COVID-19 impacts on SDG 8
Trade Union perspectives: preliminary findings

ILO-ACTRAV

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The Key objectives were to:

- Establish credible baseline data that will inform the ILO-ACTRAV’s work on Agenda 2030 and serve as a baseline for the office’s work on SDGs and COVID-19;
- Serve as the first measure of the current assessment by trade unions regarding the positive and negative impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically on SDG 8 indicators, and generally on Decent Work; and
- Draw conclusions and recommendations that will assist ACTRAV to develop appropriate and timely advice and advocacy campaigns on the role of trade unions in the achievement of SDG 8 during and post-COVID-19.
Methodology

- The survey was conducted using the online software SurveyMonkey and consisted of six multiple-choice questions;
- The survey was distributed for a period of 30 days in English, French, Russian, Arabic, and Spanish;
- In addition, targeted interviews with national trade union technical persons, Global Union Federation (GUF) representatives, and labour support organisations including pro-labour academia, both at regional and global level were conducted;
- The interviewees were guided through a semi-structured interview guide focusing on the likely impact, challenges, and opportunities of COVID-19 on the achievement of SDG 8;
- An extensive secondary source review was conducted to contextualise the answers received through the survey and the key informants.
Outreach:

- An invitation to respond to the survey was sent to 305 trade union leaders, spread over five regions;
- The contact details were mostly gathered through the Trade Union Development Cooperation Network (TUDCN) of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its regional networks as well as through ACTRAV staff at HQ and field;
- 141 participants in total including the 11 key informants;
- 113 were active at national level;
- The remaining were either representing the GUFs, labour support organizations, or regional and sub-regional trade union organizations.
Positive and Negative impacts

- **Tele/remote working:** Improvement of working conditions for workers whose jobs do not require them to work from a specific location. Working remotely could reduce commuting time for workers, thus increasing their possibilities for a better work-private life balance. However, this concerns mostly workers in high income countries, where data safety and connectivity is not much of an issue;

- **Safer working conditions/work places:** While COVID-19 has further slowed aspects of SDG 8 that were lagging, there is also scope for opportunities. Amongst the examples of positive impacts, the informants highlighted the global response to securing safer working environments for essential workers, such as those in the health sector;

- **Better recognition for public sector workers:** Public sector workers (especially those in health and education) have been recipients of widespread societal recognition for their role in containing the pandemic,

- **Heavy work load for frontline workers including unpaid care work:** their workload has become considerably heavier and this has generally not been addressed with adequate policies. This is of utmost importance given the percentage of females working in the health and education sectors who, apart from having to work longer hours, are also faced with increased unpaid care work responsibilities in their homes, also as a result of the COVID-19 measures;
Positive and Negative impacts

- **Acute vulnerabilities (migrant, informal workers):** The prospects for vulnerable groups of workers, such as migrant workers and those in the informal economy have been the most impacted by the global pandemic.

  Not being able to work from home, informal workers are faced with the choice “to risk dying from COVID-19 or from hunger” (loss of income for migrant, no guaranteed minimum income provision of social security) migrant workers are indebtedness as they lost their income but still need to pay off high recruitment fees).

- **Workers in global supply chains:** i.e. Garment workers are very likely to face extreme poverty and health impacts due to the systemic issues within the sector and reliance on low wages, which leave workers without an economic safety net when faced with reduced work or unemployment;

- **Workers in construction:** Respondents discussed how unionised workers in the construction sector will need to devote more endeavours to negotiate better working conditions not only through collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), but also through advocacy;

- **Reversal of the gender equality gains:** COVID-19 “threatens to push back limited gains made on gender equality and exacerbate the feminisation of poverty, vulnerability to violence, and women’s equal participation in the labour force”;
Impact on Decent Work Pillars
Employment Creation

- A third of the respondents opined that COVID-19 will positively impact employment creation as the “the crisis situation will put employment at the centre of government policies.”

- In contrast, over a quarter of the survey respondents expects employment creation to be negatively impacted…financial support has focused more on keeping big corporations afloat rather than protecting and creating jobs, particularly in the informal economy and for migrant workers.

- “The situation prior to the pandemic was already extremely vulnerable with respect to job creation. Even with economic growth, the countries did not significantly generate jobs and those generated were mainly in services and in sectors where there is no recognition of the dependency relationship. The responses to the pandemic of most governments and many companies are not guaranteeing the stability of employment and wages for workers. On the contrary, in many ways they reproduce and consolidate pre-pandemic vulnerabilities (A respondent from the LAC region).
Almost a third of the respondents opined that the impact will be negative as governments focus on retaining jobs and supporting businesses, but in the process are willing to comprise workers’ rights.

One respondent clarified that “there may be interest in approving legislation that makes working hours more flexible to the detriment of current regulations.”

Many trade union representatives point out that labour rights are already widely violated in their countries under the veil of COVID-19, such as forcing workers into unpaid leave, reducing work hours, hindering collective bargaining and failing to protect the health and safety of workers during the pandemic.

On the contrary, a quarter of the respondents believe that rights at work will be impacted positively indicating that the crisis may push governments to implement policy reforms with more recognition for workers at all levels.

However, this shall depend on the sector, as some industries have seen increased recognition for workers rights whereas others remain vulnerable.

Due to COVID-19, unionised workers may be more protected, but the enforcement of labour inspections has been difficult through the crisis and violations are going unreported especially for informal workers and those who are not unionised.
With respect to the perceived impact of COVID-19 on this pillar of the Decent Work Agenda, 46 of the trade union leaders believe the impact will be positive.

Examples of positive developments include Argentina where “the government has extended social protection measures, assisting with income substitution programs for sectors and workers that have suspended activities.”

Likewise, in the Russian Federation, “to counteract the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of workers, wages and scholarships will increase by 15 percent as of September 1, 2020, and social and insurance pensions will be increased from 15 to 50 percent.”

Some trade union leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate the view that impacts will be neutral… acknowledging the different efforts governments have made to support workers facing unemployment (for example, by introducing unemployment benefits and cash transfers), factors such as rampant inflation and limited budgets have curtailed the effectiveness of social protection measures.

Moreover, “social protection measures are largely restricted to [the] formal sector and [the] informal economy, which employs 70-80 percent of the workforce, is not covered. Measures such as social cash transfers are limited and impact especially the women remains narrow due limited budget constrained by external debt.”
When asked about the likely effects of COVID-19 on this pillar of decent work, over a third of trade union leaders reported expecting a positive impact... “all sectors are aware that the crisis can only be overcome with social dialogue”, and “tripartite dialogue is advancing to overcome the COVID-19 crisis.”

COVID has also forced governments that have been traditionally hostile with trade unions to haven an open dialogue and to work with them.

In some parts of Asia, national social dialogue is generally weak. However, because of the pandemic some dialogue has developed, for example in Myanmar and Korea there have been discussions on protection and post COVID-recovery.

In Indonesia, through social dialogue, workers of a garment factory that was due to shut down because of a reduced number of orders, negotiated to starting to produce PPE to keep jobs going. In Asia, national social dialogue is generally non-existent. However, because of the

Respondents with a negative outlook highlight the unequal footing in which many workers stand when negotiating their working conditions, where “power is skewed in favour of the highly resourced and those they support.”

Likewise, “because some of the old patterns remain unchanged in terms of the relationship of the worker with the employer and in terms of the implementation of labour laws and international standards, social dialogue will exist, but it is not effective due to the disparity of forces between employers and workers.” ... “social distancing could be used as an argument to avoid social dialogue.”
Some recommendations

Thematic Policy Advocacy: Trade unions should advocate for policies toward the protection of existing jobs and creation of new employment in the formal economy, advancement of decent work in the informal economy, while ensuring that such policies do not adversely impact workers’ rights and decent work;

Thematic Campaigns: Build and implement campaigns to address decent work deficits in the informal economy as well as the extension of social protection for all, including workers in the informal economy and migrants;

Social dialogue: trade unions should ensure their consultation and active participation in shaping the COVID-19 response, highlighting the key tenants of SDG 8, employment promotion, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue;

Capacity advancement: toward the internal transformation of trade unions to better prepare for recovery and resilience