

When Norms Are Not Enough

Why Technical Weakness Is Undermining the ILO's Mandate

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In March 2025, Development Pathways [released a blistering critique](#) of the International Labour Organization's flagship World Social Protection Report 2024-2026. The report's claim—that achieving universal social protection in low-income countries would cost 19.8% of GDP—had already echoed widely in global policy circles. It sent the wrong message at the worst possible time: that expansion is fiscally unrealistic. But as Development Pathways demonstrated that the figure was not just misleading, it was methodologically indefensible. Inflated benefit levels, ahistorical poverty lines, and context-blind assumptions had turned a questionable model into a global talking point.

The damage is done: The 19.8% figure has been used not only by austerity-inclined economists, but also by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, who cited it to argue that “[in the short term, it is...unaffordable for LICs to close the social protection financing gap](#).”

Reading the Development Pathways paper left me deeply unsettled. This was not merely a technical rebuttal—it was a direct challenge to what the ILO's Social Security Department has become. Once the world's leading voice for technically grounded, rights-based thinking, the department now appears unable—or unwilling—to push back against austerity narratives repackaged as “resilience,” “targeting,” and “fiscal consolidation.”

The ILO I Knew

My relationship with the ILO runs deep. I joined in 2006–07, during the tenure of Michael Cichon—a leader whose technical brilliance was matched only by his moral clarity. I was a junior team member then, but Michael personally mentored me in social protection costing work—beginning with healthcare financing models, and later leading to the development of the [ILO-UNICEF Social Protection Costing Tool](#). But it wasn't just about spreadsheets; it was about standing for something. At the time, technical work at the ILO carried weight because it was rooted in a clear purpose: to push the boundaries of the right to social security and offer credible alternatives to cost-saving, austerity-driven, minimal-state models.

Michael was technically unmatched. Even at the highest levels of global policy dialogue, he made time to sit with junior staff, reviewing every assumption, checking every formula. The department was alive with intellectual rigor, filled with exceptionally strong technical people. Rigorous, evidence-based work wasn't a slogan—it was the culture. The methodological errors we see today in the department's publications would never have made it past even a zero draft under Michael's leadership.

The Contrast Today: From Counterweight to Co-Pilot

Fast forward to my experience with the ILO Social Security Department in 2022–23, and the contrast could not be more stark. What was once a beacon of technically grounded, rights-based policy has drifted toward diluted themes—often duplicating work already done by other UN agencies and funds. Instead of offering a bold alternative to the IMF and World Bank, the ILO now seems content to ride comfortably alongside them—too often at the expense of its founding values.

This shift wasn't abstract. It had real-world consequences: One experience stands out. I was part of joint work with the IMF and World Bank in Iraq. I sat through endless, circular meetings—online and in Washington—hoping to produce a unified, credible voice on Iraq's social security reform. These weren't technical disagreements; they were fundamental clashes of values. I warned early on that this could threaten the [trust built with Iraq's tripartite partners and undermine groundbreaking progress on the ground](#). Eventually, I was sidelined. The work was handed to an ambitious colleague more focused on attaching his name to a glossy joint publication than on defending the ILO's mission and credibility.

Then came another low point. After publishing a [UN position paper on reform in Iraq](#), I expected substantive technical feedback from the ILO's backstopping team. Instead, I received angry emails and calls—not about the content, but about the order of names in the acknowledgements. The value addition was reduced to a fight over a footnote. That moment crystallized a disturbing reality: something vital had been lost.

The Stakes Are Global

This is not just an internal institutional crisis. It has global consequences. The ILO is the only UN specialized agency with a constitutional mandate to promote universal, rights-based social protection. In an ideal world, institutions like the World Bank and IMF would operate as part of the broader UN system—and with that, a shared commitment to the international normative framework of social protection grounded in ILO conventions and standards. That framework gives the ILO a natural and legitimate leadership role in the global social protection arena.

But in a less-than-ideal world, the ILO has historically played an additional role: that of a counterweight to austerity-leaning, efficiency-driven, and often conditional models promoted by Washington institutions. That counterbalance is not just symbolic—it is vital to maintaining diversity in global policy options and to safeguarding the principle of social protection as a right, not a residual safety net. When the ILO's Social Security Department loses its technical edge, the space opens for minimal, cost-focused paradigms to dominate the discourse—often at the expense of inclusive, sustainable, and dignified systems.

And the vacuum is already being filled: The World Bank's new [State of Social Protection Report 2025: The 2-Billion-Person Challenge](#) positions itself as a serious alternative to the ILO's own flagship World Social Protection Report. If the ILO Social Security department continues to weaken technically, the global consensus around social protection may tilt decisively toward narrow, conditional paradigms that erode the rights-based framework we spent decades building.

We Need Competing Paradigms

Countries deserve genuine choices, not just variations of the same model under different labels (as one example of ILO critical work, see [National Defined-Contribution Schemes: Old Wine in New Bottles?](#) exemplified the kind of critical analysis that pushed the global debate forward). And for that, the ILO must reassert its voice—not only in Geneva, but in the data, the modeling, and the field.

This is not a plea for nostalgia. It is a call to recover what made the ILO unique: the courage to lead with both values and evidence. That means investing in technical excellence, making room for internal dissent, and reaffirming clarity of purpose.

That's why the Development Pathways critique matters. What it does is restore integrity by doing what the ILO should have done itself: challenge flawed assumptions. Ask hard questions.

It reminded me of a moment years ago when I asked a UN consultant why he hadn't flagged a clear flaw in a high-profile agency evaluation report. He looked at me and said, "I don't shit where I eat." That sentence has stayed with me. It explains more than it should.

And it's exactly why we need more critical voices, more honest engagement, and a revitalized ILO Social Security Department that reclaims the space it once occupied—technically, normatively, and morally.

I say all this not to diminish the ILO's work. Quite the opposite. I say it out of frustration and sadness. I've always admired the ILO's role and values. I owe a lot to the organization. It shaped my thinking. I learned so much. And it hurts to see such impactful, but professionally inexcusable technical errors in its flagship work.