of work started being regulated by international agreements at the end of the nineteenth century. The International Labour Organization (ILO) was established with the objective of promoting social justice in the process of generating economic growth. It created a general system of norms that are used as labour standards in respect of protection of the rights and working conditions of workers. From 1919 to 1999, 181 conventions and 189 recommendations were adopted by the International Conference. After the Second World War, the focus of labour standards was on important issues of human rights, economic development and social justice.

The relationship between trade and international labour standards has become a matter of high controversy between developed and developing countries. Developed countries have indicated their desire to include labour standards in the purview of the World Trade Organization (WTO), claiming the existence of a link between regulation of conditions of work and international competitiveness. Developing countries (including the least developed countries, or LDCs) reject the proposal, considering it an indirect but strategic means of promoting

protectionist measures. The level of socio-economic development of African countries limits their ability to implement the provisions of the international standards.

Regardless of their lack of capacity, African countries are being obliged to undertake fundamental changes in their internal organization. Current conditions of employment and work in Africa show that steps are being taken to increase the possibilities of proper utilization of human resources by matching people and jobs.

The fact that these countries are opposing the inclusion of the new issue of trade and labour standards on the WTO negotiating agenda should not be taken as a lack of recognition of the importance of labour standards in sustainable economic development. On the contrary, African countries attach importance to labour standards, while they oppose the possible use of such standards as trade-restrictive or protectionist measures.

They need to adequately orient themselves to prevailing conditions regarding international trade and work together

towards common positions that may help to strengthen their negotiating capabilities.

Technical assistance is regarded as a method of facilitating the creation of an enabling environment by providing the necessary expertise, funds and facilities.

In conclusion, the paper asserts that labour standards provide guidelines for improving working conditions and affirms that making labour standards binding wherever feasible may be acceptable as long as the competitiveness of countries is not eroded.

The paper also concludes that African countries should strive to create an enabling environment for improving conditions of work. It emphasizes that African countries must combine their efforts in the negotiation process and recommends the promotion of wider participation by all stakeholders.