Covid-19 exposes glaring gaps in OHS in EA workforce

“Every worker is a citizen and gives his duty to the nation and the community. It is the duty of the community to provide an enabling environment for the welfare and safety of the workers. Workers should be able to maintain their integrity and dignity in work. Workers should be able to satisfy their basic needs. The workers have a right to live a life of dignity and safety,” said Caroline Khamati Mugalla, the Executive Secretary at East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC).

According to the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC), the terms of African states’ agreements with the community to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and containment are the new parameters in adding the new normal. EATUC advocates that workers are expected to protect their past lives and the community to provide a new and safe workplace. For instance in Kenya, doctors have gone on strike for over 90 days. There have been cases of some country governments not signing collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), and not adhering to the CBAs they signed leading to nurses going on strike. The same health workers have been threatened with job loss, yet in the middle of the global Covid-19 pandemic crisis these are the same workers governments are putting their lives in danger to save their citizens.

In Uganda, a 2017 doctors’ strike paralysed health services across the country. But the response was intimidation where doctors were threatened with job losses if they did not return to work. This is a similar script that has played in other EAC partner states year after year. Of importance is that the issue of occupational health and safety as they carry out their work has been on top of their grievances.

According to EATUC, the advent of Corona has exposed the challenges in implementation of OHS in our transport sector, the taxis, boda boda, matatus, and dala dala. It begins answers as to how these workers who remain vulnerable and are not protected from highly infectious diseases are expected to protect their passengers from transmissions.

East Africa states should not wait for a pandemic for them to start enforcing OHS. EATUC notes that OHS should be a natural requirement to transport and labour ministries ensuring enforcement just as other workplaces. The transport sector needs to have occupational health and safety committees to ensure implementation of OHS standards and to troubleshoot any matter that relates to OHS and how best to put it in practice.

It is worth to note that the EAC countries have Occupational Health Safety Acts within their labour laws. They have OHS Authorities that govern the particular Acts. At this time of crisis protecting workers to minimise the direct effects of Covid-19 has been paramount and also stipulated in the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and guidelines that call for improved OHS measures. Trade unions and employers’ organisations, too, have a role to play as they can contribute greatly through tripartite social dialogue between governments, workers’, and employers’ organisations. This, according to EATUC, is a key tool for developing and implementing sustainable solutions, from the community level to regional level.

EATUC has been advocating for SDG 8 on decent work and sustainable development and have built their work around it, which is paramount at this time. This sets the tone for the fundamental role that decent work has for sustainable development and opens a window of opportunity to realise a new social contract. “The effects of Covid-19 are proving why workers in East Africa need a new social contract,” observed Ms Mugalla.

According to EATUC, the pandemic has put a spotlight on employment relationships which are deficient of paid sick leave, guaranteed hours of work or even a contract of work. It is also worth to note that the informal economy workers, freelancers, gig economy workers and hidden workers in global supply chains, are all strangled by the lockdowns required to contain the spread of the coronavirus. These populations are the people feeling the first shockwaves of this crisis.

EATUC notes that as many governments scramble to pay for sick leave, provide income support or other measures, they have found themselves putting in place the building blocks of a social contract. As such, a new social contract is vital to set the region back on a sustainable and just path.

According to EATUC, the terms of this contract must include a Social protection floor for all workers with fundamental rights, s, adequate minimum wage, maximum working hours, and health and safety. The body also notes that paid sick leave, carer’s leave and other entitlements should be guaranteed through legislative guarantee or collective bargaining.

EATUC has since inception in 1988 been advocating for social protection governance at the EAC level that includes portability of social security. A comprehensive social protection, including income protection for periods of unemployment is a societal guarantee for working families and the foundations of a more equal society and a sustainable economy.
Why informal economy workers in East Africa need incentives beyond Covid-19

ILENCESENCE

EATUC committee of experts.

The informal economy is the back-bone of East Africa, and to a larger extent, all African economies. Statistics obtained from the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that informal sector workers contribute 60 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in East African countries.

In Uganda, informal economy accounts for 94 per cent of non-agricultural employment. The informal sector's employment accounts for 82.7 per cent of the total employment in Rwanda, 59.2 per cent in Uganda and 65 per cent in Tanzania.

In East Africa, the East Africa Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) with a membership of over 4.5 million members, the trade unions have managed to only organise less than 600,000 members from the informal sector. This makes it a challenge to mainstream and extend Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) through OHS Committees and awareness building at work places.

Most of the informal sector workers live from hand to mouth, and any extra unplanned expenses put a strain on them economically in point in case having to buy sanitizers or masks. The OHS measures being put in place are a huge challenge at their places of work. Given the overcrowded business environment that they operate in, social distancing, hand washing or self-isolation is a challenge due to lack of, or there being limited sanitary facilities.

There is need for governments to support the informal economy to cushion their businesses during the ongoing slump. This might require social protection incentives such as cash grants to replace incomes, which are key during this critical time, explained Caroline Khamati Mugalla, the Executive Director at EATUC. According to EATUC, such incentives give informal economy workers greater financial freedom during the restrictions put in place.

In the long-run, these incentives might go beyond the poor in the informal sector. Some partner states have put up direct, and the cash grants to replace incomes, as cash grants to replace incomes, as immediate employment and income losses. They also help prevent a chain of supply shocks such as increases in workers' productivity capacities, and demand shocks from suppressed consumption.

“Without government support, a sector that contributes over 50 per cent to the GDP and employs over 70 per cent of people in East Africa is at the verge of collapse if the issues surrounding the informal sector are not addressed,” Ms Mugalla pointed out.

According to EATUC, if East Africa has to meet the SDGs, the government must start with ensuring decent work in the informal economy. The body notes that this is the decade of ‘do action’ for the SDGs and as for trade unions decent work is important to achieve sustainable development. So it is time countries in East Africa ensured that Goal 8 is met. SDG 8 focuses on the promotion of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as employment and decent work for all.

Inadequate labour policies and weak enforcement of labour laws at the center of fighting Covid-19 pandemic

Governments in East Africa are putting measures to protect workers against Covid-19. Most businesses have closed while others are operating with minimal activities. However, there is need to go beyond this and enact legislations and policies that will see the informal sector workers being provided with minimal protection against Covid-19.

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EATUC’s main goal is to integrate workers’ interests and efforts in the East African region with a view to develop a common approach towards enhancing social and economic justice through the participation of workers’ organisations at all levels of the regional integration.

As a regional trade body, EATUC is instrumental in ensure integration, establish tribunal as an important mechanism of consultation and dialogue, promote the ratification of international labor standards by the partner states. It also promotes the integration of youth and women in all spheres of socio-economic development, promote the decent work agenda, harmonisation of social and economic policies in East Africa and promote the concept of free movement of factors of production in the region.

In July 2007, EATUC membership was extended to the National Trade Union Federations from Burundi (COSYBU) and Rwanda (CESTRAR). EATUC enjoys an observer status within the EAC structures.

EATUC committee of experts.