

EXPLORING POSSIBLE WAYS OF RAISING AWARENESS OF THE ILO CONVENTIONS ON FAIR LABOUR PRACTICES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) aimed at improving conditions of work of employees across the globe. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that the ILO is an organisation with a tripartite structure. In contrast to the United Nation based organisations that engage a limited number of state representatives, the ILO encompasses representatives of governments, employers' associations, and workers' unions as key players at all levels of decision-making. This article aimed at exploring different ways in which South African government can raise awareness around ILO Conventions in relation to fair labour practices in the workplace. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm. Ten participants from two South African organisations in Johannesburg were interviewed. The findings indicated that there is little awareness regarding the ILO and its purpose or contributions in building the South African Labour Relations. Therefore, a potential first step in addressing these issues could be the establishment of an HR department. Building upon these findings, the study suggests that employers engage employees in the development of employment policies and procedures to promote fairness within organisations. Furthermore, South African organisations should be made more aware of the ILO conventions. Additionally, the study recommends the regular review and revision of policies to ensure alignment with legislative and societal changes. Finally, training and development should be prioritised in the organisation to minimise non-compliance.

Keywords: International Labour Organisation, South African Legislation, Fairness, Labour Practices, Organisation.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is a United Nations specialist body that deals with all workplace labour concerns. It now has 185 member states (Almakky, 2023). The ILO is the cornerstone of the international regulatory framework that governs the South African constitution, in addition the ILO plays a role in the development of systems to maintain social security and the labour law across the globe, and it has emerged as a key global starting point for initiatives in this regard (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). The driving factors behind the establishment of the ILO stemmed from concerns related to security, humanitarian issues, political aspects, and economic factors. The ILO's founders understood that social justice was crucial for maintaining peace, especially in a time when workers in industrialising nations were being exploited. Moreover, there was a rising awareness of the interconnectedness of the world's economies and the importance of working together to establish consistency in labour standards among competitive nations (Almakky, 2023).

The international legal framework of social standards promotes equality in the global economy. It helps governments and employers to resist the temptation to lower labour standards under the assumption that this would provide a comparative advantage in international trade. The standards established through collaboration between governments and social partners serve as fundamental guidelines. It is in the collective interest that they be applied consistently, so as not to undermine the efforts of those who are applying them by those who are not adhering to them (ILO, 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

The ILO has ratified numerous conventions for the protection of workers in various countries. These conventions also cover such diverse themes as workers' rights, safety at the workplace, fair pay, and non-discrimination. Adherence to these principles is especially important in South Africa, which has an intricate background regarding labour relations. South Africa is among the member states of the International Labour Organisation, and it has ratified some of its conventions. Despite this, the level of awareness and adherence to these principles among South African enterprises remains inadequately understood and poorly documented.

1.1.1 Subsidiary Research Questions

- Are South African organisations aware of the ILO conventions regarding fair labour practices?

1.1.2 Research Objectives.

- To establish whether South African organisations are aware of the ILO conventions regarding fair labour practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The International Labour organisation's contribution to the South African labour Legislation

South Africa, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom founded the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1919. The United States joined the three nations in 1934, but left ILO in 1977 only to rejoin the in 1980 (ILO, 2021). South Africa resigned its membership in 1964 because to apartheid laws that encouraged racial discrimination against people of colour. According to Smit and Van Eck (2010) Apartheid was considered in the International Labour Conference because its policies did not align with ILO convention recommendations. Despite this, South Africa chose to return to the ILO following the democratic elections of 1994. (Smit & Van Eck, 2010).

By modifying its domestic laws and practices to ensure that they comply with the ILO conventions, South Africa has demonstrated its commitment to upholding ILO regulations (Mokofe, 2020). Moreover one of the LRA's goals is to put into effect the policies that South Africa, an ILO member state, created (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). The nation's Constitution also puts the idea into practice. International labour standards cannot be defined unless agreements

are approved and put into effect by the ILO said the court *Sidumo and Others v Rustenburg Platinum Mines Ltd and Others*. Bendix (2019) asserts that a convention issued by the ILO does not immediately apply to a member state. This implies that the application can only be submitted after gaining permission from a member state. South Africa has successfully adopted some of the ILO conventions. These include agreements against forced employment, freedom of association and the right to organise, collective bargaining, equal compensation, and equal remedy in coincidental compensation (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). The ILO established these different agreements and international labour standards to promote justice and, eventually, labour peace in the workplace.

The ILO, known as the leading organisation for employment rights, holds a distinctive position among United Nations offices. It has long been recognised for its conventions and establishment of standards regarding workers' rights (Smit & Van Eck, 2010). According to Oji et al. (2016), the existence of the ILO has resulted in the publication of more than 180 conventions, which establish fundamental rights for workers across various domains. In their research, Oji et al. (2016) highlighted that rights encompass various dimensions, including freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination, and the eradication of forced labour and child labour. According to Cohen and Moodley (2012), the ILO conventions have a significant impact on the standardisation of labour rights, influencing not only ILO policies and priorities but also other international institutions and regional trade agreements. Before implementation, any convention proposed by the ILO necessitates the member states' approval to integrate it into the country's labour legislation.

The ILO challenged racial discrimination which was practiced in organisations during the apartheid era. The apartheid policy discriminated against black employees by refusing to allow them the same rights as the white employees in the organisation (Mhlauli et al., 2015). The objective of the ILO is to foster workplace equality, facilitate the development of quality job opportunities, and encourage effective employer-employee communication regarding all work-related issues (ILO, 2015). A way in which the ILO aims to achieve this is through monitoring and promoting its conventions and ensuring that each country complies with the convention they have implemented (ILO, 2015). The ILO also uses its standards which it promotes, to ensure compliance (Webster & Forrest, 2021). The Wiehahn Commission's establishment played a crucial role in shaping South African legislation concerning fair labour practices. The next section provides further discussion on this matter.

2.2 The Objectives of the ILO

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is a world-wide organisation dedicated to ending poverty and social injustices, especially in developing countries and as well working towards the promotion of workers' rights globally (Liukkunen, 2020). In view of this, there are extensive research materials available for authors who want to write about labour-related subjects in non-western regions like Asia, Africa and Latin America (Van Daele 2008). ILO stands for these values by upholding its founding belief that labour peace is an essential condition for prosperity, it thus commits itself to the promotion of social justice, individual and labour rights that are recognised internationally.

These objectives include eradication of forced labour, child labour and discrimination; creation of decent jobs with fair wages and conditions; improvement of social protection systems for safeguarding individuals from economic and social risks such as unemployment or illness; fostering dialogue between governments, employers, workers to facilitate resolution of labour issues or conflicts through negotiation among others (Webster & Forrest, 2021).

One of its primary goals is to promote social justice and fair globalization by promoting workers' rights, creating jobs, setting better working conditions, ensuring access to social protection and benefits (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). To this day, the organisation still supports decent work formulations as well as economic and labour policies that promote meaningful dialogue between employers and employees in order to achieve permanent peace stability and growth. According to Standing (2008), the main method for achieving these aims has been the drafting of a series of Conventions, as well non-binding Recommendations on national labour practices which include issues pertaining to industrial relations, employment policy or labour-based social security.

Over such a long period the ILO has demonstrated amazing adaptability to the changing circumstances. According to Tshoose (2022). The ILO needs to cope with emerging challenges by finding creative ways to engage both state and private actors involved into an integrated global market where labour standards often remain violated and work is significantly altered. The growing integration of local or national activities into globalisation as well as shifting thinking from national up-to global levels have introduced new policy imperatives necessitating increased focus on global concerns over domestic ones (Standing, 2008).

2.3 The Impact of the International Labour Standards

South African courts and government have used ILO conventions for years in developing their constitution and establishing labour laws as well as social security including the definition and interpretation of both social justice and labour law. From its inception on 11 April 1919, improving social security and labour law has been a central part of the ILO's mission to promote decent work (Van Daele 2008). In 1999, ILO introduced a notion of "decent work," which is understood as access to employment with liberty, equity, safety, and dignity. This multi-faceted framework has four main components: working conditions; income security; workplace rights; and dialogue (Tshoose, 2022).

The preamble of the constitution of ILO states several objectives in relation to this undertaking such as protection of workers from diseases and accidents; safeguarding children and women; supporting aged persons. In order to achieve these noble values and goals, ILO develops international labour and social security standards that need to be ratified by member countries who in turn must incorporate them into their national regulations (Cohen & Moodley, 2012).. These ILO standards aim at providing uniform framework or tool for regulation which member states can employ when it comes to establishing, improving or maintaining domestic, regional or international systems of social security as well as labour law.

2.4 Ratification of ILO Conventions by South Africa

South Africa has been a member of the ILO from 1919 to 1966, and again since 1994. The peaceful political transition in South Africa from apartheid is considered one of the most extraordinary political achievements in the last century (Tshoose, 2022). Today, ILO provides technical as well as financial support to country with the overall aim of reducing poverty and inequality through inclusive and sustainable growth and development (Koliev, 2021). Key priorities established by South African tripartite constituents include generating more and better jobs, particularly for young people; expanding social protection coverage; and fostering strong and representative employers' and workers' organisations.

International Labour Organisation conventions has over many years been used by South African courts in order to interpret social security fundamental rights as well as clarify them under constitutional law (Tshoose, 2022). Since its foundation in 1919, The ILO has greatly emphasized on social security as well as labour laws in its efforts towards promoting decent work agenda. The below table shows the conventions ratified by the South African government.

Table 1: ILO Conventions Ratified by South Africa

| Ratification Subject | Convention Number |
|--|---------------------|
| Freedom of association, collective bargaining, and industrial relations | C087 and C098 |
| Forced labour | C029 and C105 |
| Elimination of child labour and protection of children and young persons | C138 and C182 |
| Equality of opportunity and treatment | C100, C111 and C190 |
| Tripartite consultation | C144 |
| Labour administration and inspection | C063 and C081 |
| Employment policy and promotion | C002 |
| Working time | C089 |
| Occupational safety and health | C045, C155 and C176 |
| Social security | C019 and C042 |
| Fishers | C188 |
| Specific categories of workers | C189 |
| Final Articles Conventions | C080 and C116 |

Source: (Ratifications of ILO Conventions: Ratifications for South Africa, 2017)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To respond to the research question, this work used a qualitative approach research based on an exploratory and descriptive research Methodology. When it came to research methodology, both data collection and data analysis were done using qualitative techniques. According to the spectrum of the qualitative research methods, this study employed phenomenology to systematically investigate the phenomenon under discussion. The study was conducted in Johannesburg where two companies were used in the participation of the study. The study targeted a population of 212 teachers but only a sample of ten was used the source of data was collected through interviews which were semi structured interviews.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

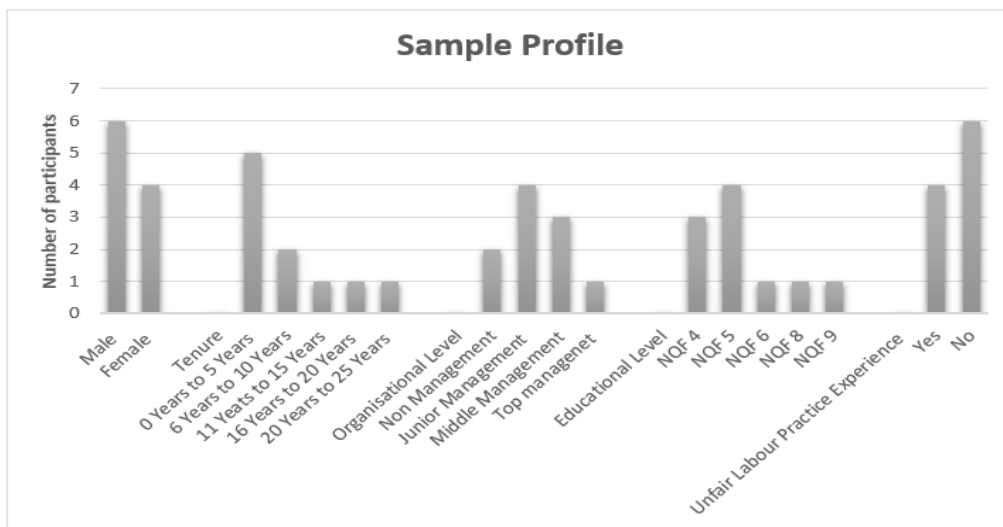


Figure 1: Sample Profile

Source: Author’s fieldwork

4.1 Research Findings and Discussion of Findings

This study focused on exploring different ways in which South African government can raise awareness around ILO conventions in relation to fair labour practices in the workplace.

4.1.1 Conversant with the ILO Conventions

The ILO has published over 180 conventions since its existence, defining core rights for workers in different areas (Oji et al., 2016). The analysis shows that the majority of the participants are aware of the ILO convention. The figure below shows the feedback received from the participants in response to the interview question.

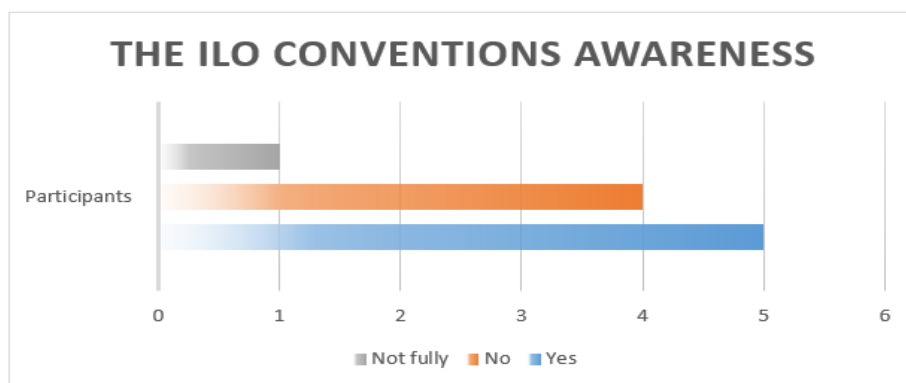


Figure 2: The ILO Conventions Awareness

Source: Author’s fieldwork

The graph indicates participants' responses regarding whether or not they are conversant with the ILO conventions. Of the ten participants, five indicated that they are aware of the ILO conventions, three participants indicated that they are not and one participant gave an inconclusive answer.

Mokofe (2020) mentioned in his study that South Africa has committed to ILO rules by going as far as adjusting its national laws and policies to ensure that they conform with the ILO conventions. This was in accordance with **Rep10's** observation below:

They shape the country's labour laws. Each country has to conduct their labour laws according to the ILO standards.

Participants who indicated that they have knowledge of the ILO conventions also shared briefly what they understand by ILO conventions.

*It is something that governs the laws in terms of the employer and employee relationship and therefore, the parties use the international standard to ensure fairness (**Rep2**).*

Similarly, **Rep4** submitted:

The International Labour Organisation conventions are conventions set by the International Labour Organisation to ensure that there is fairness in the workplace.

Rep7's response seems to correspond with **Rep4's** as he remarked:

It is the one that oversees and ensures that rules are followed in every workspace or corporate.

In addition, **Rep7** stated:

They also act against those who do not comply with the employment rules.

Rep10 also believes that the ILO conventions shape the country's labour laws. In her own words:

They shape the country's labour laws. Each country has to conduct their labour laws according to the ILO standards.

Rep8 indicated that he is not conversant with the ILO convention. However, he has the desire to learn about them. In his words.

No, I would like to learn about it though.

The findings demonstrated that some of the participants are not conversant with the ILO conventions. In addition, most of the participants who indicated that they are, were uncertain about what they understand about the ILO conventions.

4.1.2 The Contribution of ILO Conventions towards Ensuring Fair Labour Practice

The findings indicated that the ILO plays a major role in the development and shaping of South African labour laws. A way in which the ILO aims to achieve this is by monitoring and promoting their conventions and ensuring that each country complies with the conventions they

have implemented (ILO, 2015). In agreement with this perspective, **Rep6** remarked:

By constantly monitoring that the rights enshrined in the Constitution and Labour Relations Act are promoted, protected and applied by the company, same is done through requirements from ILO, Department of Labour and labour cases precedence and whereby external labour relations organisations, such as the Department of Labour, CCMA, and the labour court provide guidance and applies remedies where unfair labour practice is an issue. At times, inspectors from various labour organisations are sent to monitor and the organisation has its own internal bodies making sure that the company adheres to same.

Moreover, **Rep1** remarked:

In our organisation I can say that there is a lot of improvement when coming to staff development. They also fairly elevate the employees. So even if the ratio is still questionable, there is a lot of ladies employed in our organisation so they are indirectly implementing the outcome of the international conventions”

Rep2 remarked:

The ILO conventions have assisted South Africa with the rules and laws relating to labour.

Rep4 shared that the ILO conventions can contribute to how South African organisations are supposed to conduct business, in his words:

Through the International Labour Standards. These standards ensures that the participating countries matches the international standards in how the businesses of that country conducts business.

As part of ILO policy, priorities, regional trade agreements and international institutions, the ILO conventions play an essential role in normalizing labour rights (Cohen & Moodley, 2012).

Rep4 shared the same view and said:

... the International Labour Organisation conventions are conventions set by the International Labour Organisation to ensure that there is fairness in the workplace.

The findings revealed that the ILO plays a role in shaping South African labour laws. Participants indicated that labour laws in South Africa are guided by the ILO conventions and the international labour standards set by the ILO.

4.1.3 The Importance of ILO Conventions in Ensuring Fair Labour Practice in the Organisations from the Participants’ Point of View

One of the key goals of the ILO is to establish and advocate for standards, fundamental principles, and rights related to work. Another important objective is to enhance prospects for both women and men to secure decent employment and earn a satisfactory income. Cohen and Moodley (2012) assert that ILO Conventions play a key role in achieving the uniformity of labour standards which, in turn, directs the policies of the ILO and affects other global

organisations and regional trade agreements. Concurring with this **Rep1** stated:

First, the international law has been tested and it is being applied across the globe and currently we have evidence and a lot of good things that were implemented when you look at how the countries are developed in the terms of labour laws.

He carried on by saying:

*Our South African Constitution still needs to be amended here and there. We cannot entirely rely on our South African laws. We need to check from time to time what has been applied in other countries and whether it is working (**Rep1**).*

One of the participants remarked that the ILO convention is important because it sets the standard of how employers should run their businesses:

*A country selects a convention that works for them, and they need to ensure that these conventions are added to their labour laws and legislation **Rep 4**.*

Rep7 added by explaining that:

We need to consider the ILO because they provide fair mediation between the employers and employees.

According to **Rep10**:

The ILO is important because it covers aspects more than employment policies, such as basic human rights, social and labour issues, which includes minimum wages and industrial relations.

In a nutshell, the findings presented in this section suggest that most of the employees have little knowledge of the ILO conventions, which play a major role in the development and shaping of South African labour legislation. In addition the findings demonstrated that South African organisations should always endeavour to utilise the ILO conventions as they are reliable and can be used to ensure fairness in labour practices. One of the participants stated that the ILO conventions have been tested and proven to work when it comes to ensuring fair labour practice in the organisations, which is why it is important for South Africa to embrace the ILO conventions and its guiding principles.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

This study centered on examining the prevailing status of fair labour practices within two specific South African organisations situated in the Gauteng province. Hence, the findings derived from this research cannot be extrapolated to encompass all organisations across South Africa. Furthermore, the research targeted a subset of employees within the organisation, rather than involving the entire workforce. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, only a limited number of participants, specifically ten employees from the selected organisations, were included. The sensitivity surrounding the research topic posed challenges in securing willing participation from organizations. Moreover, with organisational shifts towards hybrid and remote work arrangements, logistical hurdles arose in scheduling interviews, resulting in

frequent rescheduling of appointments. Additionally, the delicate nature of the topic prompted some participants to be cautious and strategic in their responses during the interview process.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that South African organisations consistently exercise fair labour practices and to proffer mechanisms that government can use to raise awareness in South African workplaces, the following recommendations are proposed.

5.1 Effective Communication

Effective communication is essential when it comes to fostering a harmonious working environment and creating a culture that promotes trust, transparency, and fair labour practices in organisations. Effective communication should be used at all times by both the employer and the employees as it involves employers, as well as employees sharing information openly and honestly. The employer needs to distribute information equally in the organisation. Effective communication will enable employees to express themselves clearly and openly. This will ultimately reduce the feeling of being unfairly treated by the employer. Effective communication in the workplace will encourage employees to provide feedback, as well as express their concerns, which will be beneficial for the organisation to make improvements where necessary. Employees are more likely to believe that an organisation is fair when the employer takes their input into consideration. Effective communication has a direct impact on performance management as the employer must clearly communicate expectations to the employee. In this way, the employee will be aware of what is expected of them and have a greater chance of becoming successful in their role. Effective communication enables the advancement of workplace fairness.

5.2 Establishment of a Compliance Team

To monitor compliance, the employer can establish a compliance team that focuses on checking whether the policies and procedures that have been put in place are compliant with the labour laws. To obtain an objective judgement, the compliance team should be diverse. There should be a mix of blue-collar and white-collar employees along with subject matter experts. It is important for the compliance team to review and update policies on a regular basis. Whenever issues of unfair labour practices and non-compliance arise, the compliance team can be consulted to conduct an internal investigation. In addition to explaining the consequences of non-compliance to the organisation, the team should also explain why compliance is important to every member of the organisation.

5.3 South African Organisations should be Made More Aware of the ILO Conventions

South Africa is a member of the ILO and has implemented many of the conventions set by the ILO. It is important that both employers and employees are educated about the conventions of the ILO that apply to the SA labour laws. In this way, the organisations will ensure compliance with ILO conventions and national labour laws. The ILO conventions have been implemented to ensure that there are decent working conditions and labour peace. Organisations should

engage with the government and their industry associations to stay updated with the developments that are being made and current best practices across the globe.

5.4 Training and Skills Development

For employees to be successful at performing their duties in their respective positions in the organisations, they need to be trained. This will assist the employees in knowing exactly what is expected of them and how they can contribute to the success of the organisation. In addition to training employees, it is important for organisations to consider developing the skills of their employees so that they can take advantage of opportunities that arise in the organisation. This will also help organisations to enhance fair labour practices when it comes to promotions.

5.5 Involving Employees in the Development of Employment Policies and Procedures

Employee participation in the development of policies and procedures is very important as it encourages open communication and inclusivity. This will ensure the fair representation of different segments of employees in the organisations during the formulation of employment policies and procedures. Involving employees in the development of policies assists with ensuring that the protection of workers' rights is upheld in the organisation. Employers collaborating with employees when developing policies will contribute to demonstrating to employees that the company considers their concerns in the organisation. Such collaboration will also enhance the trust between the employers and employees, which will go a long way towards minimising unfairness in organisations.

5.6 Continuous Revision of Policies Based on Amendments to Legislation

South African legislation is continuously being improved and updated, thus it is important for employers to stay up to date with the amendments to the South African legislation as this will have a direct impact on policies and procedures in organisations. Employers need to review their current policies to ensure that they are aligned with the updated labour legislations. Amending policies will assist in improving fair labour practices in organisations. Employees should be made aware of all the changes that are made with regards to policies in the workplace. It would be advisable for the employer to keep the employees' acknowledgment of the new policies as a reference in the event of a dispute. Policies play a fundamental role in ensuring that there is fair labour practice in organisations.

6. CONCLUSION

South Africa has been a member state to the international Labour organisation for a very long time and the ILO has made an impact in the South African Labour Legislation in terms of eradication of forced labour, child labour and discrimination. It has also assisted in creation of decent jobs with fair wages and conditions; improvement of social protection systems for safeguarding individuals from economic and social risks such as unemployment or illness; fostering dialogue between governments, employers, workers to facilitate resolution of labour issues or conflicts through negotiation. Even though there is evidence that the ILO continues to assist the South African labour legislation in ensuring fair labour practices in the workplace,

the findings suggest that most of the employees have little knowledge of the ILO conventions. Recommendation to ensure awareness of the ILO conventions, which were ratified by the South African labour laws to assist with fair labour practices in organisation have been proposed in this study.

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