



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

Dignity, Self-realisation and the Spirit of Service: Principles and Practices of Decent Work

Statement for the

Decent Work Agenda

jointly Sponsored by the

International Labour Office and the World Council of Churches

February, 2002, Geneva, Switzerland

(later published in 'Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives on Decent Work', by Peccoud, Dominique, 2004, World Council of Churches, International Labour Office, Pp 96-103)

Decent Work

The Brahma Kumaris support the International Labour Organization's emphasis on decent work and its objectives regarding the promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work, greater employment and income opportunities, social protection and dialogue. All of these objectives are based on an interlinked web of values such as respect, responsibility, justice, solidarity, care and understanding that are of fundamental importance for the kind of world we would all like to live in. Work inevitably has ethical values attached to it since work is a human activity and the human being is a whole composed of various dimensions that include, and ultimately are based on, the ethical and spiritual. The human dimension to work is both individual and collective and so work that is decent must be so with regard not only to the individual worker but also the family and community. While an ethical foundation to decent work may seem intangible, the benefits are certainly practical and putting people at the heart of the work agenda has more than just an immediate positive personal influence; it also enables the integration of economic and social policies so that they can be two even pillars supporting a gateway to a better world rather than being treated as contradictory or sequential goals.

The Value of Work

Work is an expression of personal dignity and self-realization. The right to the dignity of work is one of the most fundamental expressions of human worth. It is the right to perform constructive, purposeful action and work is thus a defining characteristic of human identity. To deny this right to others is to deny their dignity and also to deprive society of the benefit of their potential. Properly remunerated work allows the individual to provide for the basic needs of the self and family. Unremunerated work, such as within the family or carried out by volunteers, is often an expression of the highest of personal qualities and a commitment to a purpose beyond the self. Work also plays an important role in the development and

fulfilment of the individual through the expression and realization of skills, wisdom and potential.

However, work is not dignifying if it involves exploitation or discrimination, or if a person's individuality, endeavours and commitment are not given due recognition. While the individual has his or her own separate identity and existence, each of us is also an actor on a stage of life that includes many other players; as such, we are interconnected and related. We have relationships and exchanges with other individuals both in their own right and collectively as a family, community, government, state or world society, and work is a creating and sustaining force in these relationships. The overall health and well-being of society as a whole is thus largely affected by the extent to which such working relationships, and the rights and responsibilities that are their fibre, are based on ethical considerations. Further, a society is enriched by the creative contribution and productive participation of people of both genders having a variety of disciplines, talents and expertise. For the individual, being part of a society of people, which is the better for his or her efforts, enhances personal satisfaction and self-esteem.

A Deficit in Decency – a Surfeit in Misconceptions

Despite all our tremendous achievements, society's face is blighted by improper working practices and unmet work aspirations. Among the many divisions within this globalized world there is a work divide: while some complain of the burden of too much work, the tension, stresses and pressure of overwork, with resulting disruptions to personal, family and social life, there are millions who would gladly have even a little of such work and the remuneration that goes with it.

There is a deficit in decent work and this means that there is a deficit in social justice and political will, and in providing legal recognition or identity to workers in the informal sector. The roots of social and economic disparities can be found in misconceived notions of work and the misrepresentation of work and worth. In a world of material poverty but abundant human resources, the fact that people lack decent work means that they have been in some way excluded. Forced and bonded labour, slavery, women's inferiority and child labour are totally incompatible with human worth and should be consigned to the history books as a lesson in what not to do and what is unacceptable. Unfortunately, some misconceptions that have dehumanised, categorized and sought to attribute value to work and workers have done so on the basis of misinterpretations of sacred texts which, instead, could be used to consider notions of workers as 'caretakers of the garden' or 'trustees of the world'.

Uncaring and depersonalising attitudes to workers who are treated as little more than the means by which others may become rich make work an undignified and inhuman experience for many. There is much to be said for a fair, free and open economy but materialistic forces must not be allowed to make a market economy into a market society and to value human beings strictly in economic terms. It has been said that to treat a person kindly without any economical purpose is to find the answer to all economical purposes.

For sure, dividing up the world for economic reasons, with caste being used as an organizing principle to structure society, is a particularly egregious form of indecent work that can have dire consequences on the well-being of society as a whole. As Mahatma Gandhi said on 'The Economics of Justice': "*True economics never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as all true ethics, to be worth its name, must at the same time be also good economics. An economics that inculcates Mammon worship, and enables the*

strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and dismal science. It spells death. True economics, on the other hand, stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life.”

Work as Caring and Sharing

Securing decent work for all demands a spirit of inclusion, equity and balance, the recognition of the identity of all, and a reaching out to the marginalized and abused to bring everyone within the heart of a cooperative working community characterized by caring and sharing. Working conditions, including hours, must be humane and all work properly remunerated or recognized; working practices must be ethical and promote respectful relationships and social and environmental responsibility. The work itself should be varied and worthwhile and allow workers control over the use of their time and mental capacities and the freedom to associate with each other.

Governments can contribute to the building of such a society by taking steps to provide a social and business environment conducive to good investment and the free and fair movement of capital, goods and the workforce. The possession of wealth brings with it responsibilities which an individual, or enterprise, owes not just to shareholders, investors and employees but also to the society within which profits are accumulated. Work and its benefits must be fairly distributed amongst society as a whole. For their part, individuals must also be prepared to help themselves by taking the initiative in actively looking for work and enhancing their capacities. In providing work for those seeking it, those without work must be seen as potential partners in development rather than the passive and helpless recipients of welfare or charity. Their situation typically owes more to poor governance, institutionalized discrimination and structural inequalities than limitation of abilities.

True dialogue among and between governments, businesses, workers and others would help lead to a recognition of the perspectives and justifiable aspirations and needs of all actors within civil society. Workplaces and public meeting places need to become generative spaces in which hierarchies are broken down and all voices are given a chance to be heard. This will help underline the fact that every link in the work chain is an important one and should be recognized as such in order to strengthen and build capacity.

All of the above would lead us to another way to think of globalization: as the creation of a unified human family, an unbroken link of compassion and concern. In this kind of global world, human misery in one part of the human family must be absolutely unacceptable to the rest, and every effort should be made to restore well-being, peace and prosperity to each part so as to ensure an integrated whole. We must be willing to listen to new voices – not only the voices of the educated, the people who do all the counting, the so-called experts, but the people from the community: ordinary women and men in their towns, townships and villages.

The Revival of Service

Many people carry out meaningful and constructive tasks that largely go unrecognized and unrewarded, despite their obvious contribution to the common good of society. In various faith traditions, work has been described as service, prayer, sacrifice and purification. In this regard, what is required is a revival of the notion of service in which it is understood that work may have value and social relevance other than just in economic or monetary terms. Such work is then a service offered to another, the community, society or humanity

as a whole, and allows people self-sufficiency, fulfilment and dignity by allowing them to express their innate capacity for creating and giving.

Jonathan Haidt, of the University of Virginia, in his paper on ‘Elevation and the positive psychology of morality’ reports on a study he did with his students on the emotion of ‘elevation.’ He showed them a video clip of Mother Teresa and found that *“they were more likely to report wanting to help others, to become better people themselves, and to affiliate with others . . . to cultivate skills and relationships that will help them in the long run.”* Service is not about charity and donations based on guilt. Service is showing the quality of kindness towards others without any desire for a material reward or result for the self. It is better understood as an act that is borne of an awareness of altruism and the recognition that such an act will bring rewards in the form of spiritual elevation, or generosity of spirit, which cannot be measured by any material instruments. A dimension of altruistic service such as this needs to be integrated into paid work to bring about ‘a balanced reappraisal of human nature and potential.’ It will also clearly demonstrate ways in which people are good, kind, respectful and compassionate towards one another, not only in communities of their own kind but across different communities.

Service is a universal religion. Service is to give of oneself and to give time to tasks of a higher purpose in the spirit of volunteerism. But to be of service to the millions who are being marginalized for want of employment and other basic needs, and who are becoming devoid of self-respect and dignity, requires humility and elevation.

Service, therefore, is about people’s relationships with each other, God, time, nature and the world around them. A significant role of work will always be to generate a financial reward, but this needs to be seen as only a means to the end of a better quality of life for the individual and his or her family, not an end in itself. To add the dimension of service into work will put people at the heart of work and imbue it with a meaning and purpose that it often seems to lack. Indeed, ultimately work only has a human face and is dignified to the extent that the worth and dignity of the worker is recognized, including by the worker in question.

Dignity is Intrinsic

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a keystone in all our endeavours to uphold human dignity. It sets standards that we must live by in order to sustain, or re-ignite, the spirit of human dignity by articulating in its various articles the rights that such dignity confers on every human being. The Declaration does not specify this, but if it is to be safeguarded it is worth examining the nature and origin of human dignity and worth.

The faculties available to every human being include the mind, heart and spirit in addition to physical abilities, skills and talents. We are thus all born with a tremendous potential, but without self-worth this potential can never really be realized to the full. People who feel useful themselves and to people around them are more likely to find a way not only of expressing their inner qualities but also acknowledging such qualities in others.

A self-realized person is one who understands his or her own inherent dignity and that of others. Such a person will know that dignity is intrinsic to their being and is not something that is given by the world but comes from a source that transcends all that is physical. Religions do not give dignity – they simply remind people of what is true of everyone. Declarations, conventions and other legal documents highlight the importance and create the conditions to uphold the dignity of individuals, but cannot confer this. The ways in

which society works today often seem to conspire against the individual really knowing himself or herself as one who is naturally endowed with worth and dignity. Instead they often suggest that it has to be earned or, for example, that society gives or accords this dignity only to those who are wealthy or occupy a position of influence or authority. Work is thus an expression of our worth, not the basis of it. In reality, every individual has the right to know that dignity is inherent in what it means to be a human being; and all individuals have the responsibility of seeing that this spiritual right is affirmed and given expression.

People often base their sense of identity on their interactions with others. It is therefore no surprise that many people base their identity on factors such as their occupation, etiquette, dress, nationality, colour, gender, age, social status, ideologies and wealth. As these factors are to some extent transitory such a sense of identity requires continual maintenance, nurturing and protection. Much energy is then devoted to establishing and defending this identity. When people identify with their external conditions or roles they inevitably feel inferior or superior to others and so lack an authentic self-respect. Every person who is aware of what it means to be a human being will feel a natural right to live in dignity with all basic needs and human rights fulfilled. On the other hand, when an individual is forced to suffer oppression or degraded living conditions the feeling is humiliation and severely damaged dignity. However, because human dignity is a state of being, it can never be fully taken away from an individual so long as he or she continues to hold on to it internally. The realization and conscious awareness that dignity is intrinsic can thus give strength and hope and be a powerful tool to help overcome such indignities as unemployment, poverty and the loss of liberty or opportunities.

Work is a significant part of who we are but we are human beings before being workers. To be true to ourselves requires that our actions, including work, be an expression of and consistent with the fundamental truth that each of us is spiritual in nature. It is because of this common spiritual identity that we all share universal rights and can claim to be members of the one human family. The spirit of brotherhood that derives from this and is referred to in Article One of the Declaration requires that our relationships – whether personal, working or otherwise – be imbued with ethical values.

Putting People at the Heart of Decent Work

Deficit in decent work is a deficiency within the global human spirit – a poverty of values that amounts to a lack of respect for the intrinsic dignity of people as individuals and as a collective. Resolving the issue therefore involves a moral choice as much as the formulation of new economic and social policies and programmes.

The real question is how the value system implicit in the right to decent work can be applied and implemented. Much has already been achieved in this regard in setting a conceptual framework and defining goals. The right to work itself is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and there is widespread agreement on some of the characteristics and practices of what kind of work is acceptable and what is not.

It is recommended that the next step forward be to set up a task force that includes representatives of religious and spiritual traditions as well as labour organizations and other concerned individuals. The priorities of the task force would be:

- To look closely at what value considerations underlie decent work as opposed to any other kind of work, clarifying what is decent work and what is indecent work

and the correlation between the two, their corresponding values and anti-values. It is believed that in summary it is the presence of regard for human factors that distinguishes decent work from other work.

- To identify common ground regarding such human factors, specifically the ethical values and the nature of the human spirit that is at the heart of the individual. Agreement in this regard will lay a firm foundation for a model of decent work that not just recognizes that people must be at the centre of working practices and programmes, and their beneficiaries, but one that also recognizes that spirituality is at the heart of what it truly means to be human. It will thus be the basis for a shared sense of identity and mutual recognition.
- To look at the various ways in which such values need to be expressed in the field of work and the connection between values, policies and rights.
- To set common values-based standards to help individuals define and assess themselves and their work, and to express themselves, far more by reference to their inherent dignity and their values than to wealth, income or other external physical conditions and circumstances. To do so will bring back to work its forgotten soul and offer meaningful and well-founded principles and standards by which the decency of work may be assessed.
- To revive the spirit of service and integrate it into paid work.

Values-based and Spiritual Indicators

To be sure, finalizing comprehensive, commonly agreed and assessable values-based and spiritual indicators will be a time-consuming task, but such reference points would, if submitted, provide a reliable compass by which to chart meaningful and long-term efforts that truly have people as their beneficiaries. In fact, there is already a fairly substantial convergence of thinking in this regard and the signs of the emergence of a global ethic, on the basis of a set of commonly held values, are obvious. Societies, governments and markets that function properly all do so because of a moral basis of qualities such as trust, fairness, respect, equitable treatment of all people, responsibility, solidarity and honesty. Such values underpin all objectives towards realizing the goal of decent work and a better world.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.

The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.

It has been affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1980.

www.bkun.org

OFFICE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

Suite 436
866, UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017
U.S.A.
Tel.: +1-212-688-1335
Fax.: +1-212-504-2798
bkun@bkwsu.org

HEADQUARTERS

Pandav Bhawan
Mount Abu 307501
Rajasthan
India
Tel.: +91-2974-238261
Fax.: +91-2974-238952
abu@bkivv.org

INTL. COORDINATING OFFICE

Global Cooperation House
65-69 Pound Lane
London NW10 2HH
U.K.
Tel.: +44-20-8727-3350
Fax.: +44-20-8727-3351
london@bkwsu.org

©BKWSU, 2010; extracts may be reproduced on condition that the source is indicated and a copy of the publication in which the extract is used is sent to the above New York address.