

Original Article

Ratification Status of International Labour Organization (ILO) Fundamental Conventions on Occupational Safety and Health

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ABSTRACT

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Background A safe and healthy work environment is key to sustainable development and because of this, in June 2022, the International Labour Organization (ILO) declared this to be a fundamental principle and right at work and recognized the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) as fundamental Conventions. The objective of this study was to assess the global as well as regional ratification status for ILO Conventions 155 and 187 among member countries, one year after their declaration as fundamental conventions.

Methods Updated ratification status was accessed in November 2023 through the ILO NORMLEX system, and presented in descriptive statistics using bar charts and line charts.

Results By November 2023, 80 (42.8%) and 62 (33.2%) ILO member countries had ratified ILO Conventions 155 and 187 respectively, with the highest ratification numbers from countries in Europe and Central Asia region, 62.7% and 56.9% for Conventions 155 and 187, and lowest ratification numbers from countries in the Arab states region, 18.2% and 9.1%.

Conclusion Active ratification campaigns and awareness, especially in regions with low ratification numbers, can further improve the ratification status to achieve the target of universal ratification.

INTRODUCTION

As per global estimates, 2.9 million lives were lost due to work-related illnesses or injuries in 2019 and 395 million suffered from non-fatal accidents. The work-related fatalities contribute to 6.7% of the global deaths annually. Collectively, this leads to huge economic losses as well as human suffering thereby making occupational health and safety (OHS) a global as well as a national priority.^{1,2} Safety and health at work are also key factors for sustainable development and can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030.³

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a tripartite United Nations agency with 187 member countries and is strongly committed to workers' health and safety which is one of its constitutional objectives. This was further reaffirmed during the 110th session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) in June 2022, whereby it was decided to include a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental principle and right at work hence recognising the Occupational Safety

and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) as fundamental conventions.^{4,5}

ILO Conventions 155 and 187, which complement each other, ensure good national governance as well as effective workplace implementation of OSH systems. Both of these conventions highlight the roles of government, employers and workers in improving workplace safety and health.⁵ Member states that ratify these conventions shall promote occupational safety and health, and develop a safe and healthy working environment through a national OSH policy and a programme to be developed in consultation with employers and employees to prevent occupational injuries, illnesses and deaths.⁴ Ratification of these ILO standards is important as it shows political support to protect workers and ensures social justice across countries for sustainable development; however, a study by Wilson et al. showed that only 42 (23.7%) member countries had ratified the ILO Convention 155 by 2006.⁶ ILO launched an active action plan in 2010 to enhance ratification of Conventions 155 and 187, and again had a centenary ratification campaign in 2019 with a target of universal ratification by all member countries.^{7,8} Therefore, this study aimed to assess the global as well as regional status of ratification for ILO Conventions 155 and 187 among member countries, one year after ILO's declaration as fundamental conventions.

METHODS

The updated status of ratification of ILO Conventions 155 and 187 was assessed from the ILO NORMLEX system in November 2023. This system provides up-to-date information on the ratification status of all the international labour standards.⁹ Member countries were grouped into five regions: Africa, Americas, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe and Central Asia with 54, 35, 11, 36, and 51 member countries respectively. This regional classification was based on the country grouping used by ILO for reporting data.¹⁰ Ratification data was analyzed in Microsoft Excel and presented as descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage), using bar charts to present regional as well as yearly ratification status and line charts to present trends.

RESULTS

As presented in Figure 1, from 1982 until November 2023, 80 (42.8%) member countries have ratified the ILO Convention 155 with an average ratification by 2 countries every year. The maximum yearly ratification was by 5 countries in 1991, 2000, 2021 and 2023. Since the ratification by five countries in 2023, there has been no increase in ratification following ILO's declaration as a fundamental convention in June 2022. Similarly, 62 (33.2%) of member countries have ratified the ILO Convention 187 up until November 2023, with an average ratification by 3-4 countries every year. For Convention 187, the highest ratification by eight countries was observed in 2021, followed by ratification by six countries in 2008, 2014 and 2015. With ratification by three countries in 2023, no increase number of ratifications was observed following ILO's declaration as a fundamental convention (Figure 2).

On regional comparison, higher ratification for ILO Conventions 155 and 187 was seen coming from member countries in the Europe and Central Asia region (62.7% and 56.9% respectively), followed by member countries in the African region (44.4% and 31.5% respectively). The lowest ratification was among member countries from the Arab States (18.2% and 9.1% respectively) (Figure 3).

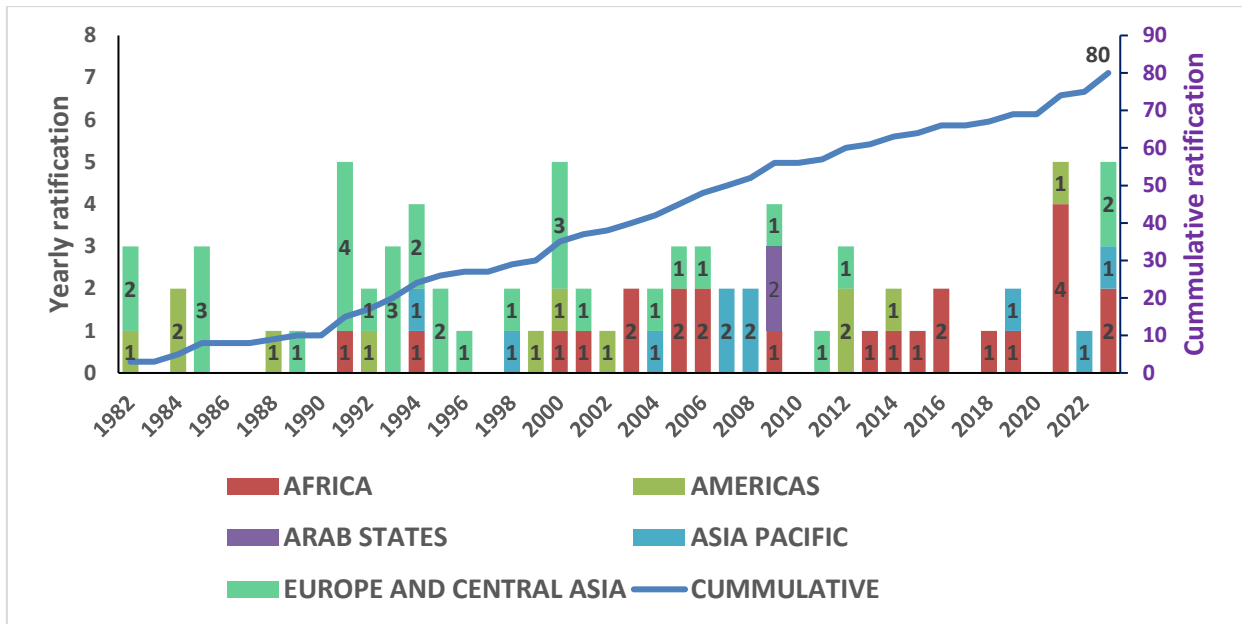


Figure 1. ILO Convention 155 - Yearly (regional and total) and Cumulative Ratification by member countries (1982-2023)

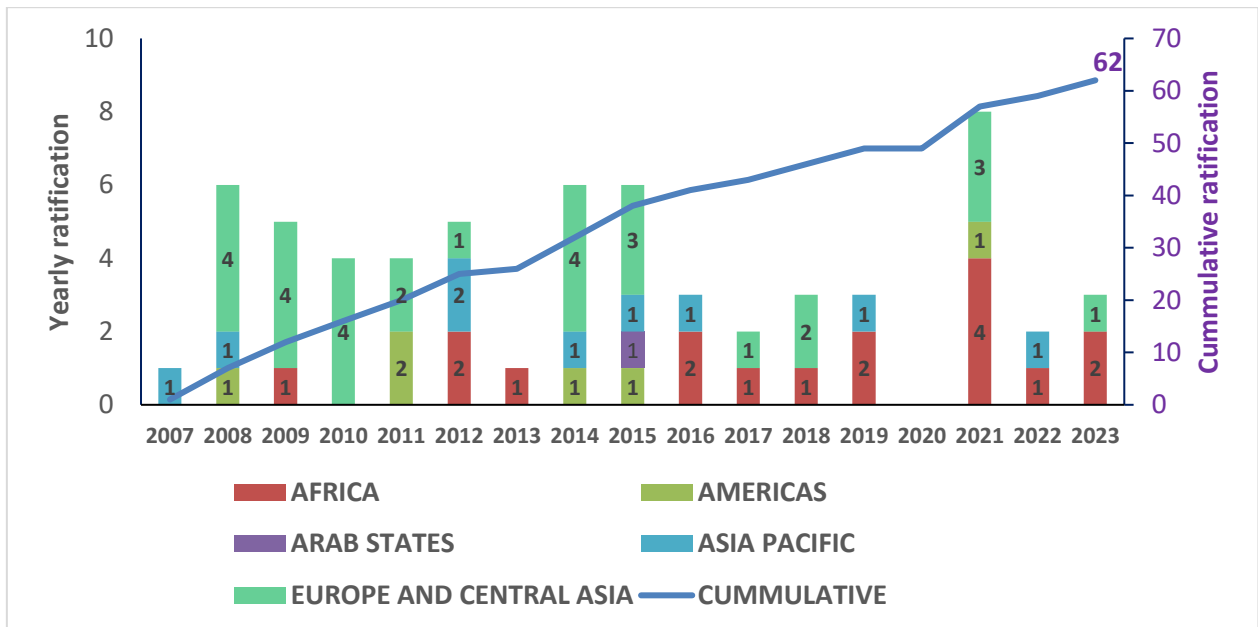


Figure 2. ILO Convention 187 - Yearly (regional and total) and Cumulative Ratification by member countries (2007-2023)

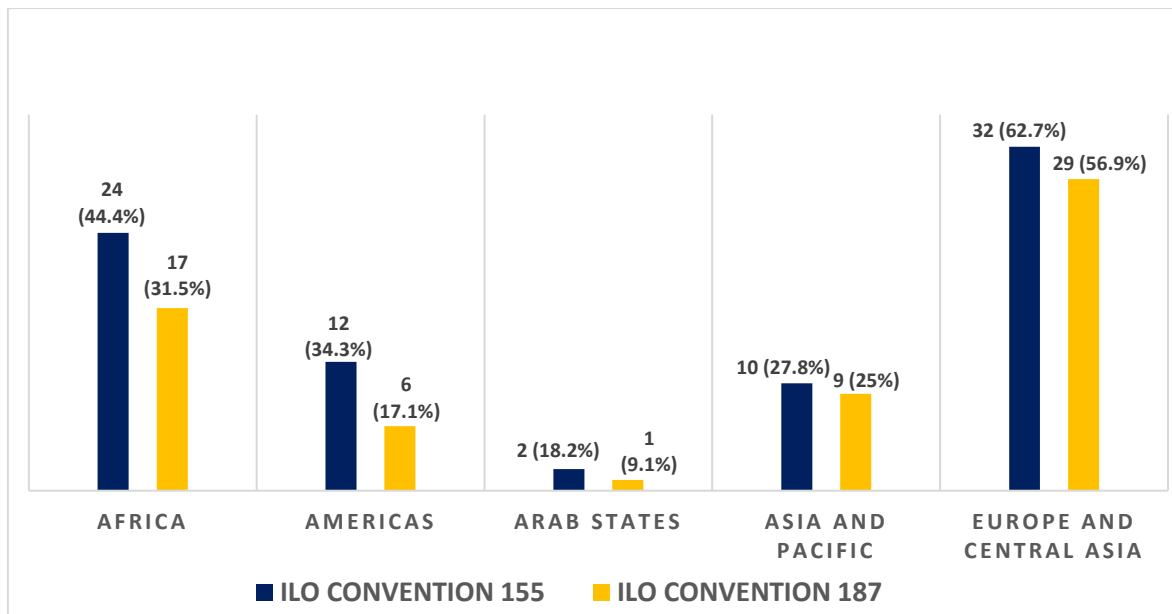


Fig. 3 Region-wise Ratification of ILO Conventions 155 and 187 (up to November 2023)

DISCUSSION

Since the establishment of ILO, international labour standards in the form of Conventions, which are either legally binding international treaties or non-binding recommendations or guidelines on issues relating to work, labour and social policy, are adopted at the annual International Labour Conference (ILC) attended by member countries. Once approved at ILC, these conventions are shared with the relevant authorities of the member countries within twelve months. Should member countries choose to ratify the conventions, they have up to one year before the conventions come into force. By ratifying, member countries show their commitment to the implementation of OSH regulations in line with the Conventions, after which there will be further support and follow-up by ILO.¹¹⁻¹³

This study assessed the current ratification status of ILO Conventions 155 and 187, which are two of the recently designated fundamental conventions related to OSH. By November 2023, 80 (42.8%) and 62 (33.2%) ILO member countries have ratified ILO Conventions 155 and 187 respectively. The ratification of Convention 155 increased from 42 (23.7%) member countries in 2006.⁶ The average yearly ratification for Convention 187 (4 member countries) was higher compared to Convention 155 (2 member countries). These higher average yearly ratifications for Convention 187 compared to that of 155 as well as the increased ratification for 155 compared to the previous study can be attributed to the ILO's active efforts for ratification in the form of the action plan for widespread ratification of this convention from 2010-2016 as well as the ILO centenary ratification campaign in 2019.^{7,8} No comparative rise in ratification was seen for both of these conventions in 2023, a year after their designation as fundamental conventions. Possible contributors to this are the internal process for ratification in the individual country, which would normally include legal reviews and gap analyses, consultation with stakeholders, and parliamentary approval. This entire process can typically take a year to several years depending on national circumstances.¹⁴

This study also found higher ratification for both these conventions from the countries in the European region, 62.7% and 56.9% for conventions 155 and 187 respectively, while the lowest ratification was observed from countries of Arab States, 18.2% and 9.1% respectively. A similar ratification pattern was observed in a previous study when the highest ratification for OSH conventions was from member countries in Western Europe followed by Eastern Europe and the lowest ratification was from the countries in the Middle East.⁶ Possible reasons for this regional disparity can be the shorter length of ILO membership, income status of developed western countries, demographic factors such as high population growth rate, and political freedom when compared to other regional states.^{6,15} A past study also reported lower work-related fatalities among countries that ratified ILO OSH conventions compared to non-ratifying countries thus highlighting the role of implementing such standards for the improvement of OSH performance.¹⁶

This record-based study accessed the current ratification status of ILO's OSH Conventions 155 and 187, one year after their designation as fundamental conventions. It does not look into the factors contributing to ratification nor factors for regional disparities. Future research using an appropriate study design to identify facilitators as well as barriers to the ratification of these conventions would help improve ratification rates.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that there was an improvement in the ratification of Convention 155 compared to a previous study, and also showed a higher average yearly ratification for Convention 187 compared to 155. Although these observations suggest higher recognition of occupational health and safety among member countries, there is still a long way to go to achieving the goal of universal ratification by all 187 member countries, as targeted by ILO for the fundamental conventions as part of its centenary ratification campaign.⁸ This study also observed regional variations in ratification patterns among regions.

Ratification of Conventions 155 and 187 by ILO member countries is of strategic importance for the improvement of occupational health and safety at the national and global levels. Besides ILO's global campaign strategy to encourage member countries to ratify Conventions 155 and 187, member countries' strong commitment to adopt these conventions can result in universal ratification. The recent designation of Conventions 155 and 187 as fundamental occupational health and safety conventions will hopefully further improve ratification by member countries.

DECLARATION

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