

## ACHIEVING "DECENT WORK" IN SOUTH AFRICA?

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### SUMMARY

The fundamental goal of the International Labour Organisation is the achievement of decent and productive work for both women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. The South African government has pledged its commitment to the attainment of decent work and sustainable livelihoods for all workers and has undertaken to mainstream decent work imperatives into national development strategies.

The four strategic objectives of decent work as identified by the ILO are: i) the promotion of standards and rights at work, to ensure that worker's constitutionally protected rights to dignity, equality and fair labour practices, amongst others, are safeguarded by appropriate legal frameworks; (ii) the promotion of employment creation and income opportunities, with the goal being not just the creation of jobs but the creation of jobs of acceptable quality; (iii) the provision and improvement of social protection and social security, which are regarded as fundamental to the alleviation of poverty, inequality and the burden of care responsibilities; and (iv) the promotion of social dialogue and tripartism.

This article considers the progress made towards the attainment of these decent work objectives in South Africa, using five statistical indicators to measure such progress namely: (i) employment opportunities; (ii) adequate earnings and productive work; (iii) stability and security of work; (iv) social protection; and (v) social dialogue and

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workplace relations. It concludes that high levels of unemployment and a weakened economy in South Africa have given rise to a growing informal sector and an increase in unacceptable working conditions and exploitation. The rights of workers in the formal sector have not filtered down to those in the informal sector, who remains vulnerable and unrepresented. Job creation initiatives have been undermined by the global recession and infrastructural shortcomings and ambitious governmental targets appear to be unachievable, with youth unemployment levels and gender inequalities remaining of grave concern. Social protection programmes fail to provide adequate coverage to the majority of the economically active population. Social dialogue processes and organisational structures fail to accommodate or represent the interests of the informal sector. Until these problems are overcome, the article concludes, it remains unlikely that decent work imperatives will be attained.

**KEYWORDS:** ILO, decent work, sustainable livelihood, job creation, unemployment, gender equality