Decent Work, Social Justice, Status-Quo: The ILO as a World Organization

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Abstract

From internal struggles to ineffective international programming, the ILO has long been plagued with a variety of issues that undermine its efficacy. This has resulted in some scholars dismissing the organization as a relevant player in the world of international work and labour. However, this paper contends that these accusations fail to consider the ILO as a complex and multifaceted organization with its own mandate, agenda, and impact. Using the world organizations approach put forward by Martin Koch, four aspects of the ILO are discussed: world semantics, internal order, external relations, and contributions to world order. This analysis finds that, though the ILO has often failed to drive rapid progress in the world of work and labour, the incremental changes it has made to international working conditions through the use of small-scale programming has overall improved working conditions for many workers around the world.

Keywords

ILO, International Labour Organisation, World Organizations, Decent Work Agenda, Work and Labour

1. Introduction

From its inception in 1919, to joining as the UN's first specialized agency in 1946, to its 1998 introduction of the Decent Work Agenda, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has long been committed to progressive social change. In many ways, its endurance is a testament to the work it has done in improving the standards for working conditions around the world (Hughes & Haworth, 2011). However, the ILO has a problem: while its years of work have led to advances in labour and social protections, including protections around wages and hours (Maul, 2019), and provisions for migrant workers (Piper, 2022), its effica-

cy in contemporary world politics is challenged by several factors (Helfer, 2007; Maul, 2019). These factors include internal tensions between decision-making members of the organization, who compete to maintain the greatest amount of influence over the ILO's agenda (Maul, 2019; Baccaro & Mele, 2012), as well as the organization's insufficient inclusion of grassroots and community labour advocates, whose local expertise is recognized in ILO programming, but not in its decision-making apparatus (Helfer, 2007; Louis & Ruwet, 2017).

These challenges have resulted in the dramatic but telling criticism that "the ILO has 'been around forever'" and "'has done nothing forever'" (Helfer, 2007: p. 391). Indeed, the organization is frequently dismissed in modern international politics as a marginal and ineffective actor (Standing, 2008). Yet it persists as an active entity in the world system, with a variety of ongoing local programmes and several active partnerships to promote social welfare worldwide. These programmes, including national decent work-related programming and partnerships with local labour organizations (Piper, 2022), tend to have impacts on the local scale, giving workers resources to access better working conditions and promoting local dialogue (ILO, "Social and Solidarity Economy"; Rodríguez-Pose, 2002). These, however, are regularly overlooked (Helfer, 2007).

What accounts for the pessimistic outlook several have about the ILO (Helfer 2007)? I argue that though ILO aspires to ambitiously pursue social justice globally, its state-heavy internal structure and its complicated connections to various external non-state actors constrain the types of actions the organization can take to affect transnational norms, resulting in a piecemeal, status-quo-oriented approach to setting labour and social standards. While this approach is not radically transformative, the ILO is nonetheless important in the contributions it makes to the social well-being of marginalized or underserved workers.

The ILO's challenging position in the international system cannot be understood without a fulsome, organization-centric framework. Martin Koch's world organizations approach aims to center International Organizations (IOs) in their social and political contexts, rather than treating them as the external arms of state geopolitics. This breaks significantly from previous models of studying IOs, which tend to emphasize their roles exclusively in relation to how they interact with, and are used by, states (Koch, 2015). By focusing on four dimensions—world semantics, internal workings, external relations, and generation of world order—Koch's approach decenters the state to bring IOs to the methodological core of an analysis (Koch, 2015). This allows scholars to treat the ILO as an autonomous and complex international entity, with its own motivations, intentions, and complications.

Though a growing body of scholarship addresses the ILO's history (Maul, 2019; Baccaro & Mele, 2012; Helfer, 2007) and internal politics (Louis, 2019; Louis & Ruwet, 2017), a fulsome account of the organization's current status, from internal struggles to international programming, does not exist. While some scholarship has approached the organization using this approach (Piper, 2022; Piper

& Foley, 2021; Jensen & Piper, 2022), these accounts have been largely centered around migrant labour, and do not overview the organization's broader structural and political elements. This analysis will fill this research gap to provide a holistic account that explains the disconnect between the ILO's mandates and what it does—and often, does not—do.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first provides an epistemic and methodological overview of the world organizations approach. The subsequent four sections examine the ILO's world semantics, inner workings, external relations, and generation of world order respectively.

2. World Organizations Approach

The traditional study of IOs in IR, where an organization's actions are necessarily connected to its member states (Hurd, 2011), is limited in examining the ways in which IOs operate within a complex international society. For realists, IOs are seen as marginal actors, whose utility is dependent on the actions of hegemonic states (Pease, 2019). Where liberal scholarship does allow organizations a degree of autonomy, this is generally constrained by the amount of authority granted to them by states, and IOs often serve as tools to facilitate state cooperation (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Pease, 2019). Even when IOs are brought forward from the margins, much of their action is analyzed *vis-a-vis* the states that constitute and interact with them (Ellis, 2010: p. 12). This is emphasized in the roles that IOs fulfill in liberal institutionalist analyses; IOs function either as forums in which states can cooperatively discuss transnational issues; as tools that states may use to pursue their political goals; or, finally, as actors in their own right, operating with states, in a state-centered international system (Hurd, 2011). While this model does allow that IOs acting as actors can exercise a certain degree of autonomy (Hurd, 2011), IOs are seldom viewed without reference to the states that form their membership, and discussions thus tend to place the state at the center of analysis.

In response to state-centrism, Koch's (2015) theoretical intervention in the study of IOs proposes a "conceptual change of perspective" that provides a holistic, IO-centered account of how organizations operate in world politics. The world organizations approach that Koch proposes draws on the notion that IOs are "open systems… embedded in their organizational environment" (Koch, 2015: p. 98). Described by Ellis (2010: p. 13) as "agentive and autonomous acts despite their dependence on their constituent units for resources and personnel", IOs in this perspective are the central actors in this analysis. Thus, while IOs exist in a milieu of contextual and environmental factors, IOs are seen as having motivations and intentions of their own that are conditioned by, but not subordinate to, other actors within their context (Ellis, 2010: p. 14). In short, IOs are seen as social entities within a broader society that in both create international politics around them and are constituted through their interactions with others (Koch, 2015).

The ontological reframing of IOs in a world organizations approach entails a methodological reconfiguration. Koch lays out a framework that focuses on four key areas:

1) *World semantics* aims to "understand how world organizations understand their world and how they put themselves into context with this world" (Koch, 2015: p. 110). This demonstrates the self-perception of IOs, including "their objectives, their roles, and their functions", as well as how they perceive the world around them (ibid). Research on world semantics involves studying IO publications and other public material in order to place an IO within its social world.

2) *Inner world* "comprises all operations and processes" within the organization, thus focusing on internal operations, decision-making, funding, and membership (Koch, 2015: p. 113). Understanding IOs' inner world involves studying its internal processes, including how policy and membership decisions are made, sources of funding, and internal political struggles.

3) *External relations* discusses how IOs "maintain relations in different forms" by focusing on how organizations interact with other actors in their world (Koch, 2015: p. 115). External relations entail the study of both how IOs frame others (are other actors partners or rivals? Do they compete or cooperate?) as well as the nature of these interactions.

4) *Generating world order* focuses on IOs' actions in the world "through the formation of norms, rules, and binding standards" (Koch, 2015: p. 119). This dimension emphasizes the social role of IOs; both in the creation of broad standards and the implementation of limited programs, IOs participate in the constitution of their social world by defining problems and acting in world society in order to solve them. Studying the conventions and programmes of IOs elucidates the ways in which organizations use policy to shape the world around them.

The world organizations approach moves away from past scholarship on the ILO, which has focused on its historical evolution and contemporary efficacy (Maul, 2019; Helfer, 2007; Standing, 2008; Louis & Ruwet, 2017; Baccaro & Mele, 2012), and its specific actions around certain policy areas, such as labour migration (Piper, 2022; Piper & Foley, 2021).

Some of these works have touched on the different aspects of the world organizations approach. Piper (2022) and Piper and Foley (2021), for example, have focused on the ILO's external partnerships and generation of world order within the field of migration, pointing to the way in which ILO partnerships with both other transnational organizations, as well as local groups and individuals, have impacted the ILO's actions in dealing with labour migration. Baccaro and Mele (2012), Louis (2019), and Louis and Ruwet (2017), amongst others, have further focused on the ILO's internal operation, particularly in the context of its 1990s new governance transformation, wherein former Directors-General (DG) Michel Hansenne and Juan Somavia sought to transform the ILO's internal process and standard-setting mechanisms in response to accusations of inef-

ficacy. Other scholars, such as Maul (2019) and Standing (2008), in examining the evolution of the ILO, have demonstrated how its actions have changed in response to a changing social world since the organization's inception in 1919.

However, as much as these works contribute to a world organizations analysis, there remains a dearth of scholarship considering the ILO more holistically. Using this alternative framework, however, this analysis posits that the ILO's efficacy issues must be understood with reference to the complex social world of the organization.

3. World Semantics

What purpose does the ILO perceive for itself? With a goal to demonstrate its relevance and efficacy, and a broad but vague and evolving mandate, the ILO constructs itself as a crucial actor for social justice in the world.

The ILO centers itself as an international protector of social justice. At its inception in 1919, the organization was seen by its first DG, Albert Thomas, as "an actor in its own right in the field of *global* social policy" (Maul, 2019: p. 2; italics added). This global outlook is confirmed on its website, where it describes part of its role as a place "where social and labour questions of importance to the entire world are discussed" (ILO, "About the ILC"). In emphasizing the entire world as within the relevant scope of discussion, it constructs itself as relevant to humanity everywhere, "regardless of country of residency of origin" (Jensen & Piper, 2022: p. 240). While the ILO's original constitution, written and signed as part of the Treaty of Versailles, justified its global status by stating that "universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice" (ILO, 1919), much has changed in how the ILO understands its role since.

In 1919, the mandate of the ILO was centered on the provision of conditions for peace between states, demonstrated by its assertion that "the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries" (ILO, 1919). The ILO's agenda in the interwar period centered on interstate peace (Hutton, 1922), with social justice framed as a means to assist states in improving social conditions in order to prevent another outbreak of war in Europe.

As the ILO evolved, its social justice message has shifted from focusing on states to focusing on individuals. Considered a "second founding" (Maul, 2019: p. 112), the 1944 *Declaration of Philadelphia* reframed the organization's mandate as the protection of "all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex", stating that these individuals "have the right to pursue…their material well-being…in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity" (ILO, 1944). The ILO saw protecting the rights of individuals as "essential to sustained progress" (ILO, 1944), taking on a language rooted in liberal[1], capital-

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[1]Liberalism, in this context, is understood in its conventional political theory form as encapsulating values of individualism, freedom and the human possession of inalienable rights, and access to equal economic opportunity in a capitalist market. It is not meant to refer to liberal international relations theory.

ist conceptions of justice. As such, the ILO's understanding of social justice shifted toward improving the economic and social rights of individuals within existing socio-economic structures.

Over the next half-century, the ILO's purview continued to grow as decolonization and increased globalization caused the organization to broaden its purview and turned its attention toward development (Maul, 2019). As former colonies began to join the ILO throughout the 1960s, the organization was driven to "adapt its profile, policies, and programmes to the needs and demands of these countries", placing new emphasis on development in its mission statements (Maul, 2019: p. 159). David Morse, the ILO's DG from 1948 to 1970, emphasized in his work the expansion of the ILO's mission, implementing the *World Employment Programme* in 1969 (ILO, 2020), which emphasized employment in the developing world. Morse's prioritization of this programme demonstrates that turn caused by the ILO's more global membership (ILO, "David A. Morse"). These shifts, however, kept with the principles of the 1944 Declaration as "the freedom and dignity of the individual" remained a central focus in Morse's speeches (Morse, quoted in Maul, 2019: p. 164), and as meeting the "basic needs" of individuals—including housing, education, and access to clean water—and their importance in working conditions remained a key topic in ILO messaging (Maul, 2019). The improvement of the individual's labour rights, as understood in a liberal conception, thus remained the focus of the organization in this period (Maul, 2019).

The 1998 *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* (henceforth the 1998 Declaration) further affirmed the ILO's role as a facilitator of liberal social progress, stating that "economic growth is essential but not sufficient to ensure equity, social progress and the eradication of poverty, confirming the need for the ILO to promote strong social policies, justice and democratic institutions" (ILO, 1998). The 1998 Declaration also introduced the Decent Work agenda, which aimed to widen the organization's mandate to better include informal and domestic labour, and socio-economic protections (Standing, 2008: p. 370). This declaration cemented the ILO's role in the world as a development agency, as it understands that "economic and social developments are two aspects of the same process" (ILO, 1999): social justice and decent work took precedence over the original mandate of peace. The 2008 *Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization* cemented its turn toward development, deepening the commitments to individual economic and social rights made in previous declarations (Maul, 2019: p. 267). The ILO thus reconstructed itself as having a role in setting standards for a wide range of policies surrounding not just labour, but social protection more broadly.

The contemporary ILO describes itself as having a central role in promoting decent work and social protections around the world. Its current DG, Gilbert F. Houngbo, has emphasized in statements and podcasts the importance of social justice to the work of the ILO, stating the importance of the ILO in "fighting against inequalities, discrimination" and creating "decent work and dignifying

[sic] work" (Houngbo, 2023). Houngbo has emphasized the need to "create global momentum" in order to improve social justice, continuing to frame the ILO as globally important as it pursues goals that are of interest to everyone and ensures that "no one is left behind" (Houngbo, 2023).

Across the ILO's many webpages, the theme of social justice is prominent. The ILO's Twitter biography describes its purpose as "promoting social justice and decent work since 1919" (Figure 1). On TikTok, the ILO touts the same slogan (Figure 2), and on Instagram, it has a similar slogan with a different wording: "we are the #unitednations agency on the world of work, promoting jobs and protecting people since 1919".

While these social media pages do not garner much engagement, they present a snapshot of the ILO's evolution and mandate. While the ILO's Decent Work slogan did not appear until the 1990s, when it became "the organization's over-arching frame" (Piper & Foley, 2021: p. 257), it claims a historical continuity with social protection since its inception in 1919. Moreover, though ostensibly concerned with labour and economic rights, the framing of its mandate as social justice more broadly lends it legitimacy to operate in other social policy areas, thus enabling it to claim a stake in a variety of different struggles beyond formal labour issues.

Figure 1. The ILO's Twitter (now X) biography, as of 2023.

Figure 2. The ILO's TikTok biography, as of 2023.

While the ILO's broad, universalist language on social justice and decent work has been characterized by some as "flabby platitudes" (Standing, 2008: p. 370), there is some strategy in this broad, worldwide mandate. Without a working definition of social justice, Houngbo encourages the use of "our common sense", indicating that social justice is a broad fight for human rights and human progress (Houngbo, 2023). As such, the ILO can claim relevance in a broad array of social and economic issues, setting standards in everything from peacebuilding to child labour to unionization and social dialogue. What, then, prevents the ILO from affecting broad changes to pursue social justice?

4. Internal World

The ILO's capacity to pursue its mandate is conditioned by its internal politics. Its unique membership structure, which represents state, employer, and labour delegates at its annual plenary meeting, the International Labour Conference (ILC), is touted as being highly democratic (ILO). However, the distribution of power within the ILO's organs, as well as its funding sources, heavily privileges state power.

When the ILO was founded, labour movements were strong political players, their influence bolstered by the power that unions had gained during WWI (Maul, 2019: p. 22). As the organization emerged at the Paris Peace Conference, the Labour Commission, composed of labour and union representatives, was wary about any labour organization giving states an outsized role in creating labour standards (Maul, 2019: p. 22). Employers also sought inclusion in the process, fearing that without a balancing influence, the labour organization would be threatened by Bolshevism (Maul, 2019: pp. 46-47)[2]. These pressures spurred the creation of the ILO's tripartite structure (Maul, 2019: p. 26).

The ILO's membership is thus structured differently from most IOs. When the ILO holds its annual plenary meeting, the ILC, to set labour standards, review ongoing programmes, and deal with internal matters, every state may send four delegates: two representing the state, one representing employers, and one representing labour (ILO, "About the ILC"). Each delegate is granted an individual vote; while delegations are organized around states, delegates originating from the same state may cast opposing votes (ILO, "About the ILC").

According to the ILO's constitution, a two-thirds majority at the ILC is required to adopt any policy (ILO, 1919). As labour representatives and employer representatives make up only half of the ILC's voting membership, no standards can be passed without the consent of at least about 31 of the organization's 192 member states[3]. Given that employer and labour delegates are infrequent collaborators within the organization (Baccaro & Mele, 2012; Louis, 2019), however,

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[2]Given the year was 1919, this was a legitimate and pressing concern, as the October Revolution in Russia had occurred just a year and a half before, upending power structures in this powerful state.

[3]To make the 2/3 majority for a passing vote, around 1/6, or 16%, of states, in addition to all employer and labour representatives, must assent to a decision. As 16% of 192 are 30.72, I have rounded the necessary amount of assenting states up to 31.

it can be expected that state assent is needed for the passing of any labour standards within the organization.

Decision-making within the ILC also tends to disproportionately represent states in the global North. Within the ILC, the most significant non-regional voting alliance is the Industrialized Market Economy Countries (IMEC), made up of several developed states, including the US, UK, Germany, Japan, France, and Australia (ILO, 2015). The power of IMEC is cemented in the ILO's executive body, known as the Governing Body (GB), where these states hold several of ten permanent seats (ILO, "Governing Body"). As the GB, composed of 28 states, 19 labour representatives, and 19 employer representatives, has significant power in selecting the agenda for the ILC, managing and passing the budget, and electing the DG (ILO, "Governing Body"), having permanent seats gives these states significant say in directing ILO action.

Further bolstering the influence of these states is their significant contributions to the ILO's budget (Louis, 2019; ILO, 2021). Of the ILO's biennial $1.6 billion budget[4], around half of its funding, ~$800 million is made up of voluntary earmarked contributions, largely from IMEC states, with the remaining ~$800 million of the ILO's regular budget coming from mandatory membership contributions (ILO, "Funding"; ILO, 2021). All earmarked funds go toward specific projects in which these states are invested, usually directed at labour standards within the global South (ILO, "Funding"). This model results in underfunding in projects, where earmarked funds are insufficient for the goals of a specific programme, and the remaining budget is spread too thin amongst the variety of ILO initiatives (Standing, 2008: p. 374). While ~$600 million of the regular budget also goes toward programming, about ~$200 million is directed at maintaining the organization (ILO, "Funding"). Earmarked projects are therefore much more numerous. Thus, the ILO budget privileges developed states that can afford to voluntarily fund specific projects.

This is not to say, however, that labour and employer representatives are marginal in the ILO. Within the ILC, these delegates have been fiercely protective of their power, especially when, in the late 1990s, DG Somavia proposed changes to the ILC's participation (Baccaro & Mele, 2012; Standing, 2008). Somavia's proposed model, "tripartism+," sought to include civil society in the ILC's decision-making process (Louis, 2019). Labour and employer delegates cooperated to prevent any such changes, indicating fears about their already constrained influence being degraded by the introduction of NGOs in the ILC (Baccaro & Mele, 2012). The ability of labour and employer delegates to direct participation in the decision-making body of the ILO demonstrates the degree to which they can pressure the organization, even in a structure that favors states.

Nonetheless, the influence of labour in particular in formal bodies of the ILC has been increasingly questioned over the past several decades (Helfer, 2007; Louis & Ruwet, 2017). As unionization has declined since the 1980s, whether labour delegates meaningfully represent workers from their states is a pressing ques-

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[4]All dollar amounts are in USD.

tion (Louis & Ruwet, 2017: p. 542). Even as the ILO aims to address decent work across all economic sectors, labour delegates remain focused on a form of union organizing that is outdated, and systematically fails to include non-unionized precarious and informal workers (Louis & Ruwet, 2017: p. 542). Thus, as labour delegates within the ILO have fought to retain relevance, they have done so at the cost of ILO decisions meaningfully assisting a wider range of workers.

In sum, though the ILO's tripartite structure should add credence to its decent work mandate, inequitable power and exclusion present significant challenges to the organization's goals as industrialized states wield heavy financial and decision-making power. As such, the ILO often finds itself acting within the confines of compromise, as conflict within the organization prevents membership coordination on providing standards that may upset the status-quo-oriented global North (Baccaro & Mele, 2012: p. 195). Combined with insufficient representation from informal and non-union workers that could push the organization away from its more outdated ideas of work and labour (Louis & Ruwet, 2017), as well as the overall lack of non-earmarked funding (Standing, 2008), the ILO's internal structures tend to limit the range of issues it is able to adequately address. This becomes more evident when reviewing the organization's external partnerships.

5. External Relations

The ILO's external relations demonstrate complex and diverse connections to civil society and to other IOs as the ILO serves as a coordinating actor between others. The organization's external connections suggest attempts to democratize activities, but are nonetheless constrained by structural barriers and internal politics; while the ILO works well as a partner to states, civil society, corporations, and other IOs, its nonetheless has struggled to interact with fewer traditional non-state actors, especially those representing precarious and informal labour (Louis & Ruwet, 2017).

On the ILO's website, the language of friendly cooperation appears frequently when discussing partnerships with other IOs and with states. The word "support" appears positively on pages discussing the ILO's connection with the G7, G20, and BRICS, and the organization states that it

"…Cooperates within the broader multilateral system that includes the G7, G20, international financial institutions and regional groupings, to promote policy coherence on decent work issues, recognizing the strong, complex and crucial links between social, trade, financial, economic and environmental policies" (ILO, "The ILO and the Multilateral System").

This description is representative of how the ILO describes its partnerships, emphasizing cooperation between organizations as important to attaining social justice. While this has not always been the case—for example, the ILO and the IOM competed due to different approaches to migration prior to the 2000s—changes within the UN to "increase inter-institutional interactions" have eased these con-

nections, creating room for constructive cooperation (Piper & Foley, 2021: p. 273).

Connections based upon sharing information and mutual action predominate ILO relations with other organizations such as UNICEF and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). The ILO and UNICEF, for instance, coordinate on eliminating child labour and work together on messaging, as exemplified by the variety of social media posts on the ILO's pages that share UNICEF branding. The ILO and the IFC, moreover, have cooperated on the *Better Work* programme, which "aims to promote decent private sector jobs and social inclusion in places that need it most" (ILO, 2023). The ILO has several other partnerships centered around the provision of information, with partners including UN Women, Mastercard, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the US Census Bureau (ILOSTAT, "Partnerships"). Though more piecemeal, the ILO also works with national private and public sector actors to create Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), with the ILO framing itself as a coordinator of these connections; the ILO implicates its inclusions in PPPs in stating that "the tripartite nature of the ILO has been critically important in building such partnerships" (ILO, "Public-Private Partnerships").

The ILO coordinates frequently with traditional actors in the international system and describes its partnerships in generally positive terms. However, the ILO often struggles to interact with informal and grassroots civil society actors, even when these actors are critical to ILO programming. In addition to facing barriers caused by the organization's internal structure, these actors tend not to fall into traditional models of labour organizing, and lack the resources and recognition to pursue formal partnerships. For instance, the Self Employed Women Association (SEWA), which represents non-unionized women doing domestic work, had maintained informal ties with the ILO for decades before "an arrangement with the ITUC" formalized these connections (Louis & Ruwet, 2017: p. 545). When civil society organizations are small, or fall beyond the purview of traditional labour organizing partnerships, the ILO may maintain informal ties, but often fails to formalize these connections (Louis & Ruwet, 2017).

These small actors, however, tend to be crucial to the ILO's programming; as the ILO operates at the local level, it is often reliant on small labour and civil society organizations to connect to worker networks and to contextualize programming within local political and economic practices (Piper, 2022: p. 334). The ILO, in turn, provides avenues for these actors to access broader networks of support on the national and international scale (Piper, 2022: p. 334), thus reinforcing the ILO's role in partnerships as a coordinating actor. This is demonstrated by Piper's (2022) analysis of the ILO and labour migration during the 2021 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where the ILO served as one of many actors fighting to realize better working conditions for migrant construction workers; the ILO could not unilaterally handle this problem, and needed to coordinate with local labour organizations in order to implement its programming.

Therefore, though the ILO is cooperative with external organizations, reach-

ing vulnerable and precarious sectors is hampered by the ILO's limited capacity to establish formal connections with these actors; informality instead marks many of its smaller civil society relationships. This is exacerbated by the internal workings of the organization's membership structure, which further excludes civil society actors from the central decision-making bodies of the ILO. This lends it toward status-quo-oriented action that can be widely accepted amongst a broad group of partners, often at the cost of transformative action. Nonetheless, the information-sharing and coordinating roles played by the ILO can assist in bettering conditions for workers' rights, as demonstrated by its work with SEWA, and its role in Qatar.

6. Generating World Order

While the ILO promotes vast social protection, the organization's capacity to influence world order is complicated, piecemeal, and remains rooted in a liberal status quo. These measures do improve workers' lives and working conditions, but at times fall short of the broader aspirations of the organization.

Though the ILO's website lists several focus issues on its webpage, the 1998 Declaration puts forward four necessary pillars for the advancement of social justice: the eradication of child labour and forced labour, and the creation of social dialogue and decent work (ILO, 1998). These four aims, which have been the center of ILO action since the 1990s (Maul, 2019), form the themes around which ILO programmes are formed. However broad these pillars are, they represent more concrete areas in which the ILO aims to impact world order as they outline relatively clear problem areas to which the organization can respond.

Eradicating child labour and forced labour addresses prescient, policy issues surrounding national labour laws and international social protection standards. Social dialogue, though broader, points to improving labour conditions through unionization and opening channels of communication with employers. Decent work remains the only vague policy statement here, but seems to be understood by the ILO as improving working conditions by stimulating progressive socio-economic development (ILO, 1999).

The ILO enshrined these pillars in its constitution when DG Hansenne introduced them in the 1998 Declaration, ensuring that all members, having signed the ILO constitution, "have an obligation, arising from the very fact of membership in the organization, to respect, to promote and to realize" these four principles (ILO, 1998). Driven by the low ratification rate of ILO Conventions prior to the 2000s, adding these pillars to the constitution guaranteed that members would be legally bound by these core principles regardless of whether they ratified specific conventions or not (Baccaro & Mele, 2012). It worked: in the updated version of the 1998 Declaration published in 2022, the organization noted an uptick in ratifications of its core principles (ILO, 1998). The four pillars thus represent one of the most impactful normative changes in world order generated

by the ILO in its recent history, especially as the idea of Decent Work has turned up in academic and government documents on labour (Standing, 2008). However, practically implementing these principles requires more specific mechanisms that fit into the structure of the state system.

Beyond the core principles, the ILO aims to establish social justice in the world using two methods. Its first method, setting broad standards, has aimed to have an impact on world order through guiding state social welfare and labour policies. The ILC sets international labour standards by passing Recommendations and Conventions (Baccaro & Mele, 2012: p. 197). Recommendations are non-binding statements that set forward broad provisions to address certain issues in the world of work and labour. The most recent, *R206-Violence and Harassment* (R206), for example, aims to address safety in the workplace and to protect employees who report harassment by putting forward a variety of directions on which states can base their policies (ILO, 2019c). ILO Conventions, conversely, are binding documents, and set forward specific obligations that ratifying states must follow, including "submitting periodic reports…detailing the measures that have [been] taken to give effect" to the convention (Baccaro & Mele, 2012: p. 197). Convention *C190-Violence and Harassment* (C190), for example, pursues the same principles as the Recommendation of the same name, but also lists specific policy actions for states to undertake (ILO, 2019b). In sum, the Recommendation/Convention mechanisms for setting world order focus on setting normative standards that states can choose to adopt domestically.

The Recommendation/Convention mechanisms of the organization, however, are often insufficient to address labour issues due to both low ratification rates. As explained by Baccaro and Mele (2012), ILO Conventions prior to the 2000s were often rendered insignificant on the global scale due to the often-limited number of ratifying states; Conventions had a ratification rate of around 6%. Of the past four ILO Conventions passed, all have remarkably low rates of ratification. The 2006 *C187-Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health* garnered the highest number of ratifications, at 61 (ILO, 2006). The next Convention, passed in 2007, gained only 20 ratifications (ILO, 2007). The 2011 *C189-Domestic Workers Convention* (C198) and C190 have gained 36 and 32 ratifications respectively (ILO, 2011, 2019a). Consequently, legally binding policies in the ILO often fail to reach a particularly wide audience, as few states sign on to enforce them. Further, even when states do ratify ILO Conventions, Cherubini, Geymonat, and Marchetti (2018) suggest that additional engagement is needed to ensure the impact of these laws. In their case study of the impacts of C189 in several countries, Cherubini, Geymonat, and Marchetti (2018) found that when state engagement with the ILO was approached top-down, without the incorporation of civil society, conventions ended up having a limited effect (p. 734). This demonstrates that the ILO's ability to generate world order extends beyond the legal frameworks it proposes, and into its local programming.

The ILO's second method for impacting world order, technical assistance pro-

gramming, operates on a much more local scale as it provides direct guidance on specific issues within national labour economies. Technical assistance entails the creation of country- and sector-specific projects that aim to improve social and economic conditions for limited populations (ILO, "How the ILO Works"). In these projects, the ILO cooperates with local actors, including state governments, civil society, workers, and employers, to implement policies and improve practices. These projects may be nationwide, as in the Decent Work programmes the ILO has pursued in several CIS states, and include guidance from experts on how to improve overall working conditions within the state (ILO, "Decent Work Country Programme of the Republic of Tajikistan 2020-2024", "Decent Work Country programme of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021-2025", "Programme of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the International Labour Organization for 2021-2024"), or may provide narrow practical assistance to specific groups, as in its cooperation with migrant workers in Qatar, or its promoting of social dialogue in the Pakistan wool industry (Piper, 2022; ILO, "Promoting Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in the Cotton Supply Chain"). While this technical assistance model is less overtly political, and aims to provide ground-level guidance, it nonetheless stands to raise the prospects of social justice through incremental improvements. These improvements may appear invisible on the broader scope, but over time, they have indeed been the basis for improvement in everything from working hours and compensation to protections against discrimination and provisions of workplace solidarity.

The importance of these technical assistance programmes is evidenced by the local contexts in which the ILO operates. Differing from traditional development approaches, the ILO's technical assistance programmes focus on providing low-level and small-scale programmes to local sectors in order to promote its decent work agenda (Rodríguez-Pose, 2002). Some of these activities involve the stimulation of local economies through funding microfinance programmes, creating local economic development agencies, and improving the provision of public services, all of which have provided successful short-term job creation in the developing world (Rodríguez-Pose, 2002: p. 16). These programmes help to improve local job markets by providing individuals and businesses with the technical capabilities to meet ILO ideas of decent work (Rodríguez-Pose, 2002: p. 16). Additionally, the ILO has often worked to improve social dialogue in local situations that enables workers to better advocate for themselves (Rodríguez-Pose, 2002). For example, during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Piper (2022) explores the ways in which the ILO coordinated action between migrant labourers and transnational institutions, serving as "a node from which networking action and networked action between various types of organizations operating at different levels and across policy areas" could operate (p. 325). Social dialogue, facilitated by the ILO, is indeed emphasized in other local programmes, where the organization uses its ability to coordinate amongst different actors in order to advance local struggles (ILO, "Social and Solidarity Economy"). In these actions, the ILO

is guided by the principles of the 1998 Declaration. Thus, in these local contexts, the ILO pursues the decent work agenda through small-scale and incremental programming.

So, while the four pillars broadly direct the ILO's actions to generate world order, short-term, small-scale goals permeate the technical assistance programming that makes up a majority of the organization's work. Broader measures for change are constrained by the pressures of the organization's most powerful constituent members. Technical assistance programmes, however small, stand a better chance at achieving social justice than the broader first method, because of the way in which it is able to impact the lived realities of those it serves. However, they still remain grounded within a current liberal world order, with a limited capacity to set broader, more transformative labour standards. As such, regardless of the ILO's aspirational semantics, its generation of world order is practice-based and driven to improve minute conditions that make up the state of labour around the world.

7. Conclusion

The accusation of inefficacy that haunts the ILO may seem reasonable at first glance. Having established a monumental goal—social justice across the world—the ILO has repeatedly fallen short of initiating widespread social change. This is, in part, due to its structure and connections. The ILO's tripartite structure, while appearing inclusive, can be restrictive as it privileges state power. The organization of membership around statehood, as well as the significant portion of the project budget made up of ear-marked contributions from states, provide states considerable power over their labour and employer counterparts to limit drastic change. The ILO's external partnerships often reinforce the status quo, as actors working outside traditional economic sectors fail to formalize ties with the organization. As a result, the organization's implementation of its core principles occurs through small-scale technical assistance programmes that tacitly accept existing norms and practices. Social justice remains limited to liberal, capitalist visions.

However, it would be incorrect to fully dismiss the ILO as unworkable because of these challenges. As much as this analysis utilizes points to the many issues and contradictions within the ILO, it also reveals that in its long history, the organization has improved the everyday conditions for the workers it intends to protect (Hughes & Haworth, 2011: p. 3). These changes may occur gradually, and their impacts may seem invisible at a distance, but even so, the ILO is capable of acting to retain its relevance and pursue socio-economic improvements.

Moreover, it has done so in an environment of states that are often unwilling to adopt broad rights-related frameworks from IOs, as demonstrated by the low ratification rate of ILO Conventions. Oftentimes, the technocratic, informational and coordination-focused actions of the ILO are the ways in which the organization can most efficiently effect change; more radical actions would

risk non-acceptance not only in the broader state system, where IOs often retain an appearance of apoliticism, but likely amongst the ILO's own membership, who often reject binding obligations on their power. Working under these challenges may alter which actions the ILO can pursue, but it nonetheless has provided valuable resources for many around the world—often for vulnerable working populations that otherwise may lack an advocate on the international stage (Piper, 2022). As such, the world organizations approach reveals the ILO as a multifaceted and complex entity operating within a complicated world system.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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