



AUSTRALIA



A TRADE UNION FOCUS ON THE SDGs

#HLPF2018



ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

The Australian government has thus far avoided framing national policy debates in the 2030 Agenda context and has not set a national implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda; its national VNR indicators are in the process of being drafted.

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda is coordinated by the Department of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet (PM&C) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through an inter-departmental committee at the level of deputy secretaries. The committee has made the following allocation of responsibilities among government agencies: SDG 1 – Department of Social Services with support from PM&C, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Attorney General’s Department (AGD); SDG 5 – PM&C with support from the Department of Social Services (DSS); SDG 8 – the Treasury, with support from the

Department of Employment and ABS; SDG 10 – the Treasury, with support from the DSS and Department of Immigration; SDG 13 – Department of Environment, with support from AGD; and SDG 16 – AGD with support from the Department of Defence.

Some consultations on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda have been held with groups representing international NGOs, such as the Australian Council for International Development. However, trade unions have so far been included in only one information (rather than consultation) session, at which the government explained its process for developing the VNR, briefed attendees on which the departments oversee the development of SDG indicators, and invited partners to offer examples of where the SDGs were being met through government work.

TRANSPARENCY



Irregular access to limited information

CONSULTATION



There are information sessions but no interaction

SOCIAL DIALOGUE



There is no involvement of social partners by the national government on an SDG national plan definition and implementation



IS THE (DECENT) WORK BEING DONE?

Due to the absence of a national implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda, Australia's SDG priorities are not known. Nonetheless, trade unions are concerned about the government's lack of progress on meeting some key SDG targets.

ACTU points out that meeting **target 1.3 (implementing appropriate social protection systems)** is impeded by the fact that Australia has relatively low welfare spending compared to other developed countries (e.g. only 3.5% of GDP spent on pensions in 2013) and most of the increases in expenditure in this area relate to demographic shifts. While this model has required decent minimum wages, and measures such as mandated company pension contribution, wage growth has remained flat for several years and in-work poverty has increased. Worryingly, in 2017, the president of the Fair Work Commission, which sets the minimum wage, stated that the current minimum wage would not lift all employees on it out of poverty — particularly single parents with children.

In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that the cash economy amounted to 1.5% of Australia's GDP — a figure which is expected to further increase. The ACTU is concerned that the shadow economy creates gaps in the regulatory environment, which results in workers and their representatives facing difficulties in enforcing laws or recovering stolen wages. Due to workers' low bargaining power and the ineffectiveness of regulatory intervention, workers are unable to easily withdraw from participation, which results in wages being driven down. This situation poses a challenge to meeting **target 5.4 (recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies)** as low wages and the potential for exploitation disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to be employed in the informal economy.

There are serious concerns about Australia meeting the targets set by **SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all)**. There has not been significant progress in reaching **target 8.3 (promote policies that support productive activities, decent job creation)**, as the proportion of workers earning less than 2/3 of the median has not dropped significantly over the past ten years, remaining at

just over 15%; gender disparity for this indicator has also remained in place, with 19% of women earning less than 2/3 of the median compared to 13% of men. In addition, the minimum wage and the rates establishing industry standard wages have not been adequately increased over this period, while wages accumulated in the top decile.

With regards to **target 8.5 (achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value)**, 40% of Australians are in insecure work, ranging from unwanted or enforced 'self-employment' to contracted work arrangements. Underemployment has also risen, and there are currently 1.1 million underemployed Australians; young people are particularly vulnerable to underemployment. In 2016, 82.3% of all jobs created were part-time. The average weekly earnings in Australia demonstrate a significant gender pay gap (with \$1662 weekly earnings for men and \$1409 for women). In 2012-13, unemployment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women were 14.4% and 14.5% respectively, representing one of the most significant labour market gaps in Australia.

The Australian government is currently attempting to address the fact that there are an estimated 4300 people living in slavery in the country, by working on a legislative act designed to eradicate modern slavery. Consultations with NGOs, business groups and trade unions on this act are ongoing, which will contribute to meeting **target 8.7 (take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery)**.

A number of government policies run counter to **target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers)**. The ILO has repeatedly criticised the government for placing restrictions on the right to strike, which is currently only allowed during the period of negotiation of enterprise bargaining agreements. The ACTU further reports frequent politically motivated attacks on unions, such as investigations into donations made to the Labour Party by the Australian Workers Union or ensuring full media coverage while raiding the organisation's offices.

WHERE TO NEXT?

TRADE UNION RECIPE TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

The ACTU priority for the Australian government is to establish a firm commitment to tripartite and social dialogue. There is further an urgent need to set up a national implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda, which should be done through a multi-stakeholder consultation processes.

To ensure its effective implementation, the national implementation plan should establish:

- A baseline assessment of how the government is meeting individual SDG targets;
- Specific national targets and measures;
- Thorough and inclusive monitoring processes as well as ongoing assessment procedures.



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