COVID-19: WORKERS DEMAND JOBS, INCOME AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

In response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government of the Republic of Zambia has put in place certain restrictions, amongst which include limiting public gatherings and travel as well as quarantine for travellers. It has also introduced a number of fiscal measures to respond to the crisis, such as tax waivers; a medium-term refinancing facility for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and the promotion of local production of goods, along with value addition. These measures have, however, had little impact on workers, especially those in the informal economy. The refinancing facility for SMEs should ensure that eligible enterprises contribute to creating and sustaining employment, and the government should consider waiving tax on electricity tariffs and suspending water bills to increase the disposable income of households.

Although the government has continued to provide social protection packages and subsidised primary health care, no additional scheme has been provided in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the main challenge remains the huge informal economy where workers are uncovered. The government should therefore scale up social protection and increase coverage. It should further provide protective materials to the public, especially informal economy operators.

ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

The government of Zambia has integrated the SDGs into its Seventh National Development Plan (NDP). SDGs 1-5 are prioritised, with the others addressed with lower priority. Overall, 52 per cent of the objectives listed in the NDP are aligned with the SDGs, 15 per cent are partially aligned and 33 per cent are not aligned.

The government entities in charge of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are the Ministry of National Development and Planning and the Ministry of Finance. Trade unions feel that there has not been enough transparency on the SDG selection and implementation process, and input provided by civil society partners has not been sufficiently taken on board. While on the occasion of preparing the country’s voluntary national review (VNR), the Zambian government has set up ad hoc information sessions on the SDG implementation process, these have not adequately allowed for the provision of feedback. More broadly, trade unions report that although some of the recommendations they made were reflected within the chapter on labour issues of the NDP, the process of formulation and implementation of the NDP is not fully participatory.

Discussions within the Tripartite Consultative Labour Council, where social dialogue takes place, do not touch upon SDG implementation.

Trade unions warn that implementing the 2030 Agenda in Zambia will be a challenge given the lack of adequate financing, information management systems, and communication between the government and other stakeholders.
Zambia faces significant challenges in meeting SDG 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere). In 2018, 53.6 per cent of the Zambian population was living in poverty, only a slight decline from 54.4 per cent in 2015; urban areas were much less affected (23.4 per cent) than rural ones (76.6 per cent). Working poverty levels stood at 51.3 per cent in 2019. The total proportion of the population living below the national poverty line was 60.5 per cent — the highest figure recorded in the past decade, suggesting that target 1.1 (eradicating extreme poverty) is far off being met. Indeed, in 2018, the HDI (0.591) increased by only 0.002 points, a slowdown most likely due to high inflation and allocative inefficiencies. Reaching target 1.3 (implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures) is far off, as the proportion of the population covered by at least one social protection benefit stood only at 15.3 per cent in 2016. The budgetary allocation towards social protection for 2019 stood at only 2.4 per cent.

Achieving target 5.4 (recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work) remains far off, with women in Zambia performing three times more unpaid domestic work than men. With regard to target 5.5 (ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life), the proportion of women with at least some secondary education stood at 73.4 per cent in 2016. As of 2015, the ratio of female to male mean years of schooling of the population age 25 and above stood at 86.5 per cent. Worryingly, the figures are predicted to fall due to the gradual worsening of the economic situation in the country.

There are significant obstacles to Zambia meeting the targets set by SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all). In 2019, the proportion of informal employment outside of agriculture stood at 64.1 per cent, with much higher rates among women (69.5 per cent) than men (55.7 per cent). 36.5 per cent of workers were in low paid work — more often in urban (41.2 per cent) than rural (14.8 per cent) settings. Delivering on target 8.8 (support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of MSMEs) remains far off, as the proportion of the population covered by at least one social protection benefit stood only at 15.3 per cent in 2016. The budgetary allocation towards social protection for 2019 stood at only 2.4 per cent.

Target 10.4 (progressive achievement of greater equality) remains unmet as inequalities are increasing despite the continuous economic growth. In 2015, the income share of the top ten per cent of earners stood at 44 per cent, while the share of the bottom 20 per cent of earners accounted for a miniscule 2.9 per cent. In order to meet target 13.2 (integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning), the Zambian government has adopted a National Climate Change Policy in 2017. However, a meaningful dialogue with social partners on the issue of the effects of climate change and greenhouse emissions has been missing, trade unions report.

Trade unions call on the government of Zambia to ensure urgent action to cope with the pandemic emergency in line with the SDGs, through the following measures:

- Improve social dialogue with unions and other key stakeholders and use established social dialogue structures such as the Tripartite Consultative Labour Council to discuss SDG implementation.
- Increase transparency and improve consultation and interactions with trade unions and other stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs.
- Scale up social protection programs and coverage to ensure social inclusion, especially for informal economy operators and other vulnerable groups.
- Increase allocations towards social spending in national budgets.
- Establish a long-term macroeconomic framework that will promote local production and value addition to promote employment creation and for the economy to be resilient against external shocks.
- Guarantee a prudent management of national resources by ensuring stringent accountability measures, especially in public finance management.
- Develop a consensus-based national monitoring and evaluation performance framework to ensure that SDG national indicators collated are comprehensive, gender-sensitive and systematically acted upon.