Statistical Measurement of Quality of Employment: Conceptual framework and indicators

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The framework is logically laid out and would lend itself to an intuitive schematic. I interpret it as a pyramid with lower numbered dimensions at the base supporting the progressively higher dimensions. Dimension 6 would be at the apex, while intrinsic factors comprise a separate vertical bar that can interact with any level of the pyramid.

Although I agree with the document that the focus of job quality measures should be the individual, more thought needs to be put into defining the audience for job quality reports. Is it the general public? Policy-makers? The international community? Academics? Each of these audiences would benefit from different types of reports. I would suggest adding a section after "Moving from dimensions to indicators" that would discuss how indicators could be packaged and communicated to various audiences.

For the more sophisticated audiences—such as social scientists and empirically minded policy makers—the section should also include a discussion of multidimensional (multivariate) analyses of the many aspects of job quality. These particular audiences will be very skeptical with regards to addressing complex issues with relatively simple cross-tabulations. References to a number of such studies in the Canadian context have been included in our report. Although many countries may not have a well-developed base of multivariate research on job quality issues, the existence of data to fill in most dimensions of the framework should provide the necessary infrastructure to develop the capacity to perform such analyses.

Even with descriptive indicators, there are a couple of points that could receive more attention. First, means, medians and other measures of central tendency do not have much meaning on their own. They really only take on life in time series, since the first question many people are interested in for any indicator is whether things are getting better or worse. Since many of these indicators can be affected by the business cycle, longer time series can help to separate cyclical from secular trends. I think that a preference for time series data is implicit in many passages of the framework, but it also should be made more explicit to the reader.

The second aspect has to do with the richness of cross-sectional indicators. For most dimensions, job quality is very much a distributional issue. How many jobs have low wages? How many have high wages? How much more do high wage earners make than low wage earners? Is the wage distribution becoming more polarized? Although several different distributional indicators are suggested at various points in the framework, I think that a technical appendix that discusses the properties, strengths and weaknesses of a range of distributional measures would add to the utility of the framework.

Several recommendations with respect to specific parts of the framework follow.

- The concept of producing statistics across all dimensions for groups identified in the fair treatment section is sound. However, some context setting should be encouraged at the outset to help the reader understand why statistics are being presented for these particular groups. Are there legislative factors involved? Empirical issues? Social issues? Historical issues? Such information will help the reader to interpret the results for each identified group.

- Dimension 3 should include references to commuting time. Long commuting times can exacerbate work life conflict and it may not be possible for workers to live close to where they work. The high cost of housing in large cities, for example, can result in long commutes for low paid workers.

- Other geographic aspects of work could also be considered in dimension 3. Work in remote or isolated locations is often performed in intense shift arrangements in camp-like conditions. The prime example here is natural resource extraction industries. Remote mines and drilling operations typically operate shifts of two weeks on, two weeks off. The weeks on the job involve long hours and separation from families.

- Minimum wages are a recurring subject of public interest. Several more indicators related to minimum wages could therefore be justified. A couple of suggestions:

  o Changes in real versus nominal minimum wages. Are the legislated minimums keeping up with inflation?

  o Minimum wages as a proportion of the median (or mean). How do the legislated minimums compare the wages of the typical worker?

- The focus on high-skill jobs is good but an explicit look at high-paid jobs is also merited. There has been increasing discussion in recent years about the importance of high paid jobs to an economy. In countries with progressive income tax systems, many public services are reliant on tax revenues from highly paid workers. So maximizing the number of highly paid workers might be as important a public policy goal as minimizing low paid work.