

# Defining Decent Work

Dr Bethany Jackson

Nottingham Research Fellow, School of Geography  
Rights Lab Lead on Decent Work and Climate Change Risks



Image included is called 'California' (Maxine Albro) taken by the author on a trip to the Coit Tower (San Francisco CA) in May 2023, painted as part of the New Deal's Federal Art Project.

**Decent Work** is noted in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as one of the core goals to be achieved by 2030. SDG 8 outlines how working conditions should promote productive work activities, innovation in business, and the creation of decent jobs. Decent work in this case is also viewed as the antithesis of forced labour, which the goal also seeks to eradicate.<sup>1</sup> It is stated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that “decent work is the foundation” for sustainable development and addressing complex interactions between work and other SDG goals.<sup>2</sup>

Linked to the opportunities people have in their working lives, decent work is described by the ILO as work “**that is productive and delivers a fair income**” has “**security... and social protection**”, includes opportunities for “**personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity... for all**”.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the **Decent Work Agenda**<sup>4</sup> has four main focuses:

- Addressing international labour standards and the fundamental principles and rights at work<sup>5</sup>
- The creation of employment opportunities
- Access and enhancement of social protections; and
- Engaging in social dialogues

Understanding the extent to which decent work can be achieved requires indicators for measurement which the ILO has developed.<sup>4</sup> The following graphic is adapted from these indicators to define the **core aspects of decent work**.



### **Employment opportunities**

People have access to a choice of work without facing discrimination based on personal characteristics.



### **Decent working time**

Includes access to minimum living wage and fair remuneration for all workers; grievance mechanisms should be included.

Working periods that allow for adequate breaks, rest, and provide annual leave that is compensated.



### **Work that should be abolished**

Workers are able to leave work (annual leave, parental leave) and not face antisocial or unusual working hours or demands.

The elimination of all forms of forced labour, the worst forms of child labour and human trafficking faced by workers.



### **Equal opportunity and treatment**

Ensuring those with protected characteristics (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) are treated with respect in the workplace.



### **Social security**

Workers have access to benefits related to illness, parental status, injury, unemployment, retirement, or compassionate grounds.



### **Social dialogue, representation**

Consultation related to working conditions (e.g., wages, policy) includes worker representation (e.g., through unions).



### **Adequate earnings and productive work**



### **Combining work, family and personal life**



### **Stability and security of work**

Workers are not subjected to precarious/informal work, and have guarantees of both working hours and pay.



### **Safe work environment**

Occupational Health and Safety standards are followed, reporting mechanisms are available for workers without penalty.

## **Sources**

1. UN. (2015). Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations, NY.
2. ILO. (2021). Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. International Labour Organization, Geneva.
3. ILO. (2024). Decent Work. Retrieved 26 September 2024.
4. ILO. (2013). Decent Work Indicators: Guidelines for Producers and Users of Statistical and Legal Framework Indicators. International Labour Organization, Geneva.
5. ILO. (1998, 2022). ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up. International Labour Organization, Geneva.