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The International Labour Organization as a Development Actor in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Typically, the International Labour Organization (ILO) is discussed in narrow terms with specific reference to its role in setting labor standards and the success or otherwise of its attempts to convince governments and employers to respect them. Yet over several decades it has also sought to engage in other aspects of the world of work including knowledge production and employment generation through projects more readily associated with international development organizations or even grassroots non-governmental organizations. Although there is by no means a consensus among either scholars or practitioners about the efficacy of these interventions, it is clear that the ILO has managed to embed its concept of 'decent work' not only into contemporary discourse concerning the rights of workers and the duties of employers and states to respect them, but also that around economic development.

In this chapter, we discuss the extent to which the ILO can be understood as a development actor, how its emphasis on development has evolved over time, and how its development agenda has been pursued by means of various strategic initiatives and programs. Our analysis is grounded in Southeast Asia, which as a region is important in terms of size, population and economic weight but also because of the profound changes in political and economic status experienced by its 11 states. Not surprisingly, the ILO has played an important and sometimes controversial role in reshaping the legal and institutional framework of labor regulation in the post-authoritarian states of Cambodia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste and now Myanmar. Less recognized is the fact that this work is part of an integrated development agenda that has included measures to create opportunities for employment through large-scale development projects, entrepreneurship initiatives and deeper integration into global production networks, increasingly carried out in conjunction with influential member states, most notably the United States of America, and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.¹ We illustrate these different aspects of the ILO's role as a development actor with reference to these different post-authoritarian states. Particular attention is paid to Myanmar, where the ILO's enactment

¹ Authors are listed alphabetically and have contributed equally to the chapter, the writing of which was supported by Australian Research Council grants DP130101650 and FT120100778.

of its development agenda has benefited both from its special status in that country but also from its experiments elsewhere in the region.

Challenges to the ILO

The ILO is unique among the agencies of the United Nations (UN) because of its tripartite structure, which requires representation from the governments of member states and from recognized employer and worker organizations, both of the latter having access to separate bureaus within the technical apparatus of the ILO that support their general activities and institutional participation. This characteristic has driven the internal politics that determine its agenda and despite internal and external critics of the narrowness of tripartism – and a failed attempt at the turn of the millennium to allow greater formal participation and representation by civil society organizations – its governance structure has remained largely impervious to change (Baccaro and Mele 2012, 207–210).

The core purpose of the ILO's governance structure has been to establish and monitor the observance of a system of international conventions and recommendations approved by two-thirds of delegates at its annual International Labour Conference and designed to protect a wide range of labor rights. While ILO recommendations are intended to merely “guide national and international policy,” conventions are “detailed legal provisions that become part of the corpus of national law if a country ratifies them” (Baccaro and Mele 2012, 197). In theory, the fact that the ILO's instruments have been forged through international tripartite dialogue means that member states will observe its recommendations and ratify and implement its conventions. In practice, however, this reliance on the willingness of member states to comply has led to an uneven pattern of ratification and an even more disappointing record of implementation.

As Maupain (2005, 123) observes, the intensification of economic globalization and international competition from the 1970s onwards has made the “dilemma of voluntarism and efficacy in promoting the ILO's objectives more acute.” As a global organization with a mandate for labor regulation and policy, the ILO has been challenged by market-driven logics of free trade and deregulation that run counter to a broad-based commitment to tripartite dialogue and consensual regulation. The position of the ILO as the arbiter of labor standards has also been tested by a plethora of new organizations and multilateral initiatives – from social accountability standards to pacts, accords and voluntary corporate social responsibility initiatives that lay claim to relevance and effect in regulating different forms of work and labor standards in various industries, production networks and supply chains – that have challenged what Maupain (2015) refers to as its ‘magisterial’ function.

Insofar as they often make reference to core labor standards, these initiatives acknowledge the status of the ILO and thus can be interpreted as successfully embedding its principles in the international order. Alternately, however, they can be construed as competing instruments of labor regulation that have flourished because of the ‘governance gaps’ inherent in national and international labor regulation regimes. What is clear, however, is that the ILO is no longer a sole actor but rather one of many in a crowded field (Mundlak 2015, 81) and that this new reality has provided impetus for it to attempt to redefine its role.

The ILO as a development actor

The ILO's first-line response to these challenges to its status as the primary arbiter of labor standards was its 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which identified and delimited a set of 'core' labor standards and established a requirement for states, by virtue of their membership, to respect the principles and rights elaborated within them and attempted to embed these, and the relevance of the ILO itself, in the discourse and practice of economic development. Because demonstrating respect for core labor standards does not necessitate the ratification of associated recommendations and conventions, the 1998 Declaration has been interpreted as signifying a shift toward the logics of 'soft' regulation. The extent to which this strategic redirection was necessary and its consequent effects have been the subjects of ongoing debate (Maupain 2005, 2009; Baccaro and Mele 2012). However, far less attention has been paid to the extent to which the 1998 Declaration, and the associated focus on the concept of 'decent work,' have signaled an acceleration in the ILO's gradual effort to position itself as a development actor.

The ILO's increasing focus on development through its Decent Work Agenda is evident in the 2014 World of Work Report. Tellingly subtitled "Developing with Jobs," the report states that because "jobs, rights, social protection and dialogue are integral components of development," decent work should be a "central goal" (ILO 2014a, xxiii). According to Standing (2008, 356), the ILO has been "from the outset . . . to some extent, a development agency, in the sense that it anticipated that, as they developed, the 'colonies' and 'primitive' economies would adopt the standards, policies and institutions forged in the 'advanced' countries." It was not, however, until the late 1960s that the ILO began focusing explicitly on the relationship between economic development, poverty reduction and the nature of employment. This stance was first formalized at its World Economic Conference of 1976, but only fully realized two decades later with the 1998 Declaration and the subsequent launch of the Decent Work Agenda, which confirmed its desire "to connect with debates both within and outside the United Nations on poverty, globalization and the Millennium Development Goals" (Standing 2008, 370).

Analysts have argued that the ILO's decision to engage with, rather than resist, the Washington Consensus was largely driven by its fraught relationship with the United States of America (Alston 2004; Standing 2008). According to Alston (2004, 493), the genesis of the 1998 Declaration lay in the United States' 1984 Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Renewal Act, which he argues introduced the concept of a core set of "internationally recognized workers' rights," a concept subsequently "refined and extended" in order "to link respect for labour rights to eligibility for investment, trade and development assistance." The United States used the allocation of most favored nation status under the GSP as a means of pressuring the governments of developing countries to allow freedom of association and to guarantee labor rights. In the case of Indonesia, this tactic was pivotal in the survival of the Indonesian Prosperous Labor Union, an alternative union established to challenge the Suharto regime's one-union policy (Glasius 1999).² The United States also experimented with the inclusion of labor standards in regional and bilateral free trade agreements, beginning with the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994. It was, however, with the signing of the US-Cambodia Bilateral Textile Trade Agreement in 1999 that such an initiative for the first time combined trade incentives with compliance with international labor standards and

² See Hadiz (1997) and Ford (2009) for detailed discussions of the Indonesian trade union movement in this period.

factory-level inspections, and the first time that the ILO had been involved directly in the latter (Arnold and Toh 2010; Hughes 2007; Kolben 2004).³

Core to the Clinton Administration's decision to involve the ILO directly in the US-Cambodia Bilateral Textile Trade Agreement was its desire "to prove that trade and export-orientated policies could reduce poverty and play a central role in the development process" (Arnold and Toh 2010, 407). Despite a lack of enforcement mechanisms and incentive structures at the factory level (Kolben 2004), what became known as the Better Factories Cambodia Project gained traction because of interest, and ultimately financial buy-in, from international brands intent on improving their corporate image, such as Gap, H&M, Nike, Reebok and Disney (Hughes 2007). For the ILO's part, the Cambodian experiment provided an "example of a successful strategy, the underlying principles of which could provide inspiration for the elaboration of a global strategy to promote fair globalization in the post-MFA environment" (cited in Arnold and Toh 2010, 408). While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to assess its ultimate utility, it is clear that Better Factories Cambodia – the model for Better Work programs in Bangladesh, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Lesotho, Nicaragua and Vietnam (Better Work 2015) – was an important turning point in the ILO's push toward a greater emphasis on economic development. The fact that this expansion was made in partnership with the International Finance Corporation, a key agency of the World Bank group, is also salient as it shows the increasing alignment between these global institutions.

A second key aspect of the ILO's foray into development involved a conscious decision to broaden its focus from formal sector workers to unregulated waged workers, home workers and the self-employed. In doing so, it embraced the prospect of engaging not only in the promotion of employment growth but also in supporting the development of micro-enterprises and other forms of non-waged income generation. An example of the latter is a program called Start and Improve Your Own Business (SIYB), which has provided training and institutional support for micro and small to medium sized businesses in more than 100 developing nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia (ILO, n.d.f).⁴ The inclusion of such initiatives within the Decent Work Agenda was by no means uncontroversial. As Baccaro and Mele (2012, 211–212) have noted, there was fundamental disagreement between employers focused on "employment creation" and unions, with their focus on "fundamental rights, most particularly the right of workers to freely associate." Yet, despite these criticisms, subsequent major ILO initiatives have continued this emphasis on local participatory economic development and job creation.

A key example of the trend toward job creation and other forms of economic activity was the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization. Indeed, one comment on the Declaration suggested that it went "further than any of the existing constitutional texts by recognizing the essential role played by enterprises and entrepreneurship (private and public) in job creation and the necessity of creating an environment conducive to their sustainable

³ See Kolben (2004) for a detailed analysis of the ILO's initial proposal, which adopted a more traditional emphasis on capacity building in industrial relations, and in particular in the Cambodian labor inspectorate, the US counter-proposal, designed by the Department of Labor with significant input from the United States Trade Representative, the Department of State, AFL-CIO and UNITE, and the final agreement.

⁴ See Rodríguez-Pose (2002) on the role of the ILO in supporting and engaging with local economic development and an assessment of some of its challenges in coordinating effective and integrated development initiatives.

development” (Maupain 2009, 834). The ILO also participated in the United Nations-led Open Working Group to develop Sustainable Development Goals, which culminated in the approval of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at a UN Summit in September 2015. Alongside 16 other development goals, the 2030 Agenda includes the objective of achieving “inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all” which, as stated on an ILO resource page, is “reinforced by specific targets on the provision of social protection, eradication of forced and child labor, increasing productivity, addressing youth employment, SMEs and skills development” (ILO n.d.b). Notably, trade unions have continued to question this approach: a briefing document for the governing body of the ILO on the process recorded that trade unions “regretted the lack of dedicated goals on decent work and social protection and of references to international labour standards and the issues of wages and green jobs” (ILO 2014d, 3).

The ILO’s attempt to reposition itself as an organization able to contribute to a global development agenda is nowhere more evident than in post-authoritarian Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, the Decent Work Agenda has been vigorously pursued through livelihoods initiatives involving indigenous people and people living with disabilities, women’s entrepreneurship, community-based enterprise development and microfinance (ILO 2015a). Similar approaches have been adopted in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, with a particular focus on vocational education and business development projects through the SIYB initiative. The ILO has also pursued less intuitive approaches to livelihoods and employment creation in these countries through large projects focused on the construction and maintenance of roads. Between 2008 and 2016, the ILO’s Mission to Timor-Leste managed three road building initiatives valued collectively at US\$51.5 million. The first of these, called TIM-Works, ran from 2008 and 2012 and was supported by multiple donors (ILO n.d.d), while the second, called Enhancing Rural Access (ERA), ran between 2011 and 2015 with funding from the European Commission (ILO n.d.c). In 2012, the ILO was recruited by Australian AID, which had been part of the consortium that had supported the TIM-Works initiative, as the designated implementing agency for the third, called Roads for Development (R4D). Valued at US\$30 million, this was the largest of the three projects, aiming to rehabilitate 450 kilometers, construct an additional 40 kilometers and conduct routine maintenance of 2000 kilometers of rural roads, and make available some 4.7 million person days of work (ILO n.d.e). The ILO justified its engagement in these initiatives on the basis of its alignment with the emphasis on increasing rural employment through infrastructure projects that encourage economic development (Interview with ILO Head of Mission to Timor-Leste, July 2013). Road-building projects in Indonesia to the value of US\$11.8 million in post-tsunami Aceh and Nias have been similarly described as seeking to “facilitate aid delivery and economic recovery” through the “rehabilitation and improvement of the rural road network,” using “employment-intensive approaches” (ILO n.d.a).⁵

Even the ILO’s more traditional work in the area of labor regulation has been recast as supporting economic development in the region. In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, the bulk of ILO work on labor law reform and building the capacity of government officials, trade unions

⁵ The international labor movement was also heavily involved in development projects in Aceh, including the construction of community centers (Ford and Dibley 2012). For further discussion of the Aceh case, and of trade union aid as a form of mediated diffusion, see Ford and Dibley (2011). For a discussion of the ILO’s conscious attempt to boost its significance as a development agency in order to supplement its limited budgets and personnel capacity, see Standing (2008).

and employers' associations was funded by the United States under an umbrella cooperative agreement designed to help countries realize the objectives of the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (Interview with former ILO Indonesia Country Director, August 2015). The stated objectives of the ILO/USA Declaration Project in Indonesia was to create a "sound, harmonious and fully functioning industrial relations system aimed at promoting economic growth while guaranteeing workers' rights" (ILO 2006, 3). This emphasis is also evident in the final evaluation of Strengthening and Improving Labour Relations in Timor-Leste, which concludes that the project "partially achieved its development objective of contributing to Timor-Leste's social and economic progress through the establishment and operation of an effective labour relations system" (Scanteam 2006, 2). As discussed below, the same approach has been used in Myanmar, where there has been significant emphasis on livelihoods and 'responsible business' strategies and on labor regulation as means of promoting economic development.

The ILO in Myanmar

Then known as Burma, Myanmar became a member state of the ILO in 1948. However, it was not until the 1990s that the country came into focus as a consequence of frequent reports of widespread use of forced labor and other labor rights abuses. The ILO's engagement since that time has been significant, if not fundamental, to the development of labor regulation and institutions in that nation; it has also been important for the ILO itself as a counter to claims regarding its declining effectiveness and weakened role in international labor standard setting and monitoring (Maupain 2005; Tapiola and Swepston 2010). Its unusually interventionist approach to Myanmar first emerged in 1998 when a special Commission of Inquiry was convened to investigate the claims surrounding forced labor. The findings of the inquiry paved the way for the invocation of Article 33 of the ILO Constitution at the 2000 International Labour Conference, censuring the regime for its failure to prevent or discontinue forced labor rights violations and requesting that all member states review their relations with the country – an unprecedented step in the history of a body often criticized for lacking the enforcement powers necessary to uphold labor standards (Maupain 2005; Tapiola and Swepston 2010).

Having refused to cooperate in the inquiry or accept the ILO's censure, the regime later agreed to allow the ILO to send an investigatory team to the country in 2001 and then to establish a Liaison Office in Yangon in 2002 (Tapiola and Swepston 2010). In accordance with the 2000 decision to limit Myanmar's participation in the ILO, the mandate of the Liaison Office was restricted to dealing with forced labor. After considering a report on the lack of progress in addressing forced labor rights violations, the ILO began to discuss the reactivation of Article 33 sanctions in 2005, leading to a serious escalation of tension and threats of withdrawal by the regime. In Yangon, several government-backed demonstrations were staged to denounce the ILO and its activities and the Chief Liaison Officer received a series of anonymous death threats (ILO 2005). In an attempt to de-escalate the conflict, an official dialogue was established, resulting in a breakthrough agreement in 2007 under which the regime granted the ILO unique, in many respects extraordinary, authority to receive and investigate complaints related to forced labor (Horsey 2011).

While the initial actions of the ILO could be interpreted as an international political intervention, its subsequent engagement with the Government of Myanmar has been

characterized by a pragmatic approach that emphasized its provision of ‘technical’ assistance. This approach was held to be more strategic than reproaches directed to the military government, as it allowed for the establishment of a level of trust that ultimately reduced resistance to its engagement with the issue of forced labor (Tapiola and Swepston 2010). Through its work on forced labor, the ILO had positioned itself as an international intermediary – a role thought to be especially important because of the absence of other international rights organizations in the country – capable of building a local institutional presence and a level of credibility that could translate into ongoing effect (Tapiola and Swepston 2010, 524). This indeed proved to be the case when the Government of Myanmar, led by President Thein Sein, initiated a series of political and institutional reforms in an effort to re-engage with the international community from 2011 (Cheesman et al. 2014).

As the only independent formal actor in the labor domain, the ILO was uniquely well placed to serve as a source of knowledge, training and technical assistance following the announcement of the reforms. As a consequence, the scope of its operations expanded considerably, most notably with the establishment of a Freedom of Association project as part of a US\$15 million program on Decent Work, to run from 2012 to 2014 (ILO 2012). Close to half of the projected program budget was reserved for initiatives to combat forced labor. However, an allocation of US\$6.1 million was made for an ‘inception phase’ of a series of projects that aimed to build technical and institutional capacity in the rights and standards domain, including labor legislation, labor market governance and labor migration. This program also incorporated initiatives related to socially responsible enterprise development, enhancing employment opportunities, and the employment dimension of trade and investment, which had an obvious economic development and market-supporting orientation (ILO 2012).

By 2014, the ILO’s activities had expanded to encompass three primary objectives: promoting fundamental principles and rights at work, strengthening employers’ and workers’ organizations and labor market institutions, and enhancing employment opportunities and social protection (ILO 2014b). Reflecting its development orientation, the latter includes peace-building and livelihood initiatives in conflict-prone areas; the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), especially in the tourism industry; ‘responsible business’ strategies including value chain analysis of the garment and fisheries industries; and planning strategies for productivity improvements, in addition to support for the development of social protection policies (ILO 2014b). However, it has been through its work on labor regulation and foreign investment that the ILO has made its most influential interventions in Myanmar.

Labor regulation as a development strategy

One key plank in the ILO’s labor regulation work in Myanmar has been quite traditional, namely seeking to ensure that the country’s regulatory and institutional arrangements meet international expectations with regard to freedom of association and trade union involvement in tripartite mechanisms of policy-making and dispute resolution. As in Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, a strong focus of these efforts has been on the establishment of a ‘package’ of laws that embed the principles of tripartism and social dialogue in the legal bedrock of industrial relations (Ford 2016; Ford and Sirait 2016; Ward and Mouly 2016). With the ILO’s assistance, the Government of Myanmar drafted and passed a series of new labor laws enabling the formation of trade unions and employer organizations and establishing

institutions and regulatory provisions to allow for dispute resolution, strikes and collective bargaining. A series of related laws and regulatory provisions sought to reform social security, occupational health and safety, and minimum wages (Gillan and Thein 2016).

The ILO has emphasized the need to develop functioning employer and worker representation structures to give substance to these new laws. Through its Freedom of Association project (ILO 2012), it ran 145 activities involving 5,449 participants in the two years from September 2012 to September 2014 in Yangon and Mandalay, the cities with the largest concentration of formal employment and industries such as garment manufacturing, as well a number of mid-sized cities (ILO 2014b). Project officers and other ILO staff also met with activists from labor NGOs and the rapidly growing trade unions on a regular basis in order to assist in the development of trade union leaders and further the goal of “strengthening trade union coordination at sectoral, regional and national level” (ILO 2012). In addition, the ILO has worked closely with government agencies in various other technical areas, including the implementation of a National Labor Force Survey in 2015; improving labor inspection regimes; and building the capacity of the newly formed industrial relations dispute resolution bodies in order to streamline their processes and improve the quality and consistency of decision-making. It has also collaborated closely with the World Bank and the World Food Programme to gather information and work with government, business and civil society to identify and discuss gaps in social protection institutions and regulation (ILO 2015b).⁶

Many imperfections remain in the labor regulatory framework (Gillan and Thein 2016). Myanmar is, moreover, experiencing many of the same challenges of implementation faced by Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste in their attempts to establish a functioning system of labor relations (Ford 2016; Ford and Sirait 2016; Ward and Mouly 2016). However, in a context where workers, employers and government agencies had no understanding or experience of freedom of association or collective bargaining, the ILO has played a crucial role in creating a formal architecture for industrial relations that recognizes the right of workers to collective representation.

Facilitating foreign investment

Importantly, the ILO sought to link these labor reforms with economic growth and global economic reintegration. The relationship between labor relations and foreign investment is explicitly recognized in the context of its Labour Law Reform and Institutional Capacity program, funded by Denmark, Japan and the United States. In a joint statement by the donors, the ILO and the Government of Myanmar, Myanmar’s “labor regime” is presented as an “important component of its investment environment,” which, in conjunction with other measures, can assist in repositioning Myanmar as an “attractive sourcing and investment destination” and advance “overall sustainable growth and development” (ILO 2014d). It is within this context also that the ILO has sought to facilitate foreign investment in Myanmar in ways that support employment generation and development goals while also seeking to meet international labor standards. The ambit of the ‘responsible business’ program has been

⁶ This initiative was represented as a model example of cooperation and coordination between international development agencies, in alignment with the announcement in mid-2015 of a global commitment for ongoing collaboration between the ILO and the World Bank for a “mission and plan of action towards universal social protection” (ILO 2015b).

particularly broad in recognition of the low level of capacity in the country's formal economy to respond to an upsurge of interest from potential investors, including many multinational corporations in the consumer goods sector, since the beginning of the transition toward civilian rule.

As noted earlier, the ILO has focused on micro, small and medium enterprises in many developing country contexts in its role as a development actor. In Myanmar – as in Cambodia – it has also sought to work with large-scale enterprises, industry associations and government to support economic development and, through it, employment generation. In an attempt to enhance the capacity of industries with a current or potential export profile such as manufacturing and fisheries to articulate with global trade and supplier networks, it has initiated value chain assessments and industry development plans in conjunction with government and business. It has also begun groundwork for the development of factory-level training and measurement programs, modeled in part on the Better Factories Cambodia program, as well as various activities designed to promote 'social dialogue' and 'awareness raising' around CSR and labor standard issues in value chains (ILO 2014b). One concrete example of such an initiative is a project overseen by the ILO and funded by the Swedish International Development Agency and the Swedish fashion multinational corporation H&M to improve industrial relations in the garment industry by offering factory level training to managers and employees, as well as working with the Myanmar Garment Manufacturing Association and trade unions (ILO 2014b).

Through these and other initiatives, the ILO has taken on a direct intermediary role in Myanmar's reintegration with global production networks. Well-known international brands have consulted with the Liaison Office prior to investing in order to mitigate or lessen the potential reputational risk of expanding production or distribution within the country (Interview with the ILO Chief Liaison Officer, January 2014). Firms originating in the United States are also required by the United States Government to provide reports on the environmental and social impacts of investments in Myanmar. As labor rights and standards are a particular focus both for these reporting requirements and in Myanmar's attempts to regain trade preferences from the US Government, the ILO's role as a regulatory and standard-setting body has been especially relevant for US-based investors. The apparel firm GAP, for example, has participated in ILO 'stakeholder forums' on labor law and standards as well as publicly stating its commitment to the labor law reform process and its implementation according to ILO standards and principles (GAP 2015). As such statements suggest, the ILO's provision of technical assistance and advice on the emergent labor laws and institutions have not only been a very significant aspect of their work in Myanmar, it has also been deeply integrated with attempts to kick-start an export-oriented economy.

Conclusion

The ILO's emphasis on the link between labor reform and global economic reintegration as an engine of economic growth in Myanmar aligns with its general model of development and its interest in working with international institutions with a market-building and -supporting function such as the World Bank. It is also pragmatic in the sense that the framing of labor standards as a necessary precondition of global economic reintegration and growth appealed to, rather than threatened, the Thein Sein government and indeed is compatible with the call of Aung San Suu Kyi in her role as leader of the National League for Democracy, which won

the 2015 national election, for foreign investment that is ethical, responsible and underpinned by respect for labor and other social standards.

Whether these normative statements translate to actual practice and development outcomes remains unresolved. Questions persist as to whether employment growth, skills development and industrial diversification can so neatly dovetail with social protection and labor standards without trade-offs between these objectives, particularly in the context where other developing nations have adopted a 'low road' pathway to economic growth (Seekings 2015). With regard to labor rights and bargaining power, for example, Caraway (2006, 210) has argued that while positive to the extent that it ended the monopoly of the state-sanctioned union in Indonesia, the ILO's liberal interpretation of freedom of association, inspired by the policy orientations of the World Bank and the IMF, led to "the formation of 'free' as opposed to powerful trade unions" after the transition from authoritarianism. Similarly, it is by no means certain that Myanmar's nascent institutions and political and civil society organizations, including trade unions – which the ILO has played a significant role in shaping – will be effective, representative and able to contribute to social equity or whether these institutions and organizations will simply reproduce existing social and economic inequalities.

The case of the ILO in Myanmar is also illustrative of the way in which the role of international institutions must be understood with reference to the dynamism of their interaction with the shifting landscape of domestic politics and government. Over time, the ILO has moved from a sanctioning and monitoring role focused on forced labor to a more diverse and expansive series of interventions across the labor standards and development spheres not unlike those found in other post-authoritarian states in the region. Its ability to take on this expanded role is in part a consequence of the deep in-country experience, knowledge, relationships and credibility developed through its dealings with the government over forced labor, which has positioned it as an important development actor in the context of democratization and associated reform programs. Clearly, however, its approach has also been driven by its quest to reposition itself as a development intermediary for other international institutions, national and international businesses, as well as state agencies and policy-makers. It may be difficult to assess the impact of the Decent Work Agenda in Myanmar or elsewhere (cf. Baccaro and Mele 2012), but the ILO's approach in post-authoritarian Southeast Asia since the late 1990s suggests that its development agenda is well and truly here to stay.

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