

Report

ITUC AP-TUDCN Regional Meeting 2024: Rescuing the SDGs - Trade unions' asks and solutions for Asia and the Pacific

Online webinar: 12-13 February 2024.

Introduction

The two-day meeting had the following objectives:

- Discuss strategies to strengthen the national dialogue between trade unions, governments and UN Resident Coordinators, in order to enhance the role of SDG 8 in the governments development policies and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks;
- Define key messages and advocacy strategy for the ITUC-AP delegation participating in the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) 2024 (Bangkok, 20-23 February 2024);
- Share trade union priorities and success stories to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs – including the ones under review at the APFSD (namely SDG 1, 2, 13, 16, 17) - with key stakeholders for the Agenda2030 in Asia-Pacific, such as the UN ESCAP, the ILO, and the UN Development Coordination Office.

Meeting report - Day 1

The session was opened by ITUC-Asia Pacific Secretary General Shoya Yoshida. He reminded that 2024 has been identified by the ITUC as the year of peace and democracy, and underlined that this matter is of extreme importance since democracy is backsliding in the region. This decline is reflected in the region's underperformance on the SDGs. Yoshida concluded his intervention stressing trade unions' responsibility to contribute to rebuilding democracy and ensuring inclusivity.

ITUC Equality Director Paola Simonetti focused on the current fragmentation of the world, putting multilateralism at risk. She informed participants about the current preparation for the World Social Forum that will potentially shape the beyond 2030 negotiations. Simonetti highlighted the work of the TUDCN, particularly its #timefor8 campaign, which shows how the Decent Work Agenda supports SDGs and serves as a pillar of democracy.

ITUC's TUDCN Coordinator Giulia Massobrio provided an overview of the network's activities in 2023 and outlined its plans for 2024. She emphasised the importance of trade union involvement in shaping the future global agenda beyond 2030, particularly at the 2025 World Social Forum.

ILO ACTRAV Desk Officer for Asia and Pacific Ariel Castro highlighted three ILO recommendations for social partners to underpin the reform of the UN system and the SDGs: 1) insist on respecting the ILO and tripartism, 2) ensure the independence of the ILO and its processes, such as the Decent Work Country Programmes and social dialogue at all levels, and 3) acknowledge the ILO's normative mandate and its supervisory mechanisms. Castro stressed the importance for ACTRAV to support trade union engagement with UN Resident Coordinators, referencing positive examples from India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. He also hinted that the ILO Governing Body is waging establishing a discussion on the new social contract to prepare for the 2025 World Social Summit.

Oliver Paddison, Chief of Section on Sustainable Development and Countries in Special Situations at UN ESCAP, presented the state of play in the region of the SDGs under review at the APFSD. He depicted a dire situation, with the region heading towards missing its 2030 targets, of which only 15% has been achieved, and SDG 13 is strongly regressing to pre-2015 levels.

For each of the five SDGs under review, Paddison presented the proposals of the UN to try to mitigate the ongoing lack of progress:

- On no poverty (SDG 1), the UN recommends the governments to strengthen social protection coverage, ensure equitable access to basic services, increase access to decent work, and use technology and artificial intelligence for economic resilience.
- Regarding achieving zero hunger (SDG 2), the UN advocates for focusing on food insecurity and nutritional requirements, creating resilient agriculture supply chain, investing in green technologies and sustainable farming practices addressing climate change, and using technology to increase productivity and resilience.
- Climate action (SDG 13) is arguably the only Goal that is regressing in Asia-Pacific. This is largely due to governments' lack of action on addressing greenhouse gas emissions. Indicators show that high numbers of people are being killed or adversely affected by natural disasters stemming from climate change. In light of this, the UN proposes improving poor populations' resilience to climate-related shocks, establish adequate policies to promote green investments that lead to sustainable energy transition, increasing access to climate financing, and cooperating and sharing technology and good practices.
- Measuring achievement on peace, democracy and strong institutions (SDG16) in Asia-Pacific is very difficult as data is lacking. Nonetheless, the little data available indicates that governments must increase their effort to foster good governance, accountability and collaborative leadership. They also must invest in digital transformation for transparent and accountable regulatory environments, and provide free legal aid for the poor.
- Finally, to improve the region's poor results in concluding efficient partnerships to achieve the Goals, as intended by SDG 17, the UN asks governments to promote sustained multi-stakeholder engagement and whole-of-society approaches, along with just and sustainable finance ecosystems, broaden access to financing, technology and data, regional and subregional cooperation and solidarity, and policy coherence and coordination.

Finally, Paddison announced that UNESCAP's 2024 SDG Partnership Report, which will be launched at the APFSD on 20 February, will look at addressing the interlinked challenges of climate change, poverty and hunger in the region.

In the last section of the session, Giulia Massobrio presented the ITUC's draft document on its demands on SDG 1, 2, 13, 16 and 17 that will be brought to the APFSD and HLPF. She invited participants to revise them and provide their inputs by the end of the month. ([read the messages](#))

In their comments, TUDCN-AP members highlighted the linkages between the goals under review – for example hunger, poverty and climate change-, the need for localizing SDGs policies, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the need to invest in more and better data to monitor progress.

Meeting Report - Day 2

On the second day of the meeting, participants had the opportunity to exchange with the Director of the Social Development Division at UNESCAP, Srinivas Tata, the ILO Regional Director for Asia-Pacific, Chihoko Asada-Miyakawa, and the Director of the Development Coordination Office at UN ESCAP, David McLachlan-Karr.

The session was launched by ITUC-Asia Pacific General Secretary Shoya Yoshida, who highlighted that trade unions' demand for a new social contract is now a "UN trademark", aiming to rebuild trust between governments and the people.

ITUC Equality Director Paola Simonetti highlighted the crucial role that the SDGs play, as a rights-based agenda, to countering the current fragmentation of the world and weakening of multilateralism.

In the high-level panel, Srinivas Tata praised trade unions for promoting democracy before speaking about the challenges hampering the region from achieving Goal 1. He first stressed that poverty is more than a lack of money, but also a lack of access to services and opportunities. He then underlined that governments must invest and cooperate more on social protection, which he identified as "the most effective tool to reduce poverty". At the global level, Tata advocated a reform of the financial architecture, and support to implementing the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions.

Against the backdrop of Asia-Pacific probably missing 90% of the SDG targets by 2030, ILO Regional Director Chihoko Asada-Miyakawa explained how the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (DWA) contributes to the Goals. Social protection is central in the DWA, and thus, the ILO has over 200 experts placed around the world to advise governments on how to expand and improve social protection. The organisation's productivity programs are an important contribution to achieving Goal 2, pushing for innovative entrepreneurship, decent work and skills in the agriculture sector. In addition, the ILO promotes SDG 13 through different programs on green job creation. On Goal 16, Asada-Miyakawa acknowledged the importance of peace for development, and subsequently, the central role that social dialogue plays in promoting peace. She mentioned the example of Sri Lanka, where dispute resolution had been addressed through ILO-promoted social dialogue. Finally, on partnerships, she mentioned the role of the ILO in leading the Global Coalition for Social Justice, and the implementation of the Global Accelerator.

David McLachlan-Karr emphasised the importance of a reformed UN system and collaboration with trade unions to address inequalities. He then laid out the six transitions to accelerate the SDGs that were identified during the SDG Summit of September 2023, and through which UN Country Team must now work: 1) strengthened food systems; 2) energy access; 3) digital connectivity; 4) enhancing education; 5) address climate change/pollution/loss of biodiversity; and 6) jobs and social protection.

Concluding the first session, McLachlan-Karr explained that in the region, the UN is working through a regional collaborative platform around expanding decent work and social protection, and stressed that from now on every new cooperation framework that is going to be set up will need to be based on these six transitions. He also added that a focus for UNESCAP in 2024 is to have a direct look at decent work, jobs, social protection as drivers for the SDGs, and in light of this, trade union are important partners for the UN.

In the second session, participants discussed trade unions' take on the SDGs under review, sharing some key messages and first-hand experiences.

Dur e Shawa Siraj (Pakistan Workers' Federation, Pakistan) talked about PWF's commitment to promoting decent work and, through it, eradicating poverty. The organisation advocates for fair wages, job security, and social security measures. Trade unions have a crucial role in providing stable income sources for workers, contributing to economic stability of individuals and families. She explained how the COVID-19 era has highlighted the importance of unions in preventing layoffs and ensuring a rights-based approach, and shared some success stories showing the impact of PWF's actions, such as the reinstatement of workers post-COVID and wage negotiations.

Chandra Shekar Rajgopal Dashrath (Indian National Trade Union Confederation, India), shared with the audience about the work that INTUC has been doing since 2011 organising millions of workers in agriculture, making them aware of their right to decent work. This work has resulted in these workers achieving favorable collective bargaining amidst the political situation in which they live, with a government that has not convened any tripartite dialogue for over seven years and have not legislated any minimum wage raise in a decade. These organised workers have succeeded in earning raised economic compensations for their work and kept themselves out of poverty, eradicating hunger among them.

Speaking on trade unions' actions on SDG 13, ITUC-Asia Pacific Senior Communications and Advocacy Officer Joy Hernandez showcased many positive examples of workers from across the region taking actions to demand just transition that leave no one behind and are sustainable and fair in terms of their impact on the environment, jobs and societies.

Julius Cainglet (FFW, Philippines) shared his experience in unions' actions to prevent killings and other attacks on trade unionists and violations of their rights, as part of SDG 16. He explained how trade unions in the country set aside their differences and joined forces to push for an ILO High-Level Tripartite Mission in the country, which finally happened after three long years of pressuring the government to accept the mission. To back the cases related to the violations of workers' right to freedom of association, trade unions jointly prepared a report and documentation that details the killings of 68 trade union leaders and over 600 other forms of attacks and violations. Cainglet underlined the importance of seeking the support of the ILO and of building alliances with civil society organisations, beyond trade unions.

To conclude, Shoya Yoshida thanked all participants for their interventions. He reminded that 2024 is an important year as many elections are taking place in the region amidst a growing feeling of mistrust towards democracy and democratic institutions. He also underlined that unions have an important role to play to advocate for workers' fair share of the wealth they are creating, in order to achieve social justice.