

International social standards of the ILO on working conditions



Introduction

Social issues are becoming increasingly important in international trade. Negative publicity on issues of labour conditions during the production process may have an impact on sales. More and more EU companies use the improvement of the labour conditions as a criterion for trade with companies in developing countries. Also, improved labour conditions will have a positive impact on your own business as there is a direct relation between improved labour conditions, productivity and quality of final products.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the UN organisation dealing with aspects of work. The ILO creates international labour standards to help national authorities implement policies regarding labour conditions. The ILO has installed over a hundred Conventions, which can be seen as social standards dealing with different aspects of labour. The ILO Conventions are internationally accepted and subscribed by many countries all over the world. Governments are obliged to implement ratified Conventions in their own national policies. However, ILO Conventions are also used in international trade by the private sector. Many social requirements on labour conditions are based on the ILO Conventions, because they exist already and are proved to be internationally acceptable.

In this document you can read which of the 185 ILO Conventions are being used by the private sector as market access requirements. In other documents in this database you can read how these requirements are being translated into social codes of conducts, suppliers declarations, social management systems etc. all being used to upgrade the labour conditions in supply chains, mainly in developing countries supplying to the EU markets.

ILO Conventions

There are 185 ILO Conventions at the moment. They are divided into different classifications such as: basic human rights, employment, social policy, labour administration, industrial relations and conditions of work.

When looking at social requirements of European companies, there are several conventions on labour conditions that are used in most of the cases. They are described below. As you can see, each Convention has its own number, at the ILO website you can look up the number and read the specific text. Also you can check the social policies of European buyers if they use the right numbers and right text of the ILO Conventions.

1. Right to union membership and to negotiate (Convention C87 and C98)

Workers and employers may establish and join organisations of their own choosing without previous authorisation. Measures should be taken to encourage voluntary negotiation between employers (organisations) and employees (organisations).

➡ In several countries there is no freedom of trade unions and collective bargaining. This hampers employees in negotiating their own conditions. Please note, that European companies give high priority to doing business with suppliers that give their employees the freedom to bargain and become member of workers' associations.

2. Non-discrimination (Convention C111)

Employers should recognise and respect cultural differences. Workers should be employed on the basis of their ability to do the job, rather than on the basis of personal characteristics, gender, ethnic background or beliefs.

➡ Non-discrimination is taken in the broad sense; i.e. it means no discrimination on race, caste, national origin, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, union membership or

political affiliation. Discrimination might happen in hiring, compensation, access to training, promotion etc.

3. Forced labour (Convention C29)

There shall not be any use of forced labour.

➤ Forced labour means bonded, forced and compulsory prison labour. It is important that employees understand the terms of working and that they do not become indebted in any way (bondage).

4. Minimum age (convention C138)

No person shall be employed at an age younger than 15 (or 14 where the law of country of manufacture allows), or younger than the age for completing compulsory education in the country of manufacture where such age is higher than 15.

➤ This Convention is a very complex and sensitive issue as children are often providing income by working. However, children have the right to go to school and in case they are working children and young workers should not be exposed to situations in or outside the workplace that are hazardous, unsafe or unhealthy. Please note that having children at your company might be that sensitive to your European buyer that he will not proceed with you as a trading partner.

5. Working hours (convention C1 and C47)

The company shall comply with applicable laws and industry standards; in any event, personnel shall not on a regular basis, be required to work in excess of 48 hours per week and shall be provided with at least one day off for every seven day period.

➤ In many sectors there are peaks when a lot of work needs to be done. Therefore make sure that overwork is only done in exceptional cases and is always paid properly.

6. Equal remuneration (convention C 100)

Men and women workers should receive equal remuneration for work of equal value.

➤ There should be no gender difference when paying for the same type of activities.

7. Minimum wages (convention C131)

Employers should recognise that wages are essential to employees' basic needs. Employers shall pay employees the minimum wage required by local law or the prevailing industrial wage, whichever is higher, and shall provide legally mandated benefits.

➤ Wages should at least meet legal or industry minimum standards. More important: wages should always be sufficient to meet basic needs of employees and to provide some reasonable income.

8. Occupational Health and Safety (convention C155)

The company shall provide a safe and healthy working environment and appoint a management representative responsible for the health and safety of all personnel. All personnel shall regularly receive health and safety training. Employees shall be provided with clean bathrooms and with access to potable water.

➤ Companies should ensure that their workers are not exposed to potential risks. There are instruments and methods to assess and avoid risks. Please note that working in a safe environment will have a direct impact on the overall productivity of your company and quality of your product. Also, facilities such as toilets, water, dormitories etc. should meet the basic need of the employees.

The fundamental 8

Please note that the minimum of social requirements should be the 8 fundamental ILO conventions. When you are exporting to the EU, you have to take notice of these Conventions and make a plan on how to implement them at your company and how to show you comply. Many EU companies will see these issues as minimum social requirements and will expect their suppliers to be at least aware of the issues and working on improvement to the minimum level.

Freedom of association

1. Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
2. Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)

The abolition of forced labour

3. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)
4. Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)

Equality

5. Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)
6. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)

The elimination of child labour

7. Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)
8. Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)

➔ [For the complete list and full text of ILO Conventions](#) please refer to the ILO website at the external links.

ILO Conventions in practice

More and more companies have set guidelines regarding responsible policy on labour practices through Codes of Conduct, CSR (corporate social responsibility) or other social policies. Many initiatives refer directly to the ILO Conventions or are based on ILO Conventions. Therefore it is important that you can translate social requirements into ILO standards, or recognise social requirements as ILO standards. Policies based on ILO conventions are based on internationally accepted standards.

➔ In the database you will find for each sector a document called Buyers' requirements where policies of leading companies are being analysed, including their social requirements.

The following table gives an example of the ILO Conventions that are covered in some well-known initiatives in several sectors. :

- SA8000 social accountability management system
- Ethical Trading Initiative
- MPS (Floriculture Environmental Project)

	<i>ILO Conventions</i>	SA8000	ETI	MPS
Collective bargaining (<i>fundamental</i>)	x	X	x	x
Free association (<i>fundamental</i>)	x	X	x	x
Discrimination (<i>fundamental</i>)	X	X	x	x
Equal remuneration ⁽¹⁾ (<i>fundamental</i>)	X	X	x	x
Forced labour (<i>fundamental</i>)	X	X	x	x
Child labour (<i>fundamental</i>)	X	X	x	x
Minimum wage/living wage	X	X ⁽²⁾	x	x
Maternity protection	X			
Harassment or abuse ⁽³⁾	X	X ⁽⁴⁾		
Health and safety	X	X	x	x

Working hours	X	X	x	x
Vocational Rehabilitation & employment	X	X	x	
Home Work	X	X	x	
Regular employment			x	x ⁽⁵⁾
Harsh or inhumane treatment			x	
Management systems		X		
Compensation		X		
Pesticides and chemicals				x
Protection of the environment				x

- 1 Equal remuneration: often mentioned as part of mentioned as part of Discrimination, in which men and women receive equal salary for equal work.
- 2 SA8000 uses the definition of 'wages that meet basic needs'.
- 3 Harassment or abuse: often mentioned as part of Discrimination. MPS mentions 'no physical harassment' as part of Discrimination.
- 4 SA8000 uses the definition of 'disciplinary practices'.
- 5 MPS uses the definition 'Security of employment'.

Other Conventions

There are also other Conventions that can be helpful designing your own social standards. Think of specific gender standards such as maternity leave or specific health and safety in agriculture, work contracts, older workers, fishermen, plantation workers, tenants and sharecroppers etc.

➔ [More information](#) on the classification of standards can be found in the provided link.