

The prevalence of communication. A case study in the communication history of the International Labour Organisation (ILO)

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Abstract

Organisations are – as communication studies know – constituted through communication. Against this theoretical background, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which was founded in 1919 after the end of the First World War as a sub-organisation of the League of Nations, is examined here. It came into being in the course of the Versailles peace negotiations with the aim of harmonising the rules and standards of labour internationally and creating common standards for this purpose. The primary function of the ILO was to collect and disseminate information and communication on labour conditions in the world in order to adopt conventions and make recommendations on the basis of this information (e.g., on daily working hours, night work, women's and children's work, etc.). The external constitution and the internal structure of the organisation were designed for this. The prevalence of the ILO's communication is also confirmed by the considerable communication costs and the wide range of communication instruments it used. Methodologically, this is a hermeneutic examination of the sources produced by the ILO in the process of its foundation and establishment. The organisation documented and archived its activities extensively from the beginning.

Keywords

organisational communication, International Labour Organisation (ILO), internationalisation, labour and social policy

1 Introduction

In communication science it is known that organisations and communication are interrelated and have created their own field of research (“organisational communication”; Theis-Berglmair, 2003). In the meantime, this field is well developed and encompasses a variety of approaches and conceptualisations. For a long time, communication was understood instrumentally, as a means to achieve the goals and purposes of the organisation. More recently, however, the relationship between the two phenomena has been defined much more fundamentally, on the assumption that “organisations are communicatively constituted” (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Schoeneborn, 2013). This assumes that organisations emerge from ongoing communication processes and cannot be thought of without them. Even within this tradition of thought, there are now various schools of concepts and differentiations.

With this theoretical background in mind, the communication history of a major international organisation, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), will be examined below. By tracing how this organisation came into being and developed in its early years, it will become clear what a primary role did communication and communication processes play in this process. This latter aspect has remained almost entirely absent from previous literature on the ILO (Alcock, 1971; Maul, 2019; Servais, 2011; Tosstorff, 2005, 2020; Van Daele, Rodríguez García, Von Goethem, & van der Linden, 2010). If this deficit is to be addressed here, it is in two respects: not only to describe the instrumental use of communication by the ILO, but also to show in what respects the ILO was constituted by communication. The extent to which this was the case justifies speaking of a “prevalence of communication” in this instance. Here, this term is not used in the strict sense of medical statistics, but as in a generalisable understanding.



A German dictionary speaks of “preponderance” or “having priority” to explain this (“Prävalenz”, n. d.).

Methodologically, the following is a hermeneutic examination of the sources produced by the ILO in the process of its foundation and establishment. The organisation documented and archived its activities comprehensively from the very beginning. Of central importance is the *Official Bulletin*, a continuously printed periodical with various contents: official documents of the ILO, the minutes, motions and resolutions of its general conferences, of the meetings of its governing body and the numerous commissions. This also included documentation of the budget and internal changes. It also printed important (circular) letters and the questionnaires used for surveys. Furthermore, the *Bulletin* constantly reported on innovations in the labour legislation of the member countries. For this reason, it was essential to strive for objectivity, which adds to the value of the source. In addition, there are some early collections of sources and contemporary accounts (Shotwell, 1934; Solano, 1920) as well as the ILO’s other extensive publications (see below). Not to be forgotten as a source of their own kind are the numerous photographs available from the early days of the ILO. Although they do not speak to us verbally, they show us things visually. The guiding principle for the evaluation of the sources was their relevance to the guiding research question how and by which means communication was constitutive for the International Labour Organisation. The study presented here is made possible above all by the fact that the ILO has now excellently digitised its source material and made it accessible via its website. On this website, a special link “History of the ILO” leads to a retrospective self-portrayal (“History of the ILO”, 2019).

2 Communication as the root: Founding the organisation

The founding of ILO was already the result of communication, namely the peace negotiations after the end of the First World

War. If the “root-metaphor” is used for this, this already casts a specific perspective on the object of analysis, namely a “symbolic frame” (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 369). Roots are life-giving and bring something out of the sub-ground and make it grow. After years of military weapons and international communication dominated by propaganda, the conclusion of a peace treaty required the hostile states to make a fresh start and communicate directly with each other.

However, this was not a symmetrical communication between the victorious powers and the war losers (Conze, 2018; Leonhard, 2018; Platthaus, 2018). Rather, one must speak of a “peace dictate”. The expectations of a new era of open diplomacy, raised in particular by U. S. president Woodrow Wilson, were also disappointed (Steller, 2011, p. 361–470). After all, in Versailles (and the other places where the former enemy powers met), not only was the end of the military use of arms sealed and arrangements made for the consequences of the war (territorial cessions, reparations, demilitarisation). It also paved the way for a future peace order in Europe (and the world). Such an order seemed desirable, even urgent, for the sphere of human labour. Social conflicts that could possibly trigger uprisings were to be avoided as far as possible or at least settled amicably.

On 25 January 1919, the Peace Conference established a Commission on International Labour Legislation. It was only one of 58 commissions involved in the negotiation of the peace treaty and its level of complexity is documented (Steller, 2011, p. 391). After 35 meetings, from 1 February to 24 March 1919, the said commission submitted its report (Alcock, 1971, p. 18–37; ILO OB I, 1923, p. 1–259; Maul, 2019, p. 24–30; Shotwell, 1934, p. 149–322; Tossorff, 2020, p. 46–57). It contained a draft convention to create a Permanent Organisation for the Promotion of the International Regulation of Labour Conditions. The stenographic minutes of the meeting make it possible to follow the discussion of the individual articles in the Commission. In the mode of communication one fol-

lowed parliamentary customs, for example through the practice of three readings. The main concern was how the future institution should be organised and function, not so much its objectives. The fact that, in addition to government representatives from each country, employers' and employees' representatives should also be involved was less controversial than the question of how many there should be in each case (Tosstorff, 2020, p. 48).

The starting point for the debates in the commission was a British draft. On 11 April 1919, the Peace Conference confirmed the final draft. The defeated enemy states and the countries that remained neutral were not represented in the commission. When they were informed of the outcome, the German delegation responded with counter-proposals and its own draft of an International Workers' Charter (ILO OB I, 1920, pp. 309–326). However, Georges Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister and chairman of the Peace Conference, rejected this on behalf of the Allies as “deficient” and “inferior”. With minor modifications, the Commission's draft was incorporated into the Versailles Peace Treaty as Part XIII with Articles 387–426 (the same wording was also used in the peace treaties with Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Turkey). With the signing of the treaty on 10 January 1920, the ILO came into being, at the same time, incidentally, as the League of Nations, that other large representative body established for international cooperation (Bendiner, 1975; Ikonomou & Gram-Skjoldager, 2019; Lange, 1991; Walters, 1952). From then on, the ILO functioned as its sub-organisation. Its secretariat, initially located in London, moved to Geneva, Switzerland, on 19 July 1919, henceforth the headquarters of the ILO (as well as the League of Nations).

Since the late 19th century – in the course of the internationalisation that has since spread (Herren, 2009; Sluga, 2013) – there have been initiatives to reach agreements on rules and standards in the area of work. In 1900, the International Association for the Protection of Labour (IALL) was founded, with an office that began its work the following year in Basle, Switzer-

land, as the “International Labour Office”. A number of country sections came into being, and several conferences were still held in the pre-war period. Even during the war years, these initiatives did not completely evaporate (Shotwell, 1934, p. 1–145). Such preliminary stages were followed up in 1919/20.

After the turn of the century, the trade union movements that had already emerged in various countries had also sought to improve common social standards through international cooperation. In 1913, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) was founded, which had already been preceded by a respective secretariat since 1901. As a result of the outbreak of the First World War, this also came to a halt, so that a reconstruction was necessary in 1919, to a certain extent parallel to the founding of the ILO, where the IFTU was given consultative status (Tosstorff, 2005, 2020). It could only achieve its goals there as far as this was possible due to an agreement with the governments and the employers. The latter also began to organise internationally (International Organisation of Industrial Employers) in 1920 on the basis of common interests (Ghebali, 1989).

The 39 articles of the Peace Treaty mentioned above formed the “Constitution of the International Labour Organisation” (ILO, 1920, p. 1). In its first section, the reasons for its establishment – often unjust and poor working conditions in the world – are cited. Examples given were working hours, unemployment, adequate pay, women's and children's work, health and accident protection, as well as the principle of workers' free self-organisation and vocational training. These complexes of social life posed a threat to national and international peace, which could only be based on social justice.

The founding members of the ILO initially included the 29 contracting parties at the time of the peace agreement: Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, the British Empire, Canada, China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Italy, Japan, Liberia, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Po-

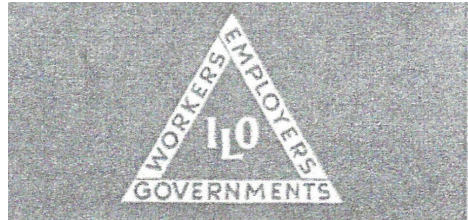
land, Portugal, Romania, the Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian State, Siam, South Africa, and Uruguay. Another 13 countries were also declared founding members: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Paraguay, Persia, Salvador, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Venezuela. European and South American countries in particular were initially members, but only five from Asia and only two from Africa. In 1920, the decolonisation of large parts of the world was still pending. The United States was not a member, nor did it initially join the League of Nations, although its founding was primarily the result of a proposal by U. S. president Wilson. Germany and Austria, which had lost the war, were also missing from the list of founding members (Fehlinger, 1927). However, they were already admitted to the first General Conference in Washington in 1919 (by 71 votes to one) and joined the ILO in 1920, rather than the League of Nations. The supporters wanted Germany to join because of its importance as a large industrialised country.

3 Organisational structure of the ILO

Articles 387 to 395 of the Peace Treaty laid down the organisational structure of the ILO. Two permanent institutions were envisaged: the General Conference of Representatives of the Members and the International Labour Office (called *Internationales Arbeitsamt* in German). The General Conference was to meet at least once a year. Each country could send four representatives, two from the government and one each to represent the interests of employers and workers. This was hailed – along with universalism, namely the potential inclusion of the whole world – as the ILO's basic principle of “tripartism”. In addition to its practical significance, it also had a highly symbolic meaning, which was later represented by a triangular visual signet (Figure 1). The principle later found expression in the new headquarters building on the shores of Lake Geneva, which was finished in 1974 (Central Block,

North Wing, South Wing) (Figure 2).¹ At the ILO conferences, even the seating arrangement was based on this principle: The representatives of the governments sat in the middle, those of the workers' organisations on the left and those of the employers on the right. Visual, architectural and proxemic sign systems thus also had a communicative function in the ILO's self-presentation.

Figure 1: Signet of the International Labour Organisation



Source: The International Labour Organisation. A Reference Handbook (1951) (excerpt).

Figure 2: Headquarters of the International Labour Organisation (1974) (Geneva)



Source: 100 years of ILO History. A house for social justice — past, present and future (2018).

The representatives of the ILO member countries could call in further experts. However, these did not have the right to vote. The General Conference had to decide on conventions and recommendations for labour rules and labour standards, which had to be ratified by the member countries after 18 months at the latest in order to become national law.

1 After its foundation in 1919, the ILO was initially housed in Geneva in an existing building called La Châteline.

However, there was no obligation to do so. The first General Conference, which took fundamental decisions, was still held in Washington in 1919, the following ones in Genoa, then mainly in Geneva, but also in other metropolises of the world. The first main issues the ILO dealt with and sought conventions on, were the limitation of daily or weekly working hours, unemployment, adequate remuneration, the work of women and children, protection against sickness and accidents, as well as the principle of free self-organisation and vocational training (Maul, 2019). These complexes of social life were seen as threats to national and international peace, which were to be counteracted.

For the General Conferences, there were formalised rules of procedure with strict regulations for the conduct of debates, following the customs of parliamentary communication. They concerned the admission of speakers, the use of two official languages (English and French, otherwise translations),² the limitation of speaking time, the concentration of speeches on “general principles”, as well as rules for the intervention of the president and the way in which decisions were taken. Interruptions and “audible conversations” that disrupted the proceedings were not allowed. Everything was to be documented by “Verbatim Reports” (“Standing Orders”, ILO B I/1920, pp. 442–450). The link between communication and effective decision-making preoccupied the ILO for years.³

2 Speeches in French and English “had to be summarized in the other language. If someone spoke in another language his delegation had to give a translation by an interpreter in English and French” (Art. 11). As photos show, this form of presentation was facilitated in the course of the 1920s by the use of headphones and simultaneous interpreters.

3 In 1924 a “second-reading procedure” in two successive sessions had been introduced in the sense of a “more thorough-procedure of discussion”: “This procedure did not prove as advantageous as had been hoped. It certainly helped to slacken the speed at which the Conference worked, by spreading the discussion of each question over a period of two years. But, in practice, it had certain

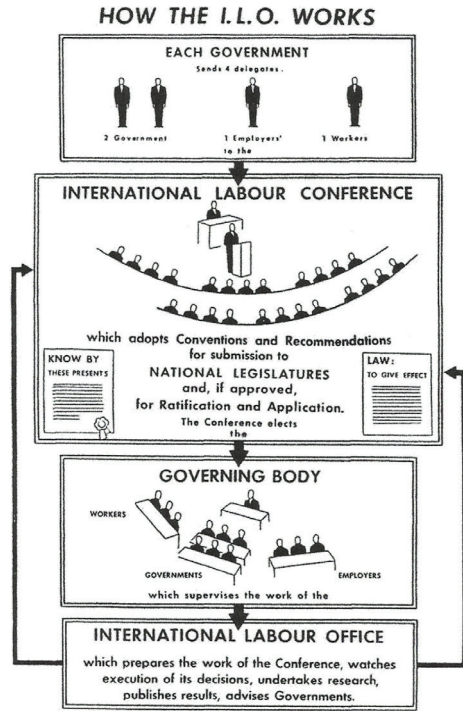
The procedures for internal communication had already been tested at the first General Conference in Washington in 1919. The debates were still held only in English and French, without translation (“interpretation”). “But this means discussions were greatly shortened” – noted the General Secretary H. B. Butler, obviously pleased (1920, p. 208). In order to ensure an equal level of information, printed reports of the previous day’s negotiations were presented each morning in three languages (besides English and French, in Spanish). In order to shorten the discussions, selected spokesmen were supposed to summarise the respective statements of the groups. Butler also believed that it was not a disadvantage, but rather a benefit,

serious drawbacks. While it had been hoped that the interval of a year would enable the holders of opposing theories to arrive at an agreement and produce a formula which would make ratification possible for a greater number of States, events showed that the exact opposite was the case. The intervening period was, in fact, used by all parties as an opportunity to defend and justify their attitude at the Conference in the eyes of public opinion. When delegates met a year later, they were more closely tied than before to the views which they had supported. These views were sometimes embodied in proposed amendments to the texts adopted at the first reading. Instead of suggesting amendments on points of detail, as had been the original intention of the authors of the system, they proposed to alter the Drafts adopted at the preceding Session in some of their essential points.” Based on this experience, the system was replaced in 1926 by a “double discussion procedure”: “The first stage consisted of a general discussion which more or less cleared the ground; at the close, the Conference would decide by a two-thirds majority whether the question should be placed on the agenda of the following Session, and if so on what points decisions should be taken by the Conference. The second discussion would take place at the next Session, and it would only be then that the text of a Convention or Recommendation might be adopted. In short, at the first Session the Conference would discuss a problem on a general basis, and at the second it would discuss the draft of a Convention on the subject” (International Labour Office, 1931, pp. 73–74).

that the governments were represented by two delegates, while the workers (like the employers) were represented by only one delegate from each country. For example, the former often voted in a split (Butler, 1920, pp. 210–211).

A Governing Body was formed as the executive body of the ILO according to the same “tripartite” principle. Of its initial 24 members, 12 were appointed by governments, eight of them nominated by the most important industrialised countries. Who belonged to these was decided by the League of Nations. Six members each of the Governing Body were elected by the delegates to the General Conference from among the employers and the workers. The members of the Governing Body appointed a chairman. The International Labour Office was headed by the Director. The first was Albert Thomas, a French socialist, who had been Minister of Armaments during the war (Tosstorff, 2020, pp. 84–110). He was represented by a Deputy Director. Cox called the regiment in the ILO a “limited monarchy” (Cox, 1974, p. 102). According to Article 395 of the Versailles Peace Treaty, the Director had to employ personnel composed of different nationalities. “A certain number of these persons,” it continued, “shall be women.”⁴ Director Albert Thomas also demanded bilingualism. “It will, moreover, be required as far as possible that all the members of the Staff should understand both English and French” (ILO, 1920, p. 26). The Governing Body was empowered to set up commissions to deal with specific issues. The Peace Treaty itself already provided for a Commission of Enquiry. Figure 3 shows a simplified organisation chart of the ILO.

Figure 3: Organisation chart of the International Labour Organisation



Source: The International Labour Organisation. A Reference Handbook (1951).

4 Information and communication as primary functions of the Office

The ILO’s tasks were defined in several articles of its constitution. The terms “information” and “communication” run through them like a red thread. Although these were not defined, one senses that two types of processes were intended. In the case of the former, a targeted one-way process (in the sense of imparting knowledge or eliminating ignorance), and in the case of the latter, a two-way process (in the sense of exchange, both technically and in terms of content). The basic formulation of Article 396:

The functions of the International Labour office shall include the collection and distribution of information on all subjects relating to the international adjustment of conditions of

4 As the ILO’s rich photographic material from the 1920s documents, it was still mainly men who held offices and spoke in the organisation. In 1923, a photo shows only five female delegates, in 1934 there were 13. As workers, women were still largely employed in service occupations, as telephone operators, stenotypists and interpreters. The situation was very similar at the League of Nations at that time (Pinguet, 2019).

industrial life and labour, and particularly the examination of subjects which it is proposed to bring before the Conference with a view to the conclusion of international conventions, and the conduct of such special investigations as may be ordered by the Conference. (ILO The Labour Provisions, 1920, p. 4)

The activity of the Office is defined here primarily as a centre for collection and distribution of information in preparation for the deliberations and decisions of the General Conference. This task is specified and supplemented in several other paragraphs in the Constitution. The governments of the member states were to communicate directly with the Director of the Office through their representatives in the Governing Body (Article 397). Ratifications of conventions were to be communicated to the Director and the Secretary General of the League of Nations. Each country was to submit an annual report on the means it had taken to implement the ILO conventions or recommendations. In cases where complaints were made, for example by the Commission on Enquiry, it was also expressly ordered that these be communicated.

The ILO constitution not only determined the great inner-systemic importance of communication for the organisation, but also shaped its task that was directed outwards. Article 396 stated that: “It will edit and publish in French and English, and in such other languages as the Governing Body may think desirable, a periodical paper, dealing with problems of industry and employment of international interest” (ILO The Labour Provisions, 1920, p. 4).

5 Internal organisation of the Office

The first important task for the Office was to establish an internal organisation. This was not easy to do, as there were hardly any models for such an international organisation. After Albert Thomas was elected Director (he served until 1932), he submitted a memorandum to the Governing Body with a provisional organisation schema

for the Office. Communication was again inherent here in two ways. On the one hand, as a recurring element in the objectives of the individual departments, and on the other, because the Governing Body in turn commented on the memorandum and took a position on it (ILO OB 1, 1920, pp. 7–10, 26–31; Thomas, 1920). Even more than the constitution of the ILO, the memorandum recurred to the manifold tasks of internal and external communication as an organising principle of the Office. In its own way, all the designated departments had to serve it: a Translation Staff as well as a Central Typewriting Staff and the Printing Branch, the three Main Departments (Diplomatic Division, Scientific Department, Political Department). “Nothing is more difficult,” Thomas stated, “to organise, to distribute in a large administration, than the various press services” (Thomas, 1920, p. 28). Repetition and overlap were to be avoided, but different agencies would have to deal with the press. At one point, a Central Press Branch was envisaged in the Director’s Secretariat, which

will work in contact with the Press Branch of the League of Nations. This branch alone will, when necessary, approach the newspapers in order that they may make the work of the Office known to the public and help to popularise it. (Thomas, 1920, p. 28)

On the other hand (in the second department) through “a methodical collection of all press announcements ... concerning social movements which will be of service also to the League of Nations” (Thomas, 1920, p. 28). With slight modifications, the Office was set up according to the proposed plan. It was to be autonomous, even if it was subordinate to the League of Nations with regard to finances and jurisdiction (ILO OB 1, 1920, pp. 7–10):

- › *The Cabinet*: Director, Secretariat of the Director, Special Staff, Press Relations Officer
- › *The Common Services*: Deputy Director, Establishment Sector, Financial Relations and Commercial Services, Section for the Examination and Control of Ex-

penditure, Section of Accountancy, Section for Staff questions

- › *The Diplomatic Division*
- › *The Scientific [1922: Research] Division*
- › *[1922: Intelligence and Liaison Division]*
- › Technical Services
- › National Correspondents

At the head of the organisation was the Director with the *Cabinet* together with a Special Staff, “containing representatives of all the most important countries, specially organised in order to keep the Office constantly in touch with the Trade Union movements in the different countries...” (ILO OB 1, 1920, p. 8). This staff was thus again mainly assigned a communicative function, namely with the respective system-relevant environment. The “press branch” was supposed to work from the inside to the outside, in connection with a corresponding department of the League of Nations.

The second department, *Common Services*, was headed by the Deputy Director and comprised five sections. The Establishment Sector contained the registry (especially of correspondence) and material responsibilities. This also included a “pool of French and English typists and duplicators...” (ILO OB 1, 1920, p. 8). The Section for Financial Relations and Commercial Services was charged “with all the commercial or quasi-commercial activities of the Office, such as the sale of its publications, etc.” (ILO OB 1, 1920, p. 8). The activities of both sections were thus also directly or indirectly in the service of the Office’s communication. Three further sections had administrative purposes (Examination and Control of Expenditure, Accountancy, Staff Questions).

The *Diplomatic Division* had to organise the substantive work of the Office, i.e., prepare meetings and conferences, monitor the ratification of the conventions in the member countries and ensure “official communication” with the Secretariat of the League of Nations. The name of the Division, as well as the choice of the term *Cabinet* for the governing body of the Office, bring to mind similarities to established political-administrative bodies and

instruments (“Cabinet (government)”, n. d.). The original idea of a separate *Political Division* was dropped.

The *Scientific Division* was to fulfil the tasks according to Article 396 of the Peace Treaty,

namely, the collection and distribution of information on all subjects relating to the international adjustment of conditions of industrial life and labour. It is accordingly responsible for the publications of the Office, including the continuation of the legislative publications of the Labour Office of Basle, and for the collection, classification and dissemination of information on labour and social subjects. (ILO OB 1, 1920, p. 8)

The division, which can already be seen as an instrument of scientific communication, was divided into five sections: “The Intelligence Section follows the daily press and periodical literature for events happening in the field of labour and industry” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 12). It also included the Translation Branch in five languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish). This was indispensable in an international organisation, both orally at the General Conferences and the meetings of the organs of the Office as well as in the production of written documents and printed material. The second subdivision was the Publications Section “which has the charge of editing and printing of all publications issued by the Office” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 12). Another small section was responsible for the Legislative Series, consisting “of translations or reprints of the principal labour laws issued during the year in various countries....” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 12). Furthermore, the Statistic Section and the Library were assigned to the *Scientific Division*, the latter “growing at the rate of about 100 per day. The library is also responsible for receiving and distributing all the periodicals and newspapers received at the Office which now amount to a very considerable number” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 13). In addition, the library of the predecessor institute in Basle had been taken over.

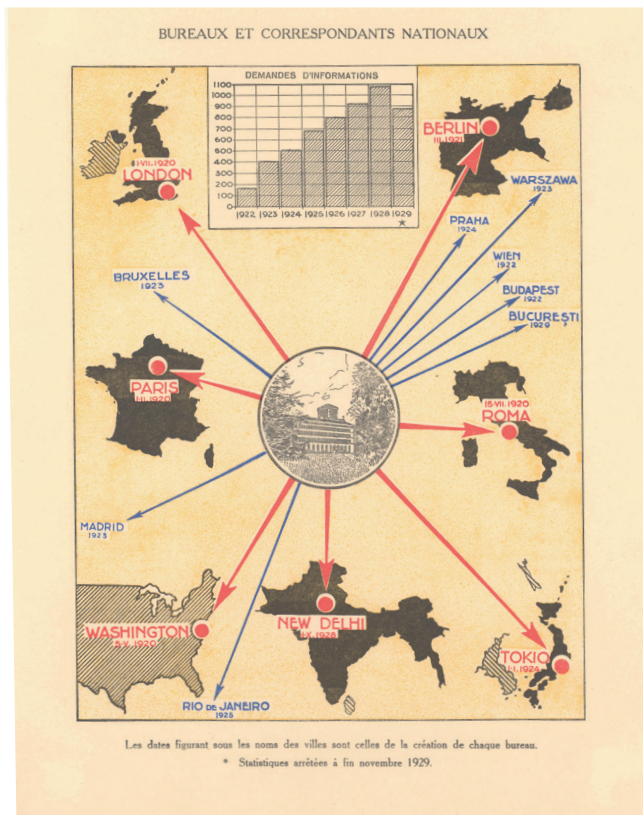
The *Diplomatic* and *Scientific Divisions* were able to draw on the support of eight Technical Services for various sub-areas of the world of work. Their function was again described as “to keep the Office informed of the latest developments in the most important fields of social problems...” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 9).

Finally, there were National Correspondents whose task was “to keep closely in touch with the movements in their respective countries and to render assistance in connection with rapid investigations and enquiries” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 9). On the one hand, they had to provide the head office in Geneva with information on working conditions and socio-political aspirations in their home countries or to meet the need for relevant knowledge.

On the other hand, they had to communicate the ILO’s decisions and proposed measures to relevant actors and the public in their respective countries. Initially there were four correspondents, in Paris, London, Rome, and Washington. The number of these liaison officers was successively extended to other countries in the following years. In 1951, there were 29. Figure 4 shows the communication network with the liaison offices at the end of the 1920s. Interesting is the diagram inserted at the top of the graph, which shows how the number of enquiries increased in the course of these years. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make more detailed statements, for example about the content.

The internal structure of the International Labour Office demonstrates through

Figure 4: ILO National Correspondence Offices (1929)



and through the prevalence of communication both as a goal and as a functional principle and means of organisation. Internationality demanded a composition of staff “of many different nationalities, accustomed to different varieties of administrative method... [and] attempting to work together for the common end...” (ILO OB X, 1, 1920, p. 9). Experience was expected, but also “sufficient flexibility to enable it to be adjusted to new demands as they arise...” (ILO OB X, 1, 1920, p. 9).

The work of the newly established organisation was reviewed by the Commission of Enquiry as early as 1921. On the basis of its observations, it made a number of proposals for changes (ILO OB III, 1921, pp. 14–17). The Cabinet system was seen as too centralised, to the detriment of the heads of the individual divisions. This should be modified once the Office had been consolidated. In addition, the Commission’s report called for closer co-ordination between the Divisions and the Technical Services. A regrouping of the divisions was also proposed. Consequences were drawn from this in 1922 (ILO OB V, 5, 1922, pp. 1–6). A new, third division with three sections was formed under the name *Intelligence and Liaison Division*. Basically, the Office’s communicative tasks were strengthened once again. The General Section of the division comprised, in addition to a National Information Service subdivided according to language groups, a Social Information Service, a secretariat and archive, “charged with preserving cuttings from newspapers and information in periodicals and with furnishing the Scientific Division with its raw materials” (ILO OB V, 5, 1922, p. 4) There was also the Translation Service. A second section was responsible for liaison with employers’ and workers’ organisations, and a third served as the ILO’s Sales and Publicity Branch. In addition, the library remained affiliated to the new division. In the course of the internal reorganisation, the *Scientific Division* was renamed the *Research Division*.

6 Communication costs

The importance of communication as the primary function of the ILO can be seen from other indicators, especially the financial expenditure. According to Article 399 of the Peace Treaty, the member states had to pay for their representatives at the General Conference or in the Governing Body themselves. All other expenses of the Office were to be met from the general budget of the League of Nations. The budget of the ILO was a delicate matter, it had to be carefully calculated and was supervised by a Financial Commission. This cannot and need not be examined in detail here. However, the budget plan for 1921 should be considered as an example (Figure 5).

Figure 5: ILO budget estimate for 1921

Estimates for 1921 adopted by the Governing Body.		
GENERAL SUMMARY.		
		Gold Francs
Subhead A	Salaries	3,070,000
» B	Travelling and Miscellaneous	318,000
» C	Establishment and Office Expenses	1,560,000
» D	Correspondents and collection of information	455,000
» E	Conferences and Enquiries	670,000
» F	Non-recurring Expenditure	384,000
» G	Emergency Expenditure	143,000
	Total Estimate	6,600,000 ⁵
	Balance	400,000
		7,000,000
	League of Nations Enquiry	10,000
	Total as voted by the Assembly of the League	7,010,000

Source: ILO OB III, 6 (1921, p. 166).

For the total budget this year more than 7 000 000 Swiss gold francs (GF) were earmarked.⁵ There was no separate budget item for “communication costs”. But those are hidden in a whole series of cost centres. First of all, salaries, which accounted for the lion’s share of the total budget at 3 070 000 gold francs (= 44 %). The salaries were distributed among all sections. The staff of the Governing Body already

5 The gold franc was an international fictitious currency in the 1920s (until 2003), originally introduced as a uniform measure of value for the settlement of postal and telecommunications services. It was equivalent to 0.81 German Reichsmark (after the end of rampant inflation in Germany) (“Goldfranken,” n.d.).

comprised in 1926 129 persons, 362 were responsible for administrative obligations, 43 for editorial and publishing expenses, 44 in the “Diplomatic Section” and 71 in the “Scientific Section” (Fehlinger, 1927, p. 26). The *Scientific Division*, whose five departments were entrusted with communications tasks in various ways (see above), required the most funds (801 850 GF), followed by Central Services (712 052 GF). Communication costs in the Establishment Branch included the telephone service, the registry with the increasing correspondence of the Office, the Distribution Branch “with the constantly increasing number of publications which have to be dispatched, amounting sometimes to as many as 2000 per day” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 9). The Financial and Printing Services had to take care of the public output of the ILO. The development of printing capacities and sales required relevant investments. The expenses for the material production of the publications were booked under Establishment and Office Expenses (a total of 816 000 GF). For post, telegraphy, and telephone, 185 000 GF were earmarked. The costs for the pool of typists and stenographers also had to do with (international) communication.

The share of salaries was also considerable in the *Cabinet*, from where the connection to the national labour organisations and correspondents had to be centrally maintained. “The Director must also keep himself informed not only of the general economic and social life of the various countries, but also of all the other circumstances of which a knowledge is indispensable to timely and effective action” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, pp. 7–8). This required a whole series of employees speaking different languages. The same applied to the offices of the correspondents, without whose supply the Office would not have been able to carry out its tasks. The highest expenses were for the office in Washington. For 1921, modest costs were foreseen for the first time for an office in Berlin, “partly because a very large number of enquiries are received as to industrial developments in Germany... and partly because very special interest is taken by the German organ-

isations in the work of the Office” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 8).

The costs of organising the conferences and surveys (620 000 GF) also largely related to the organisation of direct or indirect communication, be it their preparation, their conduct or their publication (“reporting and publication of provisional and final records”, ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 9).

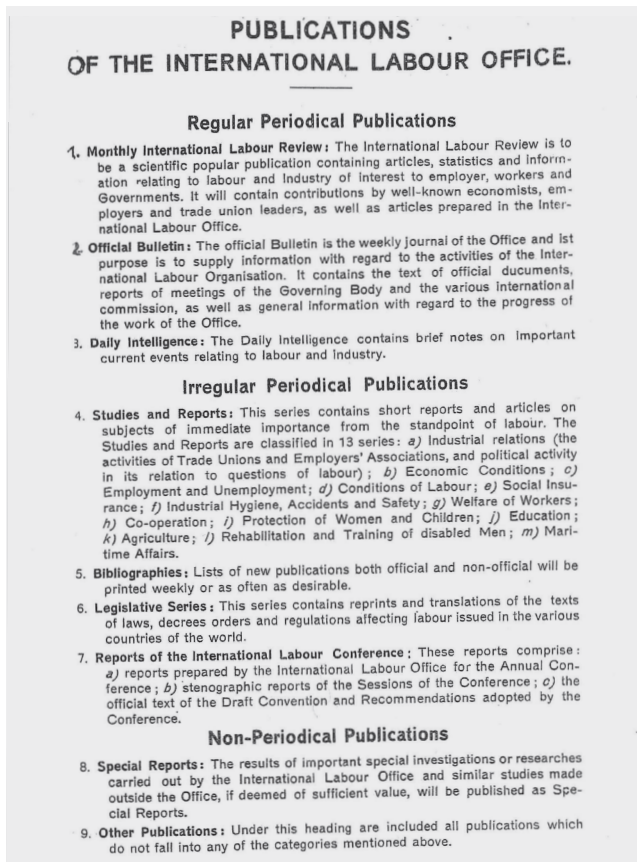
Calculating its financial budget initially confronted the ILO with some problems, especially as it began to expand rapidly. Some of the cost centres had to be rethought. The high proportion of printing costs, for example, led to the consideration of setting up its own print shop. A particular problem was the high postage costs that had to be paid in Switzerland. In this matter, the director of the ILO turned to the Swiss Federal Council and the International Postal Union as early as 1920/21. Referring to the international obligations imposed on the ILO by the Peace Treaty, he tried to obtain cost-effective regulations for its postal traffic, as the League of Nations had already done in turn (Lange, 1991). He justified this with the circumstance that “the working of an organisation so completely new as the International Labour Office raises problems which have no analogy in the past and to which consequently it should be possible to find new solutions” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 37). However, a resolution of the Governing Body to guarantee the ILO freedom of postage for its mailings under the same conditions as the national administrations was rejected by the Swiss authorities at the time, as was a kind of “postal autonomy”.

Not surprisingly, the ILO’s budget grew rapidly with its expansion in the following years. As early as 1922, the budget rose to 8 750 000 Swiss gold francs (an increase of a quarter).

7 Communication tools

The information and communication function mainly imposed on the ILO resulted, as already mentioned, in extensive publication activity. The ILO’s own advertisements distinguished between

Figure 6: Types of ILO publications



Source: ILO OB 1 (1921).

three types of publications: Regular Periodical Publications, Irregular Periodical Publications and Non-Periodical Publications (Figure 6).

The first group included three titles that fulfilled the mandate set out in the Constitution in different forms: *Daily Intelligence*, which was published daily from January 1921, initially with 12 to 16 pages, and brought short reports on current events in the international labour world and its organisations. Even the first audit report on the work of the ILO criticised the high costs of this publication and recommended that it should be published less frequently. 120 000 Swiss gold francs a year, which did not even include postage, was too much, especially as the length

of time it took to send the issues by post made the current content seem outdated in distant parts of the world (ILO OB 1, 8, 1920, p. 17). In fact, *Daily Intelligence* was discontinued with the issue of 30 December 1921. It was succeeded the following year by *Industrial and Labour Information* as a weekly periodical of varying scope but largely the same content. News from the field of work in the member countries was documented in more than 15 columns.⁶

6 The headings were: International Labour Organisation, International Labour Legislation, National Labour Organisation, Industrial Organisation, Economic Situation, Employment and Unemployment, Emigration and Immigration, Conditions of Labour, Ex-Servicemen, Social Insurance, Industrial Hygiene

The main advantage of the less frequent publication “was the opportunity of wider and closer investigation of the documents and publications from which its information is drawn” (ILO ILI 1, 1922, p. 3).

As early as 1920, the Office began to report on its work in an *Official Bulletin*. It is a unique source for the history of the ILO and the changes in working conditions and labour rules in the world. It was supposed to be published weekly, but then came out at longer intervals or was summarised at longer intervals. In terms of content there were three focal points:

1. The texts of all formal official documents relating to the work of the Office and to the International Labour Organisation.
2. Miscellaneous information relating to the work of the Office and the progress of activities.
3. Information as to the procedure followed in the various countries with regard to the ratification of Draft Conventions and to the legislative action taken in order to give effect to the Draft Conventions and Recommendations adopted by the International Labour Conference. The texts of important Bills relating to these matters will be printed in extenso with explanatory notes where necessary. (ILO OB, 2, 1921, p. 2)

The *Official Bulletin* published the proceedings and decisions of the General Conferences, informed about activities of the Administrative Council and the various commissions and committees that had been set up for special tasks in accordance with the guidelines of the Constitution. They served special problem areas or gave administrative advice.⁷

ene and Safety, Co-operation, Protection of Women and Race, Education, Agriculture, Maritime Affairs, and Welfare of Workers.

7 These included: Commission on Enquiry, Commission on Standing Orders, International Emigration Commission, Joint Maritime Commission, Commission on the Application of Standards, Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations.

In March 1921, the *International Labour Review* also began to appear, initially on a monthly basis. It was the ILO's scientific journal on the whole field of labour economics (Bollé, 2013). More than twenty subject areas were included in the publication plan submitted by the Director to the International Labour Conference in 1921. The journal became a recognised organ of economic and labour science, in which several later Nobel Prize winners published articles.

All three periodicals mentioned here were published in English and French. German editions were also produced. Not only was Germany immediately admitted to the ILO in 1920. One was also prepared to recognise German as an “auxiliary language” (ILO OB 6–7, 1920, p. 8) because there was an interest for this especially in northern European countries. However, this did not mean that it functioned as an official language (Fehlinger, 1927). The German edition of the *Official Bulletin* was titled *Ämtliche Mitteilungen* until 1922, and *Internationale Rundschau der Arbeit* even until 1940, although Nazi Germany had already left the ILO (as well as the League of Nations) in 1935. An Italian and Spanish version of the latter journal was also published for years from 1922/1923 (Bollé, 2013, pp. 6–7). In the early years, it was difficult for the ILO to determine the subscription fees for the periodicals for different countries. The reason for this was the rampant inflation in many places and the fluctuating exchange rates. These were economic obstacles to the functioning of international communication.

Several types of ILO publications appeared continuously but irregularly. These included studies and reports “on subjects of immediate importance” (in 13 thematically specialised series), bibliographies, Legislative Series with relevant legal texts from various countries, and Reports of the International Labour Conferences. They documented the meetings and resolutions held there. Singular Special Reports on research outside the ILO were also listed under Non-Periodical Publications.

The ILO's work diversified enormously in just a few years. This can also be seen

in the large number of studies and reports that were presented in thematically separate series:

- › Series A: Industrial Relations
- › Series B: Economic Conditions
- › Series C: Unemployment
- › Series E: The Disabled
- › Series F: Industrial Hygiene / Safety
- › Series G: Housing and Welfare
- › Series H: Co-operation
- › Series I: Protection of Women and the Race
- › Series K: Agriculture
- › Series L: Professional Workers
- › Series N: Social Insurance
- › Series O: Migration
- › Series P: Seeds
(ILO, OB III, 2–3, 1921)

In the individual series and reports, different numbers of titles appeared depending on their importance, in the first (A) already more than a dozen within a year. Some of them were also published in several languages, in English and French, and for a while also in German. One pioneering study published 1922 in Series L was in all these three languages dedicated to the life and working conditions of journalists (Artus, 1929; Wilke, 2021). After the Second World War, Spanish was recognised as the third official language.

8 Further development and expansion

This article concentrates on (and is limited to) the history of communication in the founding and start-up phase of the ILO. Its further development can only be briefly sketched here. Inevitably, the organisation was caught up in the maelstrom of the escalating international political conflicts in the 1930s, and these brought it a chequered fate. Although the United States became a member in 1934, Germany left the League of Nations the following year and with it the ILO. Italy, which had been a founding member, followed in December 1939. Even in the case of war, the Governing Body and the participating countries agreed that the work of the

ILO should continue (ILO OB XXV, 1944). However, one year after the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1940 the ILO was forced to withdraw its central administration from Switzerland, which was surrounded by warring states (Alcock, 1971, pp. 151–187; Maul, 2019, pp. 109–134). The headquarters were moved to Montreal, Canada, where they were housed at McGill University.

With the Philadelphia Declaration, the ILO initiated a new programmatic start in 1944. It was not until 1948 that it returned to Geneva. At that time, the organisation had already been a sub-organisation (“Specialised Agency”) of the United Nations (UN) founded in 1946 (as successor to the League of Nations) for two years and received a new version of its constitution in the same year (Alcock, 1971, pp. 188–205; Maul, 2019, pp. 135–140). Like the UN, the ILO experienced enormous expansion from the 1950s onwards, and not only through the growing number of member countries. In the early 1950s, more than 60 states belonged to it; nowadays there are 187 (2022). On the one hand, the Soviet Union and its satellite states also joined the ILO, which meant that the organisation was also confronted with competition from free-market and state-socialist economic systems and became embroiled in the conflicts of the Cold War. The ILO expanded even more, however, because many colonies in Asia and Africa became independent and gave rise to their own state entities. These all aspired to join the ILO, just as they had joined the UN. The result was a structural change in democratisation (Dupuy, 1987). At the same time, this was accompanied by an increase and change in the complex of problems to be dealt with in labour and social policy. The focus of the ILO’s activities shifted from the creation of common and internationally binding standards to technical assistance (Cox, 1974; Maul, 2019).

The internal organisation of the ILO was soon subject to changes with which it had to adapt to new conditions of the system environment. An amendment adopted in 1922, but which did not come into force until 1934, meant that the Gov-

erning Body was now made up of 16 government representatives and eight representatives each of employers and workers. Two of the latter two groups had to come from non-European countries. As a result of the increase in the number of member countries, a further enlargement of the Administrative Council became inevitable, to 56 members, 18 of them government representatives and 14 each from the workers and employers. The bureaucracy as a whole branched out and the staff became more pluralistic. Communication nevertheless remained the central objective and operating principle of the ILO. And, of course, it did not remain unaffected by the far-reaching changes in the instruments and media of communication in the second half of the 20th century. An impression of the complexity of the whole organisation and the placement of communication within it is provided by a look at the ILO's organigram following a reform of the organisational structure introduced in 2013 (ILO, Reform). To describe and analyse this systematically, however, would require a separate study.

9 Conclusions

As outlined earlier, the ILO appears to be a model case of an organisation based on communication. Communication was the very root from which it emerged and communication was its primary purpose and function as defined in its constitution. Both were decisive for its external and internal organisation. For the latter, they created their own procedures and rules of communication. The various communicative sub-functions and tasks accounted for a large part of the communication costs in the total budget of the ILO. Finally, the communication instruments used were numerous and varied.

The ILO was characterised by its specific character and that – as already quoted – “the working of an organisation so completely new as the International Labour Office raises problems which have no analogy in the past and to which consequently it should be possible to find

new solutions” (ILO OB III, 6, 1921, p. 37). The organisation's activities were geared towards international understanding and agreements on a socially acceptable harmonisation of working conditions in the world. In order to achieve this, it was first necessary to take comprehensive stock of the respective status quo. The conventions and recommendations that were then agreed upon had to be implemented in practice by the member countries. In this respect, the ILO lacked power, at least in terms of decision-making and legislative power. Instead, it had to seek a balance, and not only between the opposing goals of the representatives of the “tripartite system” with different logics of action: the profit striving of capital, the workers' striving for social justice and the goals of the state, which depended to a certain extent on the orientation of the governments, but certainly intended the preservation of power and the maintenance of internal peace. Compromises were also necessary between member countries. In the end, conciliation and compromise can only be achieved through communication. Decisions, according to Niklas Luhmann (2018) the main principle of the theory of organisations, concerned at most the formulation of guidelines, which was a matter for the nation states to apply, although they had agreed to do so through their membership. The international character of the ILO was a governing factor with considerable consequences for its communication.

It is not only in principle that the ILO can be viewed under the premises of the “Communication Constitutes Organisation”-perspective. Specific approaches that can be assigned to it can also be related to ILO. For example, the distinction made by Taylor and Every (2000) between the communication modalities “text” and “conversation”, i.e., between forms of written communication that require a certain stability and the necessarily fluid oral exchange. But the interrelationship of “communication produces organisation” and “organisation produces communication” postulated by Ruth Smith can also be illustrated with the help of the ILO (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009, pp. 6–7). The

same applies to the types of organisationally constitutive communication flows with four addressees distinguished by McPhee and Zaug (2009, p. 21).

They [i.e., organisations] must enunciate and maintain relations to their members through membership negotiation, to themselves as formally controlled entities through self-structuring, to their internal subgroups and processes through activity coordination and to their colleagues in a society of institutions through institutional positioning.

In the first case, then, it is a matter of communication with the members or their representatives, in the second it is a matter of reflexive self-structuring and self-control of the actors, in the third it is a matter of coordination of the work processes, and in the fourth it is a matter of institutional self-positioning at the macro level with, for example, governments and partners (such as the League of Nations). Finally, to speak with Luhmann (2018, pp. 26–60), one will also be able to understand the ILO as an “autopoietic system” that produces the elements of which it consists from itself. As much as it separated itself from the outside by closing itself off, it cannot be overlooked that the impetus for the creation of the organisation came from the environment and that this was essential for its maintenance.

This raises the question of whether the ILO only had autopoietic functions or how far its actions actually extended. The General Secretary H. B. Butler (1920, p. 238) had already said at the first General Conference in 1919 that international conferences “have met frequently in the past, and have adopted manifold resolutions which have done little but increase the quantity of printed matter in the world”, and he added to this statement the question: “Will the decisions of the Washington Conference be translated into action, or will they meet a similar fate?” If one wanted to answer the question raised adequately, one would have to go into the activities of the ILO in detail. This cannot be done here, especially since this article was intended to be historical-genetic rather

than communication-theoretical. For the rest, reference can be made at the end to the existing literature (Maul, 2007, 2019).

The above study goes back a hundred years and describes beginnings in two respects: On the one hand, it led into the early days of international organisations, in which they first had to find their role and develop their functions, and on the other hand, into a much earlier phase of media and communication history, in which the means and use of communication were still far less developed and complex than today. There were still hardly any role models and blueprints to orient oneself by, but had to find pragmatic solutions for the problems of international organisations and their communication step by step. At best, common practices from other political organisations could be adopted or adapted. This happened close to other international organisations that were emerging at the time, such as the League of Nations in particular. Moreover, innovation forced a learning process in which the ILO’s communication was subjected to several transformations and changes in the course of the founding phase – in a continuous process of trial and error, so to speak. The ILO has been forced to do so again and again up to the present day in order to adapt its services to changes in the organisation and its assignments, as well as its working conditions and the media of communication.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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