



SOUTH AFRICA

**A TRADE UNION
FOCUS ON THE SDGs**

#HLPF2024

**WORKERS
DEMAND A
NEW SOCIAL
CONTRACT**

WORKERS NEED DURABLE RESPONSES TO MULTIPLE CRISES

The South African government has implemented various programmes to address the ongoing multiple crises. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government worked closely with trade unions and businesses to address occupational health and safety, provide subsidies compensating workers for lost wages and support businesses in retaining employees.

To address the food crisis, the South African government has put in place a basic social security grant enabling nearly half of the population of the country, including 8 million unemployed persons, to buy food. However, by 2025, around half of the population is projected to be struggling from food insecurity and hunger, suggesting more long-term actions will be necessary.

A Just Energy Transition Investment Plan is being put in place to enable the country to move from carbon intensive to cleaner forms of energy generation – initial efforts will focus on moving away from coal and supporting impacted coal workers, investments in new energy vehicles and green hydrogen. In October 2023, the National Assembly approved a Climate Change Bill, which if approved by the National Council of Provinces and the President, would legally bind the country to reduce its emissions.

ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

While South Africa has no designated SDG plan as such, it has integrated the objectives of the 2030 Agenda into individual government departments' annual plans and the country's budget. Each government entity – both ministries and municipalities – are responsible for the implementation of their sectoral objectives in this regard. Overall, trade unions report that sufficient resources have been allocated to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but challenges remain in connection to raising the tax revenue needed to fund the country's development.

Trade unions report that there has been an improvement in the implementation of the SDGs in South Africa, as the government has accelerated its fight against corruption at the level of local governments and state-owned enterprises – seen as one of the main impediments to development. Trade unions also welcome measures such as the passing by the parliament of a National Health Insurance Bill

laying the foundation for universal health care, and the pending pension reforms and transformation of the unemployment grant into a universal basic income grant, which are set to advance the implementation of the SDGs.

Transparency on decision making, including on the implementation of the SDGs, is mandated by South Africa's constitution. Trade unions suggest that the government provides accurate information in this regard, although this could at times be more extensive. The National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) is consulted on the government's development policy, with discussions covering both SDG 8 and other goals. Trade unions also participate in parliamentary hearings. Trade unions report that their input is, in most instances, taken on board by the government.

TRANSPARENCY



Regular access to limited information

CONSULTATION



There is a structured consultation/
multi-stakeholder platform

SOCIAL DIALOGUE



There are tripartite instances to implement
and monitor the SDGs involving



IS THE (DECENT) WORK GETTING DONE?

Despite being classified as a highly developed country, South Africa's indicators for **target 1.1 (eradicating extreme poverty)** are worrying, as the country's human development index (HDI) has been decreasing since 2019. The working poverty rate has also slightly increased between 2021 (8.8 per cent) and 2023 (8.9 per cent). With regards to **target 1.3 (nationally appropriate social protection systems)**, in 2022, 63.4 per cent of the population benefitted from any type of social security benefit – however, whilst only 14.1 per cent of the unemployed received social benefits in 2020, which trade unions attribute to high levels of informal workers not being able to contribute to unemployment insurance schemes. In 2021, government introduced a new social grant for unemployed persons which is currently reaching 8 million out of 11 million unemployed persons.

On **SDG 5**, data for 2000-2010 shows that women carried the lion's share of unpaid care and domestic work in South Africa, spending 71 per cent of their productive hours on work in the household. Men spent only 11.2 per cent of their time on care for household members. This suggests an urgent need for progress on **target 5.4 (recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work)**. With regards to **target 5.5 (women's full and effective participation)**, the proportion of seats held by women in parliament increased from 30 per cent in 2000 to 46.2 per cent in 2023, although trade unions report that progress has not been as pronounced in the private sector. A ministry responsible for women was established within the office of the presidency to ensure gender-responsive policy making and budgeting, although trade unions report that tangible results remain to be seen.

Significant improvements remain to be made on SDG 8. Progress should be made on **target 8.3 (support decent job creation)** as informal employment outside of agriculture stood at 33.7 per cent in 2023. In addition, trade unions estimate that at least a quarter of all jobs could be classified as vulnerable. Indicators on **target 8.5 (full and productive employment and decent work for all)** are worrying, as the expanded unemployment rate stood at 41 per cent in 2024 and was particularly high for the 15-24 age group (59.1 per cent). Trade unions report that the unemployment rate is lower among the white and Indian population,

and higher among other groups. NEET indicators for **target 8.6 (reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training)** stood at 31.8 per cent in 2023. With regards to **target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers)**, the level of compliance with labour rights has dropped slightly between 2021 and 2022 but remains high overall. Trade unions report that sectors which employ high numbers of undocumented migrants, such as e-platforms, farms, households, restaurants, construction, security and transport companies are more likely to have lower compliance levels.

On SDG 10 and **target 10.4 (progressively achieve greater equality)**, indicators suggest startling levels of inequality: in 2014, 10 per cent of the highest income earners controlled 50.5 per cent of GDP, while the lowest 20 per cent controlled only 2.4 per cent of GDP. Between 2004 and 2020, the labour share of GDP only rose from 53.9 per cent to 60.7 per cent. A national minimum wage was introduced in 2019. On **target 10.7 (migration and mobility)**, trade unions report being involved in a dialogue on new labour migration policy designed to reform existing laws and address the abuse of migrant workers.

On **SDG 13** and **target 13.2 (integrate climate change measures into policies)**, discussions involving trade unions are ongoing on a climate change law and a just energy transition plan. A presidential climate change commission, including representatives of trade unions, business and civil society, has been put in place to coordinate the country's response in this area.

On **SDG 16** and **target 16.10 (protect fundamental freedoms)**, South African laws foresee the freedom of association but trade unionists and journalists are still at risk of violence. There have been recorded cases of trade union leaders being killed as a result of their organising activities or for uncovering corruption cases.

TRADE UNION ASKS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

Trade unions call on the South African government to:

- Provide additional resourcing and capacity building to trade unions to enable them to make strong contributions to delivering the 2030 Agenda.
- Introduce measures to build greater trust between government and social partners by taking action to implement joint commitments.
- Accelerate efforts to create decent jobs by further expanding short and medium employment programmes and improving skills training programmes.
- Expand social protection coverage to ensure all persons without a job receive unemployment benefits.
- Ensure a stricter enforcement of the minimum wage act to decrease the numbers of the working poor and decrease income inequality levels.
- Ensure the stricter enforcement of the employment equity act to eliminate gender or disability-based discrimination in the workplace.
- Ensure the stricter enforcement of labour laws to protect workers in all sectors, especially those particularly vulnerable to abusive practices, such as migrant workers.



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