

## The Indian Society of Labour Economics

The Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE) is a professional association of researchers, scholars and other stakeholders interested in the area of labour, employment and development issues. The Society promotes scientific studies of labour markets, employment, employment relations and related issues and disseminates knowledge. It publishes a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal The Indian Journal of Labour Economics (IJLE), which is now in its 69<sup>th</sup> year of publication. Promoting and featuring scientific studies on labour and employment issues, the journal is co-published with Springer. More information on the journal is available on <http://www.springer.com/economics/journal/41027>



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A Panel Discussion during  
66<sup>th</sup> ISLE Conference

## Challenges of Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals

Organised by

U N I K A S S E L  
I N S T I T U T E  
F O R  
S U S T A I N A B I L I T Y

20 January 2026 | Pune



# About the Panel

## Challenges of Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals

### Background

Bringing together contributions from over 74 leading labour scholars, a volume, *The Elgar Companion to Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals*, edited by Madelaine Moore, Christoph Scherrer and Marcel van der Linden, critically investigates the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and how it relates to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. While the mainstreaming of labour concerns into the United Nations agenda can be attributed to the ILO's strategic focus on decent work, the world is no closer to achieving the Decent Work Agenda. The Agenda cannot be blamed for this setback. However, the persistent decent work deficits expose tremendous obstacles encountered on the way to the stated goal of achieving 'full and productive employment and decent work for all'. Some critics argue that the concept itself needs to be re-evaluated, some see full employment as a utopian goal and look for alternatives to social inclusion, and others see the whole concept of decent work as too closely associated with the experience of rich countries where formal employment has traditionally been the norm.

While not all of these criticisms are valid, the issues raised and the reasons for the implementation deficits of the Decent Work Agenda deserve further examination. Given the unacceptably high decent work deficit, further discussions are needed concerning the adequacy of the Decent Work Agenda as well as policies for its implementation. The contributors address these issues by interrogating the key historical, current and future challenges to the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda in our global economy.



- They critically examine the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, its historical context, its inclusion in global development goals, and the challenges in achieving decent work globally.
- Analyse the difficulties in implementing and enforcing labour standards, the limitations of corporate social responsibility, and the efficacy of trade union strategies.
- Provide diverse perspectives on the Decent Work Agenda including from a range of disciplines (political science, sociology, economics, law) alongside feminist and ecological interventions and voices from the global south.
- Look ahead to future trends in labour, including automation, the gig economy, and the impact of COVID-19, and discusses the approach to work in the next iteration of the Sustainable Development Goals post-2030.

The themes from the book will be presented relating to the future of the Decent Work Agenda in an era of rising geopolitical tensions.



# Programme

**TUESDAY, 20 JANUARY 2026**

- Chair : **Christoph Scherrer**  
Professor Emeritus, Non-Resident Senior Fellow,  
Kassel Institute for Sustainability and Associate  
Fellow, Global Labour University
- Presentations : **Christoph Scherrer**  
Professor Emeritus, Non-Resident Senior Fellow,  
Kassel Institute for Sustainability and Associate  
Fellow, Global Labour University  
Topic: *Decent Work as a Sustainable Development  
Goal: Any Benefits?*
- : **Indu Agnihotri**  
Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi  
Topic: *Valuing Domestic Labour: The Changing  
Meanings of 'Housework' under Capitalism*
- : **Praveen Jha**  
Professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi  
Topic: *Challenges of Decent work for Smallholders  
and Agricultural Workers: Reflections on the  
Global South*
- : **Nausheen Nizami**  
Associate Professor in Economics at Department  
of Social Science, School of Liberal studies, Pandit  
Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat  
Topic: *The Importance of a Decent Workplace*



# Abstracts

## Issues Discussed by the Panelists

Thinking through the challenges, what does the future of the Decent Work Agenda look like? In many ways, we face the same obstacles as those back in 1919 in the early days of the ILO, namely how to build workers' power in the face of a global economic system that is structurally resistant to it. While Decent Work asserted that the world of work must include the democratic participation of workers, it is starkly clear that for this participation to be substantive, workers must have power. Tripartite agreements and institutions may provide a forum to voice workers' concerns, but there is no protection for workers' rights if states become increasingly authoritarian and explicitly aligned with the interests of capital. Must workers' demands go beyond the vague call for decent work and a seat at a table structurally designed to limit workers' power? Does the decent work agenda need concrete and far-reaching policy demands to remain relevant in the decades to come?

### **Decent Work as a Sustainable Development Goal: Any Benefits?**

**Christoph Scherrer**

The paper introduces the core International Labour Organization conventions, the Decent Work agenda and the inclusion of the agenda in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8. It provides a brief overview of the most pronounced decent work deficits, which indicate that the decent work agenda and SDG 8 are not being met. It provides some explanations as to why it has been possible to achieve decent work in some places and why decent work deficits persist despite the mainstreaming of the decent work agenda.



## **Valuing Domestic Labour: The Changing Meanings of 'Housework' under Capitalism**

**Indu Agnihotri**

The slogan Wages for Housework, first raised five decades ago, triggered a debate on domestic labour within the wider context of the mode of production and processes of social reproduction. Marxists and Feminists foregrounded the household as the site of women's invisible, unrecognized labour from different standpoints with regard to class and gender, pointing to the linkages between the household, (un) paid work and women's subordination. With the deepening of the crisis of capitalism -which drives many to migrate for livelihood- and significant shifts in contextual frameworks, women's contribution emerges as critical in coping with below subsistence level wages. strategies adopted by capitalism in the neo-liberal era. The ILO's C 189 partially aimed at recognition of this, underlines the challenge of developing methodological frameworks to examine the multiple forms and locations of domestic labour to understand women's oppression at the intersection of class and gender in the context of the crisis in contemporary capitalism.

## **Challenges of Decent Work for Smallholders and Agricultural Workers: Reflections on the Global South**

**Praveen Jha**

As per the recent estimates, almost 45 percent of the global population constitutes households for whom agricultural activities continue to be significant in their livelihoods. Of these over 80 percent are small-holders, operating up to 2 hectares. In developing countries, about 50 to 90 percent of population depends on agriculture; of these 70 to 95 percent are small holders and agricultural workers, trapped in the long-term structural-historical legacy of global capitalist trajectory. This paper focuses on the current juncture, often characterized as the neo-liberal regime that has been ascendant since the 1970s. Hallmark of this regime is an overarching macroeconomic framework driven by 'market-fundamentalism', which has implied that almost all the major correlates pertaining to the well-being of small-holders and agricultural workers,





# Biographies of the Resource Persons

## Christoph Scherrer



Christoph Scherrer is full professor emeritus of globalization and politics, non-resident senior fellow, Kassel Institute for Sustainability and associate fellow of the Global Labour University. He was the Executive Director of the International Center for Development and Decent Work (ICDD). His major area of research are the social dimensions of global economic governance. His recent publications include *Theoretical Perspectives on the Mission Drift of Public Sector Banks: The German Case*, in: *Competition & Change* (2025), *The Elgar Companion to Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals*, Edward Elgar (2025, co-edited with M. Moore and M. van der Linden), *The Selective Return of Labor Casualization in Western European Ports*, in: *Sociologia del Lavoro* (2024, co-author ID Karatepe); *Beyond the Dyad: Power Relations in Global Exploitation Chains from an Institutional and Gramscian Perspective*, in: *Notebooks: The Journal for Studies on Power* (2023).

## Indu Agnihotri



Indu Agnihotri pursued higher education and research at the JNU. She taught History at Vivekananda College, University of Delhi for over two decades, before joining as Senior Faculty at the Centre for women's Development Studies, New Delhi, from where she retired as Director. She was General Secretary of the IAWS from 2011-14 and is a member of the Governing Body of the Association of Indian Labour Historians( AILH)

Her interests lie in developing the women's studies program, the women's movement in India, women and History and gender and migration.



### Praveen Jha



Praveen Jha is Professor and Chairperson at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he was also the founding Chairperson of the Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies. He holds a PhD from JNU and has served as a Visiting Professor at several universities and as a Visiting Fellow at the International Labour Organization. His research and teaching span political economy of development, with a focus on labour, agriculture, natural resources, public finance, education, and the history of economic thought. He is a founding member of the Agrarian South Network and a founding editor of *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*. His major publications include *Labour in Contemporary India* (Oxford University Press, 2016), which is widely used in labour studies and development economics.

### Dr Nausheen Nizami



Dr Nausheen Nizami is working as the Head and Associate Professor in Department of Economics at School of Liberal studies, Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar, India. She is a labour economist and her research is primarily in the contemporary areas like Assessment of the Impact of Industry 4.0 on labour market, decent work, human well-being, behavioural economics, energy, sustainable development goals and mixed-methods research. She has worked as Visiting Professor at University of La Sabana, Colombia and is also a member of Research Advisory Board, IOSH, UK. She has worked on four ICSSR-funded research projects and two consultancy projects. She has guided more than 10 funded projects at her university and more than 35 dissertations at undergraduate and postgraduate level. She has published 04 books, seven research papers and more than ten chapters in books. Her academic contributions also include conference presentations, keynote talks, and session chair roles at national and international events.

