



ACTRAV Symposium “The Future of Work We Want”

The Future of Work Initiative is based on the acknowledgement that the world of work is changing at a faster pace than ever before.

Globalisation has profoundly transformed the world economy over the last forty years. National economies are much more interconnected with huge implications for how work and production are organised, both in developed and developing countries. Despite being an important driver of economic development, the benefits of the greater interconnectivity have not been shared equally. Increases in trade led to a decline in manufacturing in developed countries, with many medium skilled jobs being outsourced. On the other hand, many developing countries specialised in exporting basic commodities or focused only on a few productive sectors, which do not benefit all in society, leading to even greater inequalities. It is therefore vital to diversify the economy in order to make it more robust to global fluctuations, increase labour productivity, wages and living standards.

Technological change, with innovations in information technology, robotics and, more recently, “artificial intelligence”, is substantially restructuring production that is affecting work quantity, working conditions and the nature of work itself. However, an important externality is not so much the impact on the quantity of employment as such, but rather its composition. Higher skilled workers benefit most from new technologies, especially from innovations in information technologies, while medium skilled jobs are being increasingly automated. This leads to a further polarisation of the labour force, greatly affecting gender inequality and exacerbating overall wage inequality.

These changes are on top of a labour market failing to keep up with the rapid population growth in many parts of the world, which will lead to an increase of 40 million additional workers entering the labour force each year.

Moreover, the growth of the global economy has been increasingly achieved at the expense of the environment. Industrialisation, but also higher demand spurred on by a rapidly expanding population, have led to environmental degradation as well as a dangerous warming of the planet. This has and will have profound consequences for the world of work and the livelihoods of the global population.

In light of this, the Future of work Initiative functions as a framework to add to the day-to-day activities of trade unions and to examine the larger macroeconomic and social developments that influence the world of work. The accelerating fundamental changes happening today makes the timing of this initiative so crucial, given that the quality and strength of the current democratic and multilateral processes will heavily influence how the aforementioned trends will affect the world of work.

The goal of this Symposium was to contribute to the Future of Work Initiative from a workers' perspective, taking the heterogeneous issues faced by the member countries into account, and discussing possible policy responses both of governments, social partners and the ILO as a means to promoting social justice and protecting the rights of working men and women.

Main points from the Symposium on the Future of Work

Given the diversity of issues discussed by the participants, there were a number of points that influenced the discussions in each of the different dialogues. Workers' representatives were acutely aware of the scope of challenges that lie ahead in terms of their interaction as a social partner with other stakeholders, reassessing their methods as well as promoting the centrality of work and protecting the dignity of all workers in society.

One of the key themes was the importance of social dialogue in addressing the accelerating changes facing the world of work. It was agreed, that the complexity and interconnectivity of the issues at hand makes it more important than ever to operate in a collective tripartite setting. Workers' organisations in particular have to be a partner beyond collective bargaining and have to be actively included in shaping socio-economic policies. The role of the state in this regard is to guarantee equal information, consultation and participation of workers, which includes abiding by existing national and international regulation protecting labour rights, extending national regulation and ensuring that business fulfil their responsibilities and meet the criteria of a social licence.

A further point discussed was the advancements of technological innovation. It was pointed out, that the negative externalities of "artificial intelligence" and machine learning for labour markets are not generated by technology itself, but are rather a matter of an ethical and sustainable use of new technologies, which have to be regulated accordingly. However, automation and the digital economy were key concerns to all participants. Especially the digital economy was agreed to have mainly disruptive effects for workers, since these platforms operate mostly outside of classic labour regulations. Workers in digital production processes are a further category of "invisible" workers in terms of regulation, facilitating non-standard forms of employment and putting pressure on wages as well as companies in the formal economy through unfair competition. Workers in non-standard forms of employment are often excluded from social protection, on-job training, which is crucial for skills development, and are generally more vulnerable relative to workers in formal employment relationships. In order to adapt to the fast pace of technological change and its disruptive effects on the employment relationship, it is vital to strengthen social protection schemes and provide equal access to quality education and skills development in the context of a life-long learning strategy and to address skills mismatches.

Furthermore, participants stressed the importance for trade unions to reassess strategies to expand beyond their traditional member base and support the collective organisation within new forms of work and informal employment. Unionisation is shrinking in most parts of the world and the extension to workers outside of the formal employment relationship should be key to ensure, that trade unions fulfil their role in promoting social justice and decent work for all. This includes reassessing internal

strategies to allow a larger share of non-standard workers to be organised collectively and have their work formalised.

A point was made with regard to the implications of the large macroeconomic trends that accompany globalisation. Many participants emphasised that international competition should not be to the detriment of labour rights and working conditions as well as the implementation of fiscal policies that foster a broad and sustainable economic development. The increasing competition for foreign investment in particular has led to a “race to the bottom” behaviour among countries, which puts pressure on labour standards and union representation to accommodate foreign investors. This calls in particular for better regional integration, for a stronger coherence between international organisations to regulate the increased internationalisation of capital and multinational enterprises and international production patterns as well as promote respect decent work for all.

In conclusion, the debates around the future of work initiative at the ACTRAV symposium were very constructive and insightful and the conclusions will assist in moving towards a clear strategy for workers’ representatives and the ILO in shaping the future that we want.

Proposed points in moving forward

In light of the debates summarised above, we propose six specific points that should influence the further debate and be included in action plans of trade unions and other stakeholders.

1. Trade unions have to evaluate their approach in terms of their internal methods as well as their bipartite and tripartite relationships. They need to fulfil their role as an advocate of progressive policies and have to both shape and be an active participant in the democratic processes that drive sustainable development and decent work for all.
2. Social Dialogue has to be actively enhanced. This is not necessarily a matter of creating the appropriate institutions, which in most cases already exist, but rather a matter of the quality of social dialogue. There has to be a clear definition of the scope of social dialogue, strengthen the capacities of the tripartite engagements and ensure the autonomous and equal role of the social partners. In light of the new forms of work and production that blurs the definitions of both employers and workers, it is fundamental to use the potential offered by international framework agreements and to ensure that government mechanisms recognise freedom of association and collective bargaining for all workers.
3. More efforts have to be made to organise and formalise new forms of employment that resemble work practices of the distant past. The widespread fragmentation and individualisation of employment has huge implications for workers and the coverage and effectiveness of social protection schemes that are tied to a formal employment relationship as well as the bargaining power of workers. There are some positive examples of collective action among crowd workers, which have been organised or actively supported by trade unions. However trade unions have to further assess their internal methods on how to integrate workers who are not in a formal employment relationship and formalise their work.

4. Trade unions have to actively promote development strategies that fundamentally change the economic structures of the global economy. This includes striving for greater sectoral diversification to boost employment and wages, which in turn leads to higher internal demand and investing in life-long learning strategies that involve the direct participation of governments and companies. This would make emerging countries less reliant on the fluctuations of global growth rates and prices. For this, trade unions must be integrated further in the design and implementation of integration processes and trade agreements on all levels.
5. There has to be a greater coherence when it comes to policies that promote the sustainable development of economies. Furthermore, social and environmental policies have to be given the same importance as economic policies. One example for providing a coherent strategy is the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The clear set of goals and targets at the national, regional and international levels provide a framework on how the world of work can respond to the drivers and trends affecting the future of work. This will require active involvement of trade unions as well as the necessary political commitment and financial means to ultimately amalgamate the SDGs with national development strategies and ensure a future of work based on decent work and sustainable development. Overall the state has to fulfil its role as a guarantor and promoter of economic, social and environmental cohesion, equality, protecting the rights workers, respect national and international laws and their regulatory frameworks as well as extend regulation to cover newly emerging gaps.
6. On the international level, the role of the ILO is imperative for ensuring, that its mandate for social justice is present in all policies affecting the world of work, which includes upholding existing standards and addressing potential gaps in its regulatory framework. Furthermore, the focus is not only with regards to regulation, but also that the ILO strengthens the compliance with international labour standards and promotes social protection as well as social dialogue.

One has to emphasise that we are at the beginning of this discussion. The ILO Future of Work Centenary Initiative is an extraordinary opportunity for all of us to build the future that we want and it is imperative to carry this strategic debate forward to ensure, that the ILO is fulfilling its mandate for social justice and decent work for all, that puts the dignity of workers at the centre of the debate. To do so, it is vital that trade unions play an active role in shaping the political process and making the voices of workers heard on all levels of governance.