



Governing Body

332nd Session, Geneva, 8–22 March 2018

GB.332/POL/INF/1

Policy Development Section

POL

FOR INFORMATION

Report of the Workers' Symposium: The Future of Work We Want: The Workers' Perspective (Geneva, 18–20 October 2017)

Summary: This paper describes the outcomes of the 2017 ILO Symposium on the Future of Work Initiative.

Author unit: Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV).

Related documents: None.

1. The 2017 ILO Symposium on the Future of Work We Want: The Workers' Perspective, organized by the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV), focused on the issues surrounding the ILO Future of Work Initiative. This Initiative was launched by the Director-General, Guy Ryder, as one of the seven centenary initiatives in order to encourage the ILO and other stakeholders to take a step back from their day-to-day activities and address the fast pace of the changes that continue to affect the world of work. The goal of this Symposium was to contribute to the Future of Work Initiative from a workers' perspective and to discuss possible policy responses of governments, social partners and the ILO as a means to promote social justice and protect the rights of working men and women.
2. The Symposium was organized around the four thematic conversations that form part of the Future of Work Initiative: work and society, decent jobs for all, the organization of work and production, and governance of work. Two additional sessions were held to discuss issues around the role of politics in addressing future challenges and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Conceptually, the Symposium was the culmination of five regional conferences on the future of work organized by ACTRAV prior to the Symposium in 2017 that sought to promote an active dialogue between different stakeholders on issues related to the future of work. Therefore, both in the regional conferences as well as at the Symposium, participating trade union leaders actively engaged with employer representatives, government officials and academics, covering a broad spectrum of topics related to the Future of Work Initiative.
3. The Initiative is based on the acknowledgement that the world of work is changing at a faster pace than ever before. Globalization has profoundly transformed the world economy over the last 40 years. National economies are much more interconnected, which has huge implications for how work and production are organized, both in developed and developing countries. While this has been an important driver of economic growth, the benefits of greater openness to trade have not been shared equally. Increases in trade led to a decline in manufacturing in developed countries, with many medium-skilled jobs being outsourced. Developing countries specialized in exporting basic commodities or focused solely on a few production sectors with limited employment capabilities, leading to even greater inequalities. It is therefore vital to diversify the economy in order to make it more resilient to global fluctuations and increase labour productivity, wages and living standards.
4. Technological change, with innovations in information technology, robotics and, more recently, machine learning, is substantially restructuring production and affecting the quantity of work, working conditions and the nature of work itself. However, while its effect on the quantity of work is a matter of ongoing debate, technological change will certainly have a profound impact on the composition of the labour force. Higher skilled workers benefit most from technological innovation, especially information technologies, while the repetitive tasks in some medium-skilled jobs are increasingly being automated. This leads to a further polarization of the labour force, a growth in gender inequality and an exacerbation of overall wage inequality. These changes are in addition to the fact that labour markets are failing to keep up with the rapid population growth in many parts of the world, which will lead to an increase of 40 million additional workers entering the labour force each year.
5. Moreover, the growth of the global economy has been increasingly achieved at the expense of the environment. Industrialization, but also higher demand spurred on by a rapidly expanding population, have led to environmental degradation as well as a dangerous warming of the planet. This has, and will continue to have, profound consequences for the world of work and the livelihoods of the global population. Concerted efforts have to be made at the national and international levels in terms of reducing CO₂ emissions, increasing investment in the green economy, promoting more sustainable waste management and an overall transition towards a circular economy.

6. Workers' representatives were acutely aware of the scope of challenges that lie ahead in terms of their interaction as a social partner with other stakeholders, reassessing their methods, promoting the centrality of work, and protecting the dignity of all workers in society. One of the key themes discussed was the importance of social dialogue in addressing the accelerating changes facing the world of work. It was agreed that the complexity and interconnectivity of the issues at hand makes it more important than ever to operate in a collective tripartite setting. Workers' organizations, in particular, have to be partners, not just fulfilling their core role within collective bargaining, but also being included actively in shaping socio-economic policies. The role of the State in this regard is to guarantee equal information, consultation and participation of workers, which includes abiding by existing national and international regulations, protecting labour rights, extending national regulations to address present and future regulatory gaps and ensuring that businesses fulfil their societal responsibilities.
7. Another point discussed was the advancement of technological innovation. It was pointed out that the negative externalities of artificial intelligence and machine learning are not generated by the technology itself, but rather relate to the ethical and sustainable use of new technologies, which must be regulated accordingly. However, automation and the digital economy were key concerns for all participants. The platform economy, in particular, has a largely disruptive effect on workers, as, for the most part, these platforms operate outside classic labour regulations. While such regulations offer a certain amount of flexibility to some, workers in digital production processes are not covered adequately by those regulations, which leads to the development of non-standard forms of employment and puts pressure on wages, as well as putting pressure on companies in the formal economy through unfair competition. Workers in non-standard forms of employment are often excluded from social protection and on-the-job training, which is crucial for skills development. They are also generally more vulnerable relative to workers in formal employment relationships. In order to adapt to the fast pace of technological change and its disruptive effects on the formal employment relationship, it is vital to strengthen social protection schemes and provide equal access to quality education and skills development in the context of a lifelong learning strategy.
8. Furthermore, participants stressed the importance for trade unions to reassess strategies to expand beyond their traditional member base and support collective organization within new forms of work and informal employment. Unionization is shrinking in most parts of the world and the extension to workers outside of the formal employment relationship should be key in order to ensure that trade unions fulfil their role in promoting social justice and decent work for all. This includes reassessing internal strategies to allow a larger share of non-standard workers to be organized collectively and have their work formalized.
9. Another issue is the implication of the large macroeconomic trends that accompany globalization. Many participants emphasized that international competition due to an increase in trade should not be to the detriment of labour rights and working conditions, or to the implementation of fiscal policies that foster broad and sustainable economic development. In particular, increasing competition for foreign investment has led to countries engaging in a race to the bottom, which puts pressure on labour standards and union representation to accommodate foreign investors. This calls, in particular, for better regional integration; stronger coherence between international organizations, in order to regulate the increased internationalization of capital and multinational enterprises; international production patterns; and the respect for and the promotion of decent work.
10. In light of the debates summarized above, the Symposium culminated in the presentation of six specific points, that should influence future debate and should be included in action plans prepared by trade unions and other stakeholders:

- Trade unions have to evaluate their approach in terms of their internal methods as well as their bipartite and tripartite relationships. They need to fulfil their role as an advocate for progressive policies and have to both shape, and be an active participant in, the democratic processes that drive sustainable development and decent work for all.
- Social dialogue has to be actively enhanced. This is not necessarily a matter of creating the appropriate institutions, which in most cases already exist, but rather a matter of the quality of the social dialogue. There has to be a clear definition of the scope of social dialogue, to strengthen tripartite engagements and ensure the autonomous and equal role of the social partners. In light of the new forms of work and production that blur the definitions of both “employers” and “workers”, it is fundamental to use the potential offered by international framework agreements and ensure that government mechanisms recognize freedom of association and collective bargaining for all workers.
- More efforts have to be made to organize and formalize new forms of employment that resemble the work practices of the distant past. The widespread fragmentation and individualization of employment has huge implications for workers, the coverage and effectiveness of social protection schemes that are tied to a formal employment relationship as well as the bargaining power of workers. There are some positive examples of collective action among crowd workers that have been organized or actively supported by trade unions. However, trade unions have to further assess their internal methods on how to integrate workers who are not in a formal employment relationship and formalize their work.
- Trade unions have to actively promote development strategies that fundamentally change the economic structures of the global economy. This includes striving for greater sectoral diversification to boost employment and wages, which, in turn, leads to higher internal demand and investing in lifelong learning strategies that involve the direct participation of governments and companies. This would make emerging countries less reliant on the fluctuations of global growth rates and prices. For this, trade unions must be integrated further into the design and implementation of integration processes and trade agreements at all levels.
- There has to be greater coherence when it comes to policies that promote the sustainable development of economies. Furthermore, social and environmental policies have to be given the same importance as economic policies. One example for providing a coherent strategy is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. The clear set of goals and targets at the national, regional and international levels provide a framework for how the world of work can respond to the drivers and trends affecting the future of work. This will require the active involvement of trade unions as well as the necessary political commitment and financial means to ultimately incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals into national development strategies and ensure a future of work based on decent work and sustainable development. Overall, the State has to fulfil its role as a guarantor and promoter of economic, social and environmental cohesion, equality, protecting the rights of workers, respect national and international laws and their regulatory frameworks as well as extend regulation to cover newly emerging gaps.
- At the international level, the role of the ILO is imperative in ensuring that its mandate for social justice is present in all policies affecting the world of work, which includes upholding existing standards and addressing potential gaps in its regulatory framework. Furthermore, the focus should not only be on regulation, but also the ILO should ensure strengthened compliance with international labour standards and promote social protection as well as social dialogue.