



International
Labour
Organization

Evaluation Office

►Strategy and policy (2022)

► Independent High-Level Evaluation of ILO's COVID-19 response 2020-22

Executive summary





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The independent high-level evaluation of the ILO's response to the implications of COVID 19 (2020–22) focuses on two dimensions of the ILO's response to the pandemic over the period from March 2020 to March 2022. First, it assesses how well the ILO adapted at an institutional level so that it could continue to deliver its mandate. Second, it measures how well the Organization refocused its policy work to meet the changing needs of the constituents during the crisis.

The high-level evaluation draws on multiple triangulated data sources to provide an evidence-based narrative of the ILO's response to the crisis in a setting of unprecedented turmoil and to draw overall conclusions on the ILO's performance in line with the internationally accepted evaluation criteria. Mixed methods and multiple means of analysis were used, including: document review; 354 interviews with staff, constituents and other stakeholders in Geneva and in the regions, including with staff in all decent work technical support teams (DWTs) and at the ILO Office for the United Nations in New York, the International Training Centre of the ILO (Turin Centre) and the Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training (CINTERFOR);¹ surveys among staff and the constituents; eight instrumental country case studies (Argentina, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand and Viet Nam); six thematic case studies; and a three-phase synthesis review² of 87 relevant project evaluations conducted in the period under review.

THE ILO'S INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS

Navigating the crisis

When the COVID-19 pandemic was first declared in March 2020, the ILO had had recent experience dealing with natural, economic and global health emergencies, but the scale and nature of COVID-19 were something new. None of the existing risk management and business continuity plans and procedures offered a road map that ILO management could use to navigate the crisis.

ILO management faced an operating environment of uncertainty and unpredictable change. Nobody knew at the time how long the crisis would last. An existing Crisis Management Team was reconvened and met almost daily for two years, chaired by the Director-General. Both the Senior Management Team and the Global Management Team were mobilized to devise, coordinate and communicate the ILO's institutional and policy response across the Organization. The "One ILO Connect" communications campaign involved most departments and offices, and helped bring the ILO together in the new hybrid work environment.

Senior management followed an adaptive management approach that accommodated continuous adjustments based on information gathered from the field and through data analysis. This approach required a willingness to re-evaluate and adjust decisions as the situation evolved. Such decisions were made quickly: "The ILO was uncharacteristically agile", said one senior manager when interviewed

1. Of the 354 interviewees, 47 per cent were women.
2. ILO, [ILO's Response to the Impact of COVID-19 on the World of Work: Evaluative Lessons on How to Build a Better Future of Work after the Pandemic – A Synthesis Review of Evaluative Evidence](#), 2022.

Governance during the crisis

The ILO's governance systems were challenged during the crisis in unprecedented ways, demanding speed, adaptability and new virtual processes, while preserving social dialogue.

To guide the ILO's early response to the crisis and in view of the urgent action required, a four-pillar policy framework was defined.³ It was presented to the Governing Body at its 340th Session (October–November 2020). Notwithstanding some concerns that there had not been prior constituent endorsement of the framework, the evaluation team found that it was aligned with the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work and with the Programme and Budget for 2020–21. Given the urgent need for action, the framework can be seen as a response that recontextualizes an endorsed policy direction rather than changing it.

Despite reservations about the virtualization of governance systems, the constituents were satisfied that the ILO's response was appropriate, and that the ILO had remained committed to social dialogue throughout the crisis. Senior management demonstrated its continuous engagement with the constituents, for example, by holding the Global Summit on COVID-19 and the World of Work in July 2020 and by holding, over many months, entirely remote negotiations with constituents from 187 Member States, which led to the adoption by the International Labour Conference at its 109th Session (2021) – also held in a virtual format – of the Global Call to Action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient.

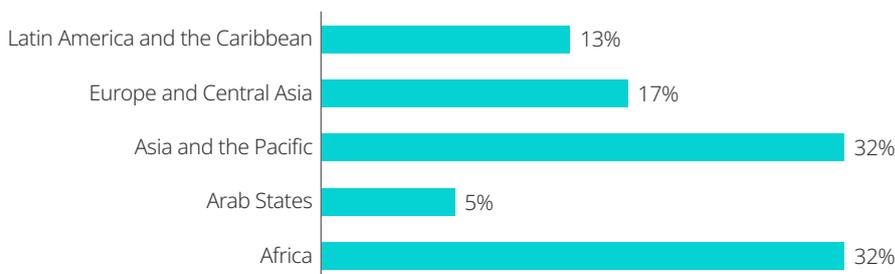
Resourcing the crisis response

The Organization understood the need for budget flexibility and introduced innovative and proactive measures to allow an agile response at all levels, including the adaptation of regular budget and development cooperation funds. The ILO reached out to its funding partners to brief them on the ILO's actions in response to COVID-19 and on the situations in the field, and to discuss how projects might be adapted.

The high-level evaluation found that, for those expenditures it could track,⁴ for the biennium 2020–21, the total expenditure of extra-budgetary resources associated with actions in response to COVID-19 was US\$180.7 million,⁵ most of which came from extrabudgetary development cooperation contributions and from the regular budget supplementary account (US\$162 million). Almost half of the total regular budget technical cooperation funds were also allocated for this purpose.

Africa and Asia and the Pacific are the regions that reported the most expenditure associated with policy actions in response to COVID-19 (over US\$58 million) (figure 1).

FIGURE 1.: REGIONAL BREAKDOWN OF TRACKABLE EXPENDITURE ASSOCIATED WITH POLICY



4 The four pillars are: stimulating the economy and employment; supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes; protecting workers in the workplace; and relying on social dialogue for solutions. See ILO, A Policy Framework for Tackling the Economic and Social Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis, ILO Policy Brief, May 2020.

5 Expenditure figures relate to country programme outcomes with a narrative on achievements relating to the response to COVID-19. The expenditure covers multiple actions that include, but do not exclusively address, the response to COVID-19. These results are therefore a proxy of the ILO's expenditure on the response to COVID-19.

6 In 2020–21, the ILO's overall expenditure was US\$1,104.6 million. See ILO, ILO Programme Implementation 2020–21, ILC.110/Report I(A), 2022.

ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19, 2020-21

Projects were adapted to their new circumstances, often through the use of virtual delivery methods and by revising training content, to emphasize responses to COVID-19, especially with regard to occupational safety and health (OSH). Evidence was found of extensive changes made by the ILO to programme strategy and services to redefine beneficiary targets, extend geographic coverage or add new products and services. New voluntary contributions, totalling US\$672.5 million, were also secured in 2020-21 (a 15 per cent decrease compared with 2018-19).

Human resources management played a vital role in ensuring business continuity. The ILO adapted quickly, establishing new systems, equipping staff to work remotely and ensuring workplace safety. However, the speed of the ILO's crisis response in the field was raised as a concern in interviews and surveys. Delays in funding approvals and in accessing technical specialists to meet increased COVID-19-related demand presented difficulties, which were only resolved in some cases by using expertise mobilized from repurposed ongoing or newly approved development cooperation projects. Some opportunities were lost due to this slow response.

Supporting the constituents during the crisis

The ILO's capacity-building work pivoted to address the needs of employer and business membership organizations (EBMOs) to survive and to provide value to their members in the crisis. A more centralized approach was used, which focused on producing global products to respond to COVID-19 that could be customized at the country level, including policy advocacy support, business continuity and support tools, local survey instruments (for example, 420 surveys were conducted in 50 Member States), and online training (for example, EBMOs in 27 Member States were reported to have scaled up virtual training). Information on global COVID-19 policy responses was shared (including via the ILO's COVID-19 portal). The programme and budget results exceeded the targets, but the constituents said that more needed to be done to strengthen the value proposition offered by EBMOs to their members (such as support for innovative member retention strategies).

The ILO shared global good practices in trade union responses and in maintaining social dialogue during the crisis. It organized online training and webinars at all levels; established a video staging site to guide trade unions on social dialogue and on ways to assist the most affected workers; ran the biennial Academy on Social Dialogue virtually; developed a new module for the Industrial Relations Global Toolkit on strengthening industrial relations in times of crisis; and developed new services to support workers in tackling COVID-19-related challenges, including through new digital tools and increased online media presence. Programme and budget targets were not met, and a digital divide was identified as a contributing factor, highlighting the need for face-to-face engagement with workers.

The needs of labour administration and social dialogue institutions changed as Member States sought guidance on crisis response policies and practices. The ILO supported the capacity-building of labour administration staff, the development of policies and protocols to monitor compliance with legislation to ensure a safe return to work, and the development of policy and guidance on working hours and fundamental principles and rights at work. Support for government COVID-19 responses was also provided across many other policy areas.

The Turin Centre played a central and much-expanded role in building constituent capacity to meet in innovative ways the many new challenges brought on by the pandemic. Its strategic shift to virtual delivery was accelerated during the pandemic, tripling its outreach. An evaluation conducted by the Turin Centre in 2021 reported knowledge acquisition and application rates that were similar to or higher than those reported in previous evaluations.

Contributing to the United Nations response

The ILO's technical expertise, normative role and ability to produce authoritative labour market data during the pandemic enhanced its profile and engagement within the United Nations (UN) system, which resulted in it taking on a key role in shaping the UN's socio-economic response framework. This does not seem to have led to a corresponding increase in access to UN COVID 19 response funds, however, especially at the country level. Some noted that the ILO often struggled at the country level to be included in UN country team proposals and approaches. At the subregional and country levels, it was reported that participation in joint projects with several UN partners often proved to be unsatisfactory, as the funding was insufficient to justify the substantial staff inputs required.

The ILO's elevated profile led to new partnerships and commitments that could take the Organization beyond its regular programmes in terms of scope and scale. This raises questions about its resourcing and capacity to deliver, especially at the country level. These challenges are heightened by the extremely ambitious support scenarios implied by many broader UN initiatives, most notably the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, in which the ILO plays the lead role.

THE ILO'S POLICY ACTION IN THE PANDEMIC: HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS

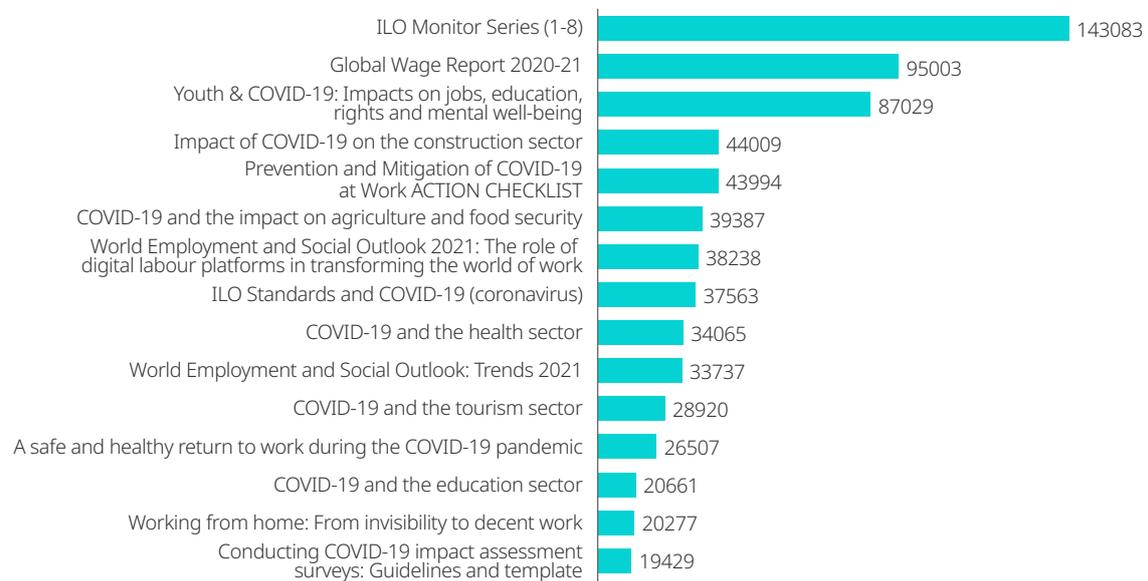
The ILO began considering policy responses before the pandemic was formally declared and, to avoid mistakes from previous crises, shaped its framework to promote a human-centred recovery.

The ILO's initial four-pillar policy framework shaped its work through the early stages of the pandemic. Inspiring global action through a true tripartite agreement was the next step and, following consultation with the constituents, the Global Call to Action was formally adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 109th Session (2021).

The ILO's immediate response – Knowledge and policy guidance

The ILO promptly produced knowledge products to guide the constituents. In the first 18 months of the pandemic, more than 170 COVID-19-related publications were produced. These were aligned with the policy framework and included 20 sectoral briefs to assist the constituents in assessing the impact of the pandemic and highlight existing ILO instruments to help sustain enterprises and protect workers. Reviewing the available programmes, policy interventions, reports and information produced by other international organizations and countries helped shape the ILO's knowledge products to support the constituents.

In the early stages, there was a lack of coordination in knowledge product output, and questions were raised about the relevance of some products. Web analysis and surveys among the constituents revealed that some ILO knowledge products attracted significant interest. This was especially the case with the ILO Monitor on COVID-19 and the world of work series (see figure 2). It was found that 20 per cent of the ILO's COVID-19-related publications accounted for 70 per cent of all downloads. The surveyed constituents from Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific found the policy guides and tools prepared by the ILO to be more useful than those from Africa and the Arab States did.

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF DOWNLOADS OF THE MOST ACCESSED POLICY PUBLICATIONS

More attention was given to the coordination of knowledge products after the Director General called for a more focused approach and a review process was introduced involving the Deputy Director-General for Policy (DDG/P), the Department of Communication and Public Information and the Director-General's Office. Some highlighted how this more focused approach improved internal coherence. Innovative methods such as "nowcasting" were also highlighted – the ILO Monitor being the prime example.

Action promoting inclusive economic growth and employment

The pandemic had severe effects on jobs, enterprises and skills that were felt in different ways around the world. The ILO had to accommodate this diversity.

Rapid assessments of the country-level impact of COVID-19 were conducted in 47 countries. Results were reported to have directly influenced national employment policies in several countries and were used by employers and trade union organizations to inform their members and as a foundation for dialogue with government.

A global survey that examined the experience of young people in the pandemic – including job loss and decline of working hours, effects on education and training, and mental health – received global attention.

A tool was developed and applied in 14 countries to assess reskilling and upskilling needs in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Capacity-building courses for technical and vocational education and training institutions were delivered remotely via the Turin Centre and CINTERFOR.

The threat of enterprise failure was seen as a priority. The ILO scanned global best practices in supporting enterprises, distributed weekly updates and produced recommendations to support the constituents and knowledge products to directly support enterprises.

The programmes and services of the ILO's Enterprises Department (ENTERPRISES) contributed to the ILO's response and were adapted to ensure continued delivery. For example, the Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE) programme introduced new modules in business continuity planning and OSH; value chain analyses were conducted to support recovery; a rapid assessment tool was introduced to measure impacts in the informal economy; COVID-19 resources related to responsible business conduct were developed; and a new training programme, Sustainable and Resilient Enterprises (SURE), was developed in partnership with the Bureau for Employers' Activities to strengthen the resilience of small businesses.

Action promoting the protection of all workers

The promotion of labour standards to protect workers' rights was crucial, and the ILO made significant contributions to the reinforcement of these rights by playing a facilitating role in social dialogue and coordinating action to promote adherence to international labour standards.

The ILO strongly supported the constituents' work to promote OSH during the pandemic, culminating in the confirmation of OSH as one of the fundamental principles and rights at work by the International Labour Conference at its 110th Session (2022). The ILO's established authority in the field of OSH was reinforced among stakeholders and UN agencies, and the ILO facilitated coordination between ministries of labour and health on infectious disease control measures.

The Better Work and Safety and Health for All flagship programmes, through the Vision Zero Fund subprogramme, successfully pivoted to guide COVID-19 workplace safety and mitigation measures, reaching the garment, agriculture, construction and other sectors.

The ILO contributed to reports on global estimates on both child labour and forced labour, warning of a reversal of progress on child labour among already vulnerable populations and called for universal social protection to help end child labour. Ongoing programmes to combat child labour provided immediate support to affected communities.

Assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on informal economy workers were conducted in 15 countries and guidance was disseminated on reaching informal workers with COVID-19 safety measures. The ILO capitalized on the elevated attention being paid to the issue to accelerate national policy action on formalization.

The ILO refocused migrant worker support services to increase safety and human rights protection at destination and strengthened support for reintegration, notably through its programmes in Asia and the Pacific.

The ILO documented the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on women and vulnerable groups, for example, with research and advocacy briefs on the care economy, violence and harassment and the inclusion of diverse groups in COVID-19 mitigation. However, resources devoted to mitigating the pandemic's impacts on women workers and vulnerable groups at the country level were mainly delivered through existing programmes, such as OSH and labour standards compliance projects, rather than new initiatives.

Action promoting universal social protection

The pandemic exposed the urgent need to build universal, comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection systems. Member States introduced social protection measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, but many were temporary and insufficient. With social protection elevated on the agenda of governments, demand for ILO support increased. For instance, annual requests to strengthen unemployment protection schemes increased from 5 pre-pandemic to 29 in 2020.

The ILO reported 70 results on outcome 8 during the 2020–21 biennium. Most of these were achieved in Africa, followed by Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The effectiveness of the ILO's social protection response to COVID-19 was rated more positively by the surveyed constituents from Asia and the Pacific than those from other regions. In November 2021, the ILO launched a regional strategy for Africa to support the constituents in their efforts to extend social protection coverage, with the aim of extending at least one social protection benefit to 40 per cent of the continent's population by 2025.

The ILO supported Member States in identifying needs and gaps, and in conducting assessments of the impact of the crisis in all regions, guided by social dialogue and the ILO normative framework. Existing programmes were adapted and new support was mobilized to reflect a shift in priorities towards building robust social protection systems able to respond to crises.

The ILO became involved in emergency cash transfer measures, giving itself an entry point to steer more sustainable system-building approaches based on ILO principles, including social dialogue. The ILO played a central role in shaping joint UN COVID-19 responses that led to the delivery of cash transfers and temporary wage subsidies in 20 Member States. However, in some countries, the funds were only partly disbursed. Some noted that working in this area required speed and agility rooted in a strategic intent, an operating framework and organizational capacities that the ILO may currently lack.

The ILO contributed towards national social protection strategies and legislation; promoted the integration of contributory and tax-funded measures to extend coverage; improved information management systems; and supported financial sustainability checks and feasibility studies on the extension of coverage, including to workers in the informal economy. The crisis highlighted the need for social protection to adequately consider the risks that hit communities at large and could jeopardize governments' capacity to develop social protection in normal times.

The ILO supported social protection interventions for vulnerable groups, including informal workers, refugees, migrants, people with disabilities and those living with HIV. Over half of the ILO's COVID-19-related social protection interventions were reported to have contributed to gender equality.

Aligning ILO action with UN and global responses, including the Sustainable Development Goals

Although the call for greater multilateral collaboration expressed in policy statements has stimulated partnerships at the field level and high-level agreements, these have so far generated only a small proportion of the UN funding required for the COVID-19 recovery.

Calls for new models of development financing have highlighted the ILO's relatively limited capacity in this field. The UN Secretary-General has emphasized the need to move forward with whole-of-government approaches, not just engaging ministries covering social, labour and environmental areas but ensuring that ministries of finance are fully engaged in the recovery process as well. To achieve this, the ILO will need greater expertise in applying a whole-of-government approach to economic and financial planning. The ILO also lacks the human resources to manage the workload associated with the many new cooperation agreements and partnerships, especially at the country level.

Agreements include the United Nations Development Programme-ILO Framework for Action, which prioritizes actions between the two partners that would increase synergy, and other global and regional partnerships with the United Nations Children's Fund; the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); the World Health Organization; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Despite the new impetus provided by the pandemic for improved collaboration and policy coherence between multilateral agencies, barriers and disincentives remain.

The ILO played a prominent role in high-level meetings of the G7, the G20 and the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa), and in drafting the Just Transition Declaration, which was endorsed by more than 30 nations at the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Scotland in October–November 2021. In February 2022, a three-day ILO Global Forum for a Human-centred Recovery addressed the need for multilateral policy coherence, which catalysed additional commitments from various parts of the UN and the multilateral system.

At the country level, the ILO was reported to have influenced over 120 plans within the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19, although it is difficult to substantiate this or to estimate the degree of influence achieved.

The Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, launched by the UN Secretary-General and the ILO, aims to create at least 400 million jobs and extend social protection floors to the 4 billion people currently not covered. The scope and scale of the initiative have huge resource implications for the ILO and for the UN system.

KEY FINDINGS BY EVALUATION CRITERIA

Relevance

KEY FINDING 1:

The ILO's management and governance systems adapted well to changed circumstances, ensured that constituent engagement and support were maintained, and introduced new systems to allow staff to continue to work.

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KEY FINDING 2:

Coordination to develop policy guides and knowledge products was initially lacking, but this was addressed, and some guides and products proved to be of global relevance.

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KEY FINDING 3:

In the crisis phase, the ILO worked with its constituents to promote safety and health at the workplace, developed resources to support employment and enterprise continuity, and influenced and helped implement emergency social protection measures. Gender-specific and anti-discrimination initiatives were included in this work.

The ILO's overall institutional response enabled the Organization to adapt to a dramatically altered operational landscape and to reinvent the way it delivered services to its constituents. The situation called for quick management decisions, often with imperfect information, and a willingness to change course as the situation evolved. Constituent engagement remained the highest priority and continued through virtual meetings and conferences. New systems and processes were introduced

to ensure that ILO staff were safe and could continue to work. The ILO gave relevant support to workers' and employers' organizations as they grappled with the crisis, including in respect of addressing OSH issues, maintaining continuity of services for their members, and enhancing their relevance through new tools and resources.

The four-pillar policy framework set out a relevant programme logic that was sequenced initially to facilitate understanding of and to address the immediate effects of the pandemic on the world of work, and then to contribute to a human-centred recovery underpinned by social dialogue and international labour standards.

While there was some over-enthusiasm in the generation of policy guides and knowledge products in the early stages, this was soon addressed. Some guides and products, especially the ILO Monitor and the many sectoral and employment papers, proved to be relevant at a global level, while COVID-19 OSH resources and the guidelines produced to support countries in conducting rapid assessments of the pandemic impacts, were applied locally.

As the synthesis review showed, existing development cooperation projects were generally able to remain relevant. Global programmes and interventions could more readily adjust delivery mechanisms and respond to new priorities than could smaller, one-off projects, which did what they could within their scope.

The ILO worked with its constituents to promote safety and health at the workplace, developed resources to support enterprise continuity, and influenced and helped implement emergency social protection measures. Towards the goal of leaving no one behind, major programmes – such as the Better Work and Safety and Health for All flagship programmes, enterprise programmes (including support for women entrepreneurs and cooperatives) and the migrant workers portfolio – integrated gender-specific and anti-discrimination initiatives. In some countries, COVID-19 response projects and social protection interventions supported employment and skills development for women, persons with disabilities, refugees, people living with HIV and indigenous communities.

As demonstrated by the synthesis review, the ILO's recovery actions are currently under way. Evaluating their relevance is complicated by a number of factors: the pandemic is still ongoing; there is a variance in recovery rates and countries' capability to respond; and the world is dealing with new crises, including war, supply chain disruptions, and energy and food shortages. In this context, the ILO's actions will need to remain responsive to continuous, unpredictable change, and not just respond to the damage left by the pandemic.

Coherence

KEY FINDING 4:

The pandemic led to some improved collaboration and policy coherence in the ILO. Collaborative structures and multidisciplinary work teams were established to good effect, with the four-pillar framework focusing effort and creating synergies.

KEY FINDING 5:

Internal teamwork and more frequent engagement between headquarters and the field were enhanced by the increased use of virtual meetings.

KEY FINDING 6:

Work in the pandemic continued to cohere with social dialogue principles and with international labour standards.

KEY FINDING 7:

New collaboration opportunities with UN agencies and multilateral partners emerged, but more work and resources are needed if their potential is to be realized. In the field, high-level agreements did not always translate to a more prominent role for the ILO.

The high-level evaluation found that the pandemic played a catalytic role in improving internal collaboration and policy coherence. The synthesis review found that the pandemic had created a “new imperative for the ILO to work as one” and had “led to strengthened internal collaboration”. There was a perception that, when faced with a crisis, the ILO had an inherent capacity to break out of its silos and galvanize around a common cause. Examples were given of this crisis-induced esprit de corps, such as the collaborative effort required to produce the ILO Monitor.

However, collaboration did not just spontaneously “break out” across the Organization. For example, the production of policy papers and guides became better coordinated after a call from the Director-General for stronger coherence and visibility in the production pipeline, and for enhanced focus and usefulness of the knowledge products. The ad hoc review process of COVID-19-related knowledge products proved to be effective overall and was found to be an improvement over the previous publication review process. Some regretted that this process was not sustained and institutionalized after 2020.

Paradoxically, the physical distancing imposed as a result of COVID-19 may have also helped bring the ILO closer together. More frequent and responsive virtual engagement between headquarters specialists and staff and constituents in the field similarly improved organizational coherence, even though it increased workload. Virtual meetings of Global Technical Teams were held more regularly to discuss COVID-19 impacts and to collectively develop responses. ENTERPRISES even organized, through the Turin Centre, a virtual Sustainable Enterprises Exhibition to “unlock synergies and scale effects” in the department’s work, and to develop a new high-level policy strategy.

The ILO worked to ensure that its institutional governance and policy responses were based on tripartism and supported by international labour standards, which were used as a “decent work compass” for the ILO’s response. Examples included support for a coherent tripartite response to

the crisis faced by maritime workers and the updating of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended, the COVID-19-related work on the health and tourism sectors, and the addition of OSH as a fifth category of fundamental principles and rights at work. Policy actions cohered with the Centenary Declaration and programme and budget, and broadly aligned with country programme outcomes and Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs).

New mechanisms for coherence and collaboration with other UN agencies and multilateral partners emerged, but will require substantial work, and more resources, to realize benefits. High-level agreements and collaborative mechanisms were established in the UN system but, at the country level, the ILO was not always able to play as prominent a role as it would have liked, even if it was the logical and mandated agency to do so. Its relative lack of resources at the country level, particularly in non-resident countries, was reported to restrict the scope of its activities. Successful examples and lessons learned from joint UN projects linked to the Multi-Partner Trust Fund are found in the synthesis review.

Effectiveness

KEY FINDING 8:

The Office's planning and reporting systems did not adequately track its COVID-19 response. Adjustments were made to these systems, but results were poorly reported.

KEY FINDING 9:

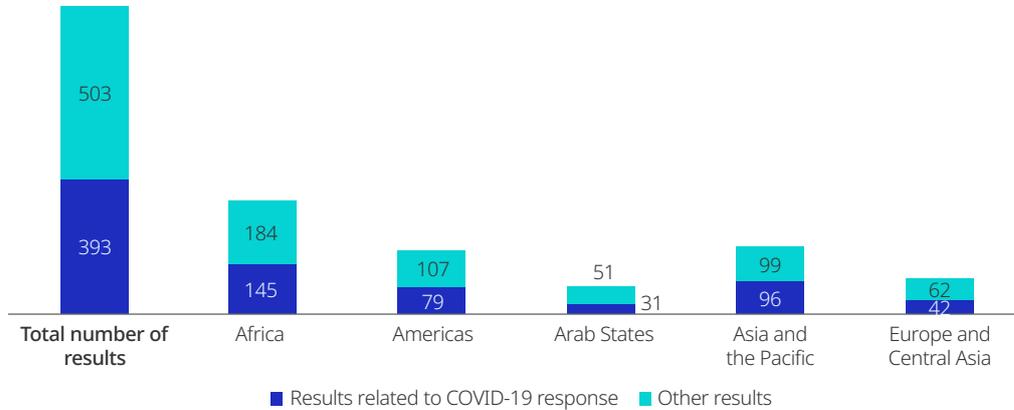
Innovative knowledge products were cited as being highly influential and elevated the ILO's profile as an authoritative source of labour market data.

KEY FINDING 10:

Good results were identified across all the key policy areas in supporting both national policy development, and programmes and measures to address the immediate impacts of the crisis.

The ILO was only partially successful in adapting its planning and reporting systems to track its COVID-19 response and measure its effectiveness. Making sense of programme and budget performance reports in their coverage of the COVID-19 response was especially challenging. Tracking adjustments were made to the monitoring and reporting system, but results were often poorly reported. In the end, the ILO decided to maintain its existing approach, tweaking its planning and reporting systems to capture some COVID-19-related detail, but largely reporting as usual on programme and budget results. This approach resulted in 45 per cent of projects being identified as contributing to the COVID-19 response in the report on ILO programme implementation 2020–21 (figure 3).⁷

7 ILO, ILO Programme Implementation 2020–21.

FIGURE 3: CONTRIBUTION OF RESULTS TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE, TOTAL AND BY REGION

Qualitative reporting of the ILO's pandemic response, both within the report on ILO programme implementation 2020–21 and in documents presented to the Governing Body, showcased highlights of the ILO's work, but said little about "lowlights" – aspects of this work that were ineffective. Such deficiencies in reporting were acknowledged by staff interviewed, who often stressed the importance of getting it right next time.

Evaluation procedures were updated and protocols were produced to ensure continued accountability and learning from evaluations.⁸ The synthesis review was carried out in three phases and results were published for each phase to provide real-time learning on the effectiveness of the ILO's operations in responding to the effects of the pandemic.

The ILO made great efforts to support employers' and workers' organizations in continuing to operate and service their members during the crisis. In high-level evaluation case study countries, the constituents were positive about the effectiveness of these efforts, highlighting, for example, the value of information shared on international practices, guides for members on OSH, telework and online payments; and support for improved policy advocacy and the maintenance of social dialogue.

The high-level evaluation found examples of effective policy actions. Knowledge products were an early focus, and while measuring their effectiveness is difficult, some were innovative and were cited as being influential. The ILO's knowledge output elevated its profile as an authoritative source of labour market data, and its outreach, public engagement and media coverage grew substantially.

8 ILO, Implications of COVID-19 on Evaluations in the ILO; and ILO, [Protocol on Collecting Evaluative Evidence on the ILO's COVID-19 Response Measures through Project and Programme Evaluations](#), 2020.

Work in support of inclusive economic growth and employment allowed the effects of the pandemic on national labour markets to be better understood, with insights incorporated into national employment policies and programmes, youth employment strategies, enterprise support measures, sectoral responses, skills systems and support for vulnerable groups. Work supporting the protection of all workers helped the constituents to implement their immediate COVID-19 responses in the field of OSH, including in the most-affected sectors and occupations, to tackle the negative effects of the pandemic on fundamental principles and rights at work, on informality, and on women and vulnerable workers. Universal social protection was given new prominence, and the ILO used its policy expertise to support new coverage in several countries (including for vulnerable groups and women), and to position the ILO with international financial institutions and in the UN system to further expand this work. Within the UN and the multilateral system, collaborative project efforts had mixed results, but the ILO has forged new agreements and partnerships that could enhance results over the long term.

Efficiency

KEY FINDING 11:

The ILO quickly reinvented its service delivery model, achieving efficiencies of scale in supporting the constituents, as well as logistical, financial, environmental and time efficiencies.

KEY FINDING 12:

Budget flexibility allowed adaptations while maintaining accountability, and funding partners were open to project adjustments. Some inefficiencies were reported in the speed of the mobilization of resources, including human resources.

KEY FINDING 13:

Major programmes (such as the Better Work flagship programme and the SCORE programme) were generally better able to make delivery adjustments than smaller, one-off projects were.

The ILO managed the crisis in an efficient and timely way, reinventing its service delivery model, defining a coherent policy framework and asserting its position as a global authority on the pandemic's effects on the world of work. The digitization of its services was accelerated, enabling it to achieve efficiencies of scale in the delivery of constituent support – as well as logistical, financial, environmental and time efficiencies – through remote engagement and less travel. The ILO established new systems, equipping staff to work remotely and ensuring workplace safety. New intervention models were introduced that streamlined support to the constituents (for example, the development of global products that EBMOs could adapt for local use). The right balance between face-to-face and remote servicing will need to be struck as pandemic restrictions ease, but it was generally agreed that the ILO would not return to its pre-pandemic mode of operation. The ILO's human resources management response played a vital role in ensuring business continuity, though delays in staff mobilization were sometimes raised by staff and the constituents as an obstacle to a timely response.

At the governance level, the ILO was able to adapt its mechanisms for decision-making and constituent engagement and achieved some new efficiencies that could be continued. Other engagement with the constituents, including at the International Labour Conference, was also efficiently maintained online, although some countries reported difficulties in connecting, due to ILO access procedures or inadequate local internet access.

The ILO established procedures to support budget flexibility while still maintaining accountability. Funding partners were briefed, and they proved to be open to the changes the ILO proposed. Project staff in countries were not always able to adapt their projects to their new circumstances as fully as they would have liked, but they were generally able to adjust delivery modes and some outputs efficiently and to reasonable effect.

Impact and sustainability

KEY FINDING 14:

Although it will take time for the impacts of the ILO's COVID-19 response work to be fully revealed, the Organization took advantage of the renewed impetus for reform in some key policy areas to rapidly advance its agenda – the inclusion of a safe and healthy working environment in the ILO's framework of fundamental principles and rights at work is one example.

KEY FINDING 15:

The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions could also have transformative impacts, but these will depend on strong partnerships and will require substantial financing.

KEY FINDING 16:

Openness to the adaptive management approach used during the pandemic needs to be maintained, especially – but not exclusively – in crisis situations.

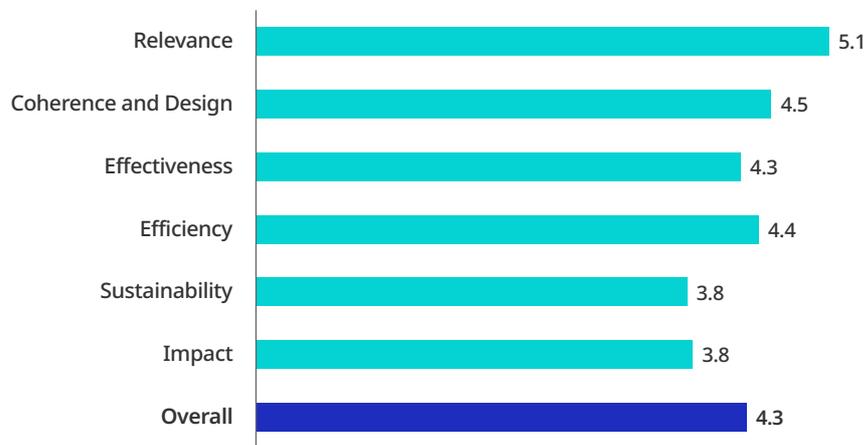
Measuring the impact and sustainability of the ILO's policy actions will require more time. However, having received a “wake-up call” on aspects of the Decent Work Agenda, many countries are now more alert to the need for action. Progress in respect of impacts is already evident in some areas, where the pandemic has given further emphasis to ongoing ILO advocacy efforts. A prime example is the inclusion, at the 110th Session (2022) of the International Labour Conference, of a safe and healthy working environment as a fifth category of rights in the ILO's framework of fundamental principles and rights at work.

There is also renewed impetus for cooperation between the ILO and other UN agencies, multilateral partners and international financial institutions that could allow the reach and scale of the ILO's efforts in these areas to be extended. The Global Forum for a Human-centred Recovery, held in February 2022, added to this impetus. The ILO has conducted substantial groundwork for the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, which may have huge impacts on the development of social protection systems and employment. But it is still in its early days and, given the resource constraints and continuing collaboration barriers, these impacts may not materialize. As has been seen in some policy areas, such as ensuring a just transition, there can be a major gap between stated policy goals and what can actually be delivered on the ground.

The ILO has emerged from the initial crisis phase of the pandemic with experience in adapting its operations quickly. The transferability of this experience is never certain, as every major disruption brings unique challenges. What can and should be sustained is an openness to the adaptive approach that the ILO has employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an approach was by no means guaranteed, and a more conservative “wait-and-see” response might easily have been adopted exactly at the time when the ILO needed to step forward. As one Department Director said: “We were lucky to have good leadership, but we need to formalize this approach. We need a statement of ‘this is what we do’ and not just hope for the best.”

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

FIGURE 4: EVALUATION OF THE ILO'S RESPONSE TO THE IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 (2020-22): RATINGS BY CRITERION



6 = Highly satisfactory, 5 = Satisfactory, 4 = Somewhat satisfactory, 3 = Somewhat unsatisfactory, 2 = Unsatisfactory, 1 = Highly unsatisfactory.

Note: Based on several criteria, specific scoring sheet available from EVAL upon request.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ New work practices can enhance the interaction of headquarters with the field and its understanding of the lived experience of the constituents and programme beneficiaries. This can lead to a more practical and less academic approach, improving relevance, effectiveness and potential impact.

- ▶ The pandemic forced the ILO to produce agile and innovative responses in its service delivery. Now, the Organization is better placed to encourage a culture of continuous improvement that follows this approach.

- ▶ The crisis response showed that leadership and putting in place the right collaborative structures can improve organizational coherence and break down silos. The leaps taken in the development of the ILO's technological capacity can facilitate this.

- ▶ The digital delivery of ILO services offers the opportunity to expand reach and scale, but there is a digital divide, especially in low-income countries, and the accessibility of these services needs to be considered.

- ▶ The monitoring and reporting of crisis response actions, which by nature are conceived and implemented quickly and outside normal planning time frames, need to be improved.

- ▶ The pandemic will have an enduring effect on the ILO's service delivery approach, reducing travel and allowing engagement with the constituents more regularly and directly through online means. However, in-person missions still bring many benefits in addition to those achieved by online contacts.

- ▶ Before the pandemic, OSH was mainly associated with industrial safety and hygiene, such as the prevention of occupational accidents. The pandemic has highlighted additional dimensions, such as mental health in the workplace, which have not received sufficient attention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations concerning the institutional response to COVID-19

RECOMMENDATION 1

Continue to strengthen the capacity of the tripartite constituents to enhance and adapt their services to contribute to the development of effective global, regional and national post-pandemic recovery policies and actions.

Adjust the ILO Institutional Capacity Development Strategy to meet the needs of the constituents in a post-pandemic world, ensuring that the constituents are as well equipped as possible to develop policy responses and to offer innovative services related to the trends accelerated by COVID-19. Emphasis could be placed, for example on: formalizing the use of digital tools; developing teleworking policies and guides (including to build capacity to influence legislation and to engage in collective bargaining on this subject); developing crisis and risk management systems; protecting and enhancing employment opportunities for vulnerable groups; strengthening the economic case for employment-rich investments, particularly in the care, digital and green economies; sectoral recovery actions; improving productivity and promoting innovation in enterprises; and curbing the spread of informality. The Office should seek the right balance between online and face-to-face approaches to capacity-building by assessing their comparative impacts and barriers to digital training.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
Deputy Director-General for Field Operations (DDG/FOP), Bureau for Workers' Activities, Bureau for Employers' Activities, DDG/P, Partnerships and Field Support Department (PARDEV), Turin Centre		Short-term	Medium

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop an Organization-wide crisis response strategy encompassing both headquarters and the field.

In addition to the ILO's current risk management and business continuity plans, use the experience accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic to develop an Organization-wide crisis response strategy to deal with any future global calamity that might have far-reaching and sustained impacts on service delivery. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of adaptive management principles and the possible need to temporarily step away from established procedures (and associated risks) and devise a resource mobilization plan (including human resources) or strategy for crisis situations to facilitate a rapid response to country offices and national constituents in crises. The ILO should also urge regional and country offices to review and adjust their existing business continuity and contingency plans in the light of the lessons drawn at the local level regarding responsiveness to the COVID-19 crisis, which was uneven.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
Senior Management Team, DDG/MR, Strategic Programming and Management Department (PROGRAM), DDG/P, DDG/FOP, Treasurer and Financial Comptroller		Short-term	High

RECOMMENDATION 3

Expand and mainstream more broadly the approach to cross-departmental teamwork demonstrated in the pandemic and continue the efficient and effective management and governance practices that were introduced.

Building on the successful collaboration models introduced during the pandemic, establish more structured mechanisms, driven by the Director-General and senior management, to drive policy coherence and organizational synergy (such as cross-departmental work teams and more frequent and structured interactions between policy portfolio directors and regional directors). The ILO should also nurture Global Technical Teams as communities of practice and mutual support. This focus on policy coherence would align with the institutional guidelines on the next programme and budget. More broadly, the ILO should review any improvements in efficiency and effectiveness that flowed from management and governance arrangements introduced during the pandemic, with a view to formalizing their ongoing application post-pandemic.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
Senior Management Team, PROGRAM		Short-term	Medium

RECOMMENDATION 4

Enhance the ILO's capacity to monitor, report and evaluate crisis response actions that are developed and implemented outside the normal programming cycle.

In the context of tracking the progress of human-centred recovery, the Governing Body has stressed the need for "evidence-based assessments of the quantity, quality and social inclusivity of the recovery at the country level and to examine how the recovery strategies can be improved". However, this high-level evaluation found the ILO's tracking of its own COVID 19 response actions to be lacking. The ILO needs to develop a process to adequately adjust plans when operational circumstances have been severely disrupted (for example, by revising the theory of change, taking major disruptive risks into consideration). Reporting needs to clearly describe actions and their effects to respond immediately and to envision recovery or structural change. Evaluation processes and their funding also need to better capture the impact of crisis recovery actions by adopting a longer-term approach that allows assessments to be made two or three years down the road, not just at the conclusion of projects.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
DDG/MR, DDG/FOP, PROGRAM, PARDEV, Research Department, EVAL		Medium-term	Medium

RECOMMENDATION 5

Strengthen the institutional capacity of governments to respond to systemic crises through universal social protection.

The Governing Body should re-emphasize the leadership role of the ILO in ensuring universal social protection in the light of current and future crises, and support Member States in implementing the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), and the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205). This can be done, among other things, by building capacities to prepare and respond to systemic crises and shocks through social protection measures that target, inter alia, vulnerable groups and the informal sector. The Office should clarify how the Global Flagship Programme on Building Social Protection Floors for All will contribute to adapting social protection systems to new and emerging challenges. It should also provide details of the strategic position and modalities under which it should offer at least the basic guarantees of income and health protection to all, including women and vulnerable groups.

The ILO should clarify its role in emergency situations in this area and consider the importance of having a seat at the table when a crisis strikes. The ILO's unique comparative advantages should be promoted by UN resident coordinators and the ILO should collaborate with UN partners and international financial institutions to shape a common understanding and vision of shock-responsive social protection systems in interventions that are systemic and catalytic. The ILO should continue to ensure strong leadership in the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, including by: contributing to the mobilization of target resources; leveraging its networks of constituents, the UN system and partners through international social protection platforms such as the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board; and strengthening partnerships with international financial institutions and ministries of finance.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
Social Protection Department (SOCPRO), DDG/P, DWTs and country offices (COs), DDG/FOP		Long-term	Medium

RECOMMENDATION 6

Continue to strengthen the constituents' capacities to sustain international labour standards and fundamental principles and rights at work for workers, even during a crisis, and develop inclusive, gender-responsive policies for the protection of workers in insecure forms of work.

The impact of the crisis on health and care workers, and transnational workers in the transport and maritime industries, exposed a lack of understanding of applicable international labour standards in these highly exposed sectors. Together with its social partners, the ILO should work with Member States to implement a whole-of-government understanding of the obligations under the applicable Conventions and support policies that are applicable at all times, especially during crises, that are rights-based and intersectional to protect key workers.

Responding to the urgent need to provide protection for emerging diverse forms of work, the ILO needs to accelerate support for gender-responsive national legislation and labour administration systems in respect of the protection of wages, working time, care responsibilities, safety and health, the elimination of violence and harassment, and inclusive access to social protection. The ILO should work with other development partners at the global and national levels to address decent work deficits, paying special attention to those made particularly vulnerable by the crisis.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
International Labour Standards Department (NORMES), Sectoral Policies Department, Governance and Tripartism Department (GOVERNANCE), SOCPRO, COs, Conditions of Work and Equality Department, DDG/P		Medium-to-long-term	Medium

RECOMMENDATION 7

The ILO should more clearly integrate a just transition into its post-pandemic employment and skills development strategies and actions, and use its experience and expertise to implement approaches with maximum potential for impact. It should pursue financing and delivery partnerships with organizations with resources to help bring a just transition to scale.

A just transition needs to be incorporated into a broader range of the ILO's employment and skills development strategies and actions in the post-pandemic recovery (including for young people, women and vulnerable groups). While the high-level agreements, transition guidelines, manuals and training courses already devised are all necessary, they are far from sufficient. Countries considering just transition processes have found that the ILO has committed very few resources in this area, and that available staff would be insufficient to support the complex social dialogue necessary to generate support for radical change. The surveys conducted as part of the high-level evaluation found that there was a strong perception that the ILO was underperforming in this important area. In the absence of sufficient ILO presence in-country, it is considered likely that other agencies will enter the process, but with limited perspective, no tripartite mandate and inadequate experience.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
DDG/P, ENTERPRISES, Employment Policy Department, GOVERNANCE, Multilateral Cooperation Department (MULTILATERALS), SOCPRO		Long-term	High

RECOMMENDATION 8

The ILO should review its current capacity to deliver on the whole-of-government approach and new models of development financing, focusing on the scale and distribution of workload implied by its agreements as part of the UN COVID-19 response (including with both UN and other multilateral organizations), and devise a prioritized and specific plan to meet the resource requirements, including at the country level.

Calls for new models and higher levels of development financing have highlighted the ILO's relatively limited capacity in this field, particularly with international development banks and funds. The UN Secretary-General has emphasized the need to move forward with whole-of-government approaches, not just engaging ministries covering social, labour and environmental areas but ensuring that ministries of finance are fully engaged in the recovery process as well. To achieve these ambitious goals, the ILO will need greater financing expertise.

Furthermore, the ILO currently lacks the human resources to manage the workload associated with its many new cooperation agreements and partnerships, especially at the country level. If these agreements are to deliver on the bold development results projected, the ILO will need to scale up its operations and presence, particularly at the country level. It appears unlikely that this can be achieved efficiently through the widespread use of short-term contract staff or consultancies.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
MULTILATERALS, PARDEV, PROGRAM, DDG/P, DDG/FOP, Human Resources Development Department (HRD)		Medium-to-long-term	High