

Economic Growth: The Fundamental Path to the Realization of Social Security Rights for Migrant Workers

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The International Labour Organization seems to only see the aspect of social security promoting economic growth, while neglecting the aspect of economic growth supporting social security. From the standpoint of materialism and the practice of social security, the realization of social security rights for migrant workers fundamentally depends on economic growth. The Belt and Road Initiative has provided a Chinese solution for creating a strong material and technological foundation to meet the social security needs of all people, including migrant workers.

Keywords: economic growth, migrant workers, social security rights, implementation pathways

Introduction

From the standpoint of materialism and social security practice, the realization of social security rights for migrant workers fundamentally depends on economic development. Social security and economic development are complementary, mutually reinforcing, and premised on each other: social security promotes economic development, and economic development supports social security, neither of which can be neglected. However, the International Labor Organization seems to only see the aspect of social security promoting economic development, while neglecting the aspect of economic development supporting social security. We believe that while acknowledging the function of social security in promoting economic development, the role of economic development in supporting social security must be emphasized. Without a strong economic foundation as a backing, comprehensive social security for all, including migrant workers, will ultimately be an empty promise, and comprehensive social security for migrant workers will eventually become unsustainable due to the loss of fiscal space or insufficient or inadequate funding support. The joint construction of the “Belt and Road” initiative provides a Chinese solution to creating a strong material and technological foundation to meet the social security needs of all people, including migrant workers.

The Relationship Between the Realization of Social Security Rights for Migrant Workers and Economic Growth

In the past, people often inappropriately believed that social security was merely a measure to prevent social risks, and even considered social security as a cost or byproduct of economic growth. However, after experiencing

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the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2008 global economic turmoil, and the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, people generally believe that social security is not only a measure to prevent social risks but also a prerequisite for promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth. This view can be corroborated by the reports, declarations, and recommendations adopted by the International Labour Organization's International Labour Conference.

The report "Towards Social Justice and a Fair Globalization of Social Security", adopted by the 100th session of the International Labour Conference in 2011, posits that social security is a prerequisite for economic growth, not a burden. It argues that social security can stimulate domestic demand, build human capital, and enhance labor productivity, ultimately contributing to sustainable economic growth. The report "Creating the Future of Social Protection for a Human-Centered World of Work", adopted by the 109th session of the International Labour Conference in 2011, states that social security is an investment with significant social and economic benefits. It not only promotes the reduction of poverty, vulnerability, and inequality but also strengthens political stability and social cohesion. It enhances people's ability to benefit from the ever-changing world of work by improving productivity (International Labour Organization, 2021). The "ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of the World of Work", adopted by the 108th session of the International Labour Conference in 2019, reaffirms that social security plays a key role in a human-centered model of economic growth and development. It asserts that a universal, comprehensive, and adequate social security system is a key component in building a sustainable future. The Declaration calls for the expansion of social security to include all migrant worker groups, as it can effectively combat crises and accelerate economic recovery, meeting and addressing new demands and uncertainties arising from technological and economic changes.

The recommendation is one form of labor standards, and its fundamental difference from another form of labor standards, the convention, lies in the fact that conventions require the approval of member states and have the nature of an international treaty; recommendations do not need to be approved by member states and do not have legal binding force on member states. However, recommendations can provide guidance for member states to formulate domestic labor policies. The preamble of the "Recommendation on National Floors of Social Protection" (No. 202) adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2012 emphasizes that social security is an automatic stabilizer of social and economic stability, which helps to stimulate overall demand during crises and subsequent periods, aiding and supporting the transition to a more sustainable economy. Social security is also a booster for social and economic development, and it is an important tool for preventing and reducing poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and social insecurity, for promoting equal opportunities, gender equality, and racial equality, and for supporting the transition from informal employment to formal employment.

The above situation indicates that social security not only has the function of preventing social risks, but it also has the function of promoting economic development. Social security is evolving from a single risk-prevention function in the past to a variety of functions now, including both risk prevention and promotion of development. As the report of the Committee of Experts on the Implementation of Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organization points out: "The idea of supporting the world economy with comprehensive social security, including migrant workers, may once again change the concept of social security, change the future mode and method of providing social security, and make the risk-based social security model move towards a more integrated model" (International Labour Organization, 2011).

The ILO Mechanism for the Implementation of Social Security Rights for Migrant Workers

Social security is a prerequisite for economic growth, but economic growth is also the cornerstone of social security. As previously mentioned, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has a clear and affirmative stance on the issue of social security promoting economic growth, but it seems to be cautious and reserved on the issue of economic growth supporting social security. This can be proven by the establishment of the ILO's supervisory mechanism for social security standards, including those for migrant workers, as set out in its constitution.

According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) constitution, any member state may comply with the recommendations or decisions made by the investigation committee or the International Court regarding its non-compliance with ratified or participated conventions. Otherwise, the Council may request the Assembly to take "wise and appropriate action". What constitutes "wise and appropriate action" is not clearly answered in the charter. If it involves military sanctions, it is prohibited by the United Nations Charter and cannot be adopted; if it involves economic sanctions, it is a common tactic of Western hegemonic countries and should be abandoned; if it involves moral condemnation, including the social security standards for migrant workers, it obviously lacks effectiveness and enforceability. As the labor group criticized: the ILO lacks "teeth" (Liu, 2003). Perhaps for this reason, the ILO has turned to a "promotional" approach, using direct contact, regional meetings and regional consultants, seminars and training, and technical cooperation (Wang, 1991), aiming to create conditions for the implementation of social security standards. However, it has been proven that this promotional method still has many limitations. Why not adopt measures to "help member states develop their economies and share the fruits of economic development?" This can be found in the supervisory implementation focus of the supervisory implementation expert committee. The supervisory implementation focus of the expert committee is: the degree to which the laws and practices of member states are consistent with the ratified conventions, the degree to which member states fulfill their obligations related to social security standards as stipulated in the constitution, and the differences in the implementation of social security standards in different countries, without considering the existing economic and social conditions of specific countries (International Labour Organization, 2011). It is obvious that the supporting function of economic growth for social security is not the focus of the labor organization.

This point can also be proven in the International Labour Organization's analysis of the relationship between fiscal space and social protection. The Bureau has selected samples from eight developing countries (Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Costa Rica, Lesotho, Namibia, Thailand, and South Africa) to analyze the relationship between fiscal space and social protection. The research conclusion, prominently titled "Summary of Lessons Learned", points out: "Economic growth is important, but it is not always the main determinant in establishing fiscal space for expanding social protection" (International Labour Organization, 1999). The reason is that factors affecting the fiscal space for social protection include economic growth, inclusive policies, and political support, among others, with economic growth being just one of the influencing factors. Even if a country's economy grows, without continuous and robust policies, the economic growth will not be translated into fiscal revenue as expected; similarly, a country may have high economic growth, but without a political willingness to prioritize social protection in fiscal goals, the fiscal resources will not automatically be invested in the field of social protection. Therefore, to expand social protection, it is crucial to adopt proactive inclusive policies and make positive political commitments.

We believe that inclusive policies and political support do have a significant impact on social security, and sometimes even a decisive one, but they are still based on economic development and are secondary. Without economic growth as a support, it is likely that no good inclusive policies and political will can be produced. Similarly, without economic growth as a support, any meticulously designed supervisory implementation mechanism would be weak, and any well-designed social security system would ultimately become a piece of waste paper. Creating a strong material and technological foundation to meet the social security needs of all people, including migrant workers, the “Belt and Road” initiative has provided practical examples.

The Chinese Plan for the Implementation of Social Security Rights for Migrant Workers

If it is said that the International Labour Organization lacks sufficient recognition of the fundamental role of economic growth in expanding social protection, then China has given the fundamental role of economic growth in expanding social protection the utmost importance. The Belt and Road Initiative advocated by the Communist Party of China in the new era is a global public good that contributes to creating a strong material and technological foundation to meet the social security needs of all people, including migrant workers.

One of the important goals of the Belt and Road Initiative is to promote joint development and achieve common prosperity. Over the past decade, the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative has yielded rich results in promoting economic growth and social development in countries along the route. According to a World Bank report: the Belt and Road construction has increased trade by 4.1%, attracted foreign investment by 5%, and increased the GDP of low-income countries by 3.4%. From 2012 to 2021, over a decade, the global share of GDP for emerging and developing economies has increased by 3.6%. The World Bank estimates that by 2030, the Belt and Road construction will generate an annual revenue of \$1.6 trillion for the world, accounting for 1.3% of the global GDP; it will lift 7.6 million people out of absolute poverty and 32 million people out of moderate poverty.¹ The first cross-border electrified railway in Africa aided by China—the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in Ethiopia, is a symbolic achievement of the Belt and Road Initiative and an important result of the cooperation between the Chinese and African people in poverty alleviation and common prosperity. The completion of the railway has promoted the sustainable development of the local economy: transportation infrastructure, business environment, and investment environment have been improved, remote villages are closely connected with bustling cities, international maritime transport channels have been formed, logistics efficiency has been enhanced, and economic belts and industrial parks are rising one after another. The construction of the railway has promoted the sustainable development of the local society: the railway construction has created job opportunities, employing a total of more than 32,000 local workers; it has trained urgently needed talents in management, technology, law, and secretarial work for railway operation, such as senior employees employed in railway construction accounting for 10% of all local employees; it has established a salary system, wage increase system, and occupational health and safety management system that are in line with local realities; and it has stimulated the entrepreneurial spirit of local entrepreneurs. The completion of the railway has promoted the sustainable development of the local environment: the railway construction has adopted relatively high standard gauge railway technology and electrified traction, which has greatly improved the air and water quality along the railway line, and significantly reduced sewage discharge; special passages for livestock and wildlife have been set up in the railway construction, allowing free passage for cattle, sheep, and other livestock, as well as camels

¹ https://news.gmw.cn/2023-06/27/content_36655196.htm, accessed on June 7, 2024.

and other wild animals. The completion of the railway has promoted the sustainable development of local governance: while assisting in the construction of the railway, China has also established mechanisms such as emergency plans for project safety production, emergency plans for unexpected events, and major public opinion response plans, and has established a system for the annual release of social responsibility reports.² The above situation indicates that the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative has laid a strong economic foundation and social foundation for the social security of all people, including migrant workers.

The practice of the Belt and Road Initiative has provided important insights for human development: First, only through concerted efforts, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, and shared promotion of economic development, can the expansion of national social security strategies (including strategies that extend to all migrant worker groups) truly be realized; Second, social security, as an investment in people, should on the one hand have the function of promoting economic growth, and on the other hand, it should have the demand that depends on economic growth. Social security without economic growth is a kind of “pie in the sky” or unsustainable; Third, just as “social security promotes economic growth” should be taken as the basic principle of social security standards and national legislation, “economic growth supports social security” should also be included in the basic principles of social security standards and national legislation; Fourth, the Western global social security governance model is on the eve of urgent change, and the Eastern global social security governance model that represents the future of human development—the construction of a community with a shared future for social security, seems like the rising sun of the East, is gradually rising.

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² https://www.chinca.org/hdhn/news_detail_3388.html, accessed on June 7, 2024.