Abstract and conclusion FNE-Project

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Abstract

This course will address the key economic and policy linkages between international trade and sustainable development. It will focus primarily on the nexus between trade and the Sustainable Development Goal #8 on decent work and (inclusive and sustained) economic growth. It will start with an introduction to the concept of sustainable socio-economic development, and globalization theories and practice, followed by an empirical impact evaluation of international trade (and investment). From there it will explore linkages between trade, decent work and growth, address issues of distributive fairness related to trade liberalization, and highlight some of the concerns that developing countries have with the decent work agenda. It will discuss specific topic (e.g. the China effect) and cover public and private approaches to protecting labor standards under globalization, specifically strategies to link and enforce labor standards through trade (agreements) and the role of transnational private regulation (voluntary sustainability standards) in improving labor standards in global supply chains. It will also focus on the multilateral system of labor governance, namely the role of the International Labour Organisation in setting, promoting and upholding international labor standards. If time permits, linkages between trade and the environment and sustainable development more generally will be addressed.

Conclusion

The project enabled the creation of a new course examining the two principal types of institutions that condition the effect of trade on labor standards in developing countries as well as the role of the International Labour Organisation in global labor governance. Research-led teaching supported amongst others by two original global datasets on the content of labor provisions in trade agreements and on labor rights violations—one of which could be updated to provide students with state-of-the-art material—the course provided a comprehensive overview of the public and private governance of internationally recognized labor standards in a global economy, with a particular focus on the design features of public policies and private initiatives and their socio-economic effects. The academic debates on the causes and effectiveness of trade-labor linkage strategies were explicitly linked to the UN's SDG framework—particularly to targets 8.1-8.9 and 8.A-B of SDG 8 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all—and thus discussed in terms of co-benefits or trade-offs between the economic and social dimensions. The links between science and policy were further strengthened by way of collaborative teaching between an academic and an ILO staff (with an academic background) as well as a guest lecture from a senior ILO staff on the topic of "The ILO and the SDGs". Also, the instructors' disciplinary backgrounds in political science/international relations and law meant that the legal, political and economic aspects were covered.

One nice thing—but also to some extent a challenge—was that students had different backgrounds with over a third of professionals from IOs, government and civil society organizations. This made the class discussions particularly interesting as the professionals often had first-hand experience with the questions at hand. On the challenging side, implementing a uniform academic-style performance assessment puts these students at a certain disadvantage. In a future realization of the course, I will consider modulating the performance assessment. I also might beef up the part on private labor regulation as this part received less attention compared to the other parts and it is no less relevant.

Promoting SD in Teaching is an outstanding programme for the development of a new course with SD content. Moreover, thanks to the assistance of dedicated people at the UniBE's CDE, I learned quite a few new things regarding didactics, so it was also a great learning experience for me.