

# Trade union revitalization: navigating uncertainty, change and resilience in the world of work

## ***Rafael Peels***

Senior Specialist in Workers' Activities,  
Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV), ILO

## ***Mohammed Mwamadzingo***

Programme Manager,  
International Training Centre of the  
International Labour Organization (ITCILO), Turin



## Introduction

The future of work is indeed uncertain. The world of work is faced with multiple transformations in the context of changing labour markets, driven by technological advancement, climate change, globalization and demographic shifts. The effects of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) worsening geopolitical tensions, disasters and armed conflicts, have further exacerbated these realities. Furthermore, the deficits in decent work and worsening violations of workers and trade union rights further aggravate the prevailing situation.

All the same, trade unions were not born out of despair, but were established to confront challenges that afflict their members and society in general. Workers and their organizations are at the forefront in formulating policy responses to the big drivers of change in the world of work, including during COVID-19 and the recovery from the pandemic. In other words, trade unions show resilience and find innovative and effective ways to thrive, to provide services and represent workers. As is expected of them, trade unions continue to contribute to building stronger, more sustainable and more equal economies and societies. They do this in a variety of ways, including by providing quality services for their current and new members, bolstering trade unions' capacity to analyse and understand the new realities in the world of work, as well as influencing economic, social and sustainable development policies. In addition, trade unions work with governments and employers' organizations in developing a conducive environment for social dialogue, based on trust and respect of their rights and independence.

This paper builds on previous research commissioned by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV), published in 2019 as "Trade Unions in the Balance" (Visser 2019). This research explored the developments in union membership across the world in the past decades and concluded by suggesting four possible future scenarios for trade unions: (1) marginalization, understood to mean decreasing rates of unionization and ageing unions; (2) dualization, where trade unions defend current positions and service the members closest to them; (3) replacement, which points towards competition between trade unions and other actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, States, employers or other intermediary agencies; or (4) revitalization, where trade unions use innovative tactics and coalitions to strengthen trade unions to ensure they are, relevant, democratic and representative actors in organizing and servicing the "new unstable workforce" in the global North and South.

This paper focuses on the fourth scenario: trade union revitalization. The aim of the paper is to showcase innovative examples from around the world, based on six thematic issues: (1) trade unions adopting new or revised policies aimed at addressing the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) trade unions in specific countries implementing innovative strategies to improve their services to attract new members and retain existing ones; (3) mobilizing workers in emerging jobs, sectors and themes;

(4) trade union internal governance; (5) workers' voice and dialogue; and (6) coalition-building and campaigning.

The paper addresses how trade unions are indeed revitalizing their organizations in relation to the six thematic issues, with the overall aim of transforming and adapting to changing dynamics in the labour markets and the needs of their members in particular and of workers in general, as well as positioning themselves for the future. Thus, the paper addresses the question: how do trade unions deal successfully with navigating uncertainty and change?

In responding to this question, we examine various approaches, strategies and tools that trade unions can use, and have been using, to navigate change and steer trade union revitalization. The paper examines various approaches, strategies and tools that trade unions can use, and have been using, to navigate change and steer trade union revitalization, such as experimentation, formal approaches towards innovation, strategic thinking and foresight, and how these can be applied most effectively to respond to particular needs in different trade union contexts.

The paper is divided into five sections, including this introduction. The second section addresses the question of uncertainty, change and resilience and introduces a framework for trade unions to deal with: the Triple-A governance framework. The third section provides an overview of positive and innovative experiences of trade union revitalization from around the world along six thematic axes, while the fourth section addresses the common element of these various experiences: the ability of trade unions to navigate change for trade union revitalization. The final section draws conclusions, provides an overview of lessons learned and suggests a way forward.

### **Uncertainty, change and resilience in the world of work: Implications for trade unions**

The ILO Future of Work discussions, which resulted in the adoption of the ILO Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work in 2019 (ILO 2019a) and the Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, adopted in 2021 (ILO 2021a), stressed the need to think more seriously about uncertainty, change and resilience. The ILO Future of Work discussions centred around major long-term trends and drivers of change, such as demographic dynamics, globalization and technological and environmental changes. Recently, additional factors of uncertainty and change have emerged, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased political conflicts and adverse developments in human rights, to increasing inflation and global food shortages.

These recent crises are good illustrations of the impact of uncertainty. They portray the lack of clarity and predictability about the way labour markets, respect for workers' rights and trade unionism would be in the period ahead. This awareness of uncertainty

or, in other words, the undecided, undetermined nature of the reality for workers and their organizations is directly related to the idea of change. It is key for trade unions to recognize that the context for workers and their organizations is in constant flux, encompassing different degrees and types of change. The changes can be extensive, such as transformation or replacement, but they can also be moderate, as in the case of modifications or transitioning.

With the recognition of uncertainty and change comes the need to manage that uncertainty and change in a proactive and positive manner. This is why it is important to consider the concept of resilience, as outlined in the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205) (ILO 2017). The Recommendation defines resilience as “the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management”.<sup>1</sup> This definition includes various elements, starting with a positive notion of uncertainty and change viewed through the lens of resilience, that is, an ability to bounce back, to cope, to resist or to emerge stronger from a crisis; but also a notion of anticipating, proactively preparing for and managing risks.

This paper uses the Triple-A governance framework,<sup>2</sup> which is centred on three key pillars for trade unions to consider when navigating uncertainty, change and resilience. These pillars are **anticipation**, **agility** and **adaptation**. The three As refer to complementary organizational capabilities that are needed to navigate an increasingly uncertain and volatile world.

**Anticipation** is the ability to understand the dynamics of change that may impact emerging futures. **Agility** is the organization-wide ability to deal with uncertainty and change by questioning mindsets, by creating an openness towards innovation and experimentation, and by strengthening the willingness to question assumptions about “how we usually do things” and foreseeable futures. **Adaptation** is the organization’s ability to translate anticipation and organizational learning into concrete actions and strategies to create desired change. This can include conventional actions, such as implementing strategic plans and road maps. However, it can also include pilot projects, experiments or prototypes to allow for the testing of new ideas and scaling-up of these into organizational innovations, reorganization and the (re)design of services for workers. This Triple-A governance framework will be used in the fourth section to assess various experiences of trade union revitalization.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.ilo.org/actrav/pubs/WCMS\\_840864/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/pubs/WCMS_840864/lang--en/index.htm) for a further elaboration of the resilience concept in the light of Recommendation No. 205.

<sup>2</sup> The Triple-A governance framework is borrowed from Ramos, Uusikyla and Luong (2020) and further elaborated in a trade union context in Ramos et al., forthcoming.

## Trade union revitalization: Good practices from around the world

As part of ACTRAV's research project on Trade Unions in Transition: Trade Unions as Actors for Change and its implementation of the ILO Programme and Budget for trade unions, several positive experiences from around the world on trade union revitalization have been gathered (ILO, n.d.). Based on discussions with trade union leaders worldwide, six key pillars of trade union revitalization have been identified. These are: (1) trade unions adopting new or revised policies aimed at addressing the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) trade unions in specific countries implementing innovative strategies to improve their services to attract new members and retain existing ones; (3) mobilizing workers in emerging jobs, sectors and themes; (4) trade union internal governance; (5) workers' voice and dialogue; and (6) coalition-building and campaigning. In the following sections, a range of illustrations of trade union revitalization from around the world, organized around these six areas, will be discussed.

### *Trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Many trade unions in the world have been at the forefront of formulating policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and its recovery. Through various types of social dialogue, trade unions have negotiated protection for front-line workers (for example in terms of occupational safety and health) or the extension of social protection to independent or casual workers; campaigned against violations of worker and trade union rights; defended the rights of groups of vulnerable workers, such as migrant workers; or negotiated relief packages in particularly hard-hit sectors (such as tourism, care, transport and retail) (ILO 2021b). Trade unions saw the crisis as a wake-up call to contribute to building forward better and advancing labour and social agendas, and pushed for greater recognition and effective participation in policymaking. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on collective bargaining. To this end, trade unions have bolstered their capacities in negotiating collective agreements promoting fundamental rights and adequate minimum wages as well as maximum working hours, health and social protection benefits for all, and safety and health at work (see box). Whereas in many regions collective negotiations were under pressure, in some regions formal and/or informal negotiations increased and trade unions made substantial progress in building their digital capacities (ILO 2021c).

### **Box. Examples of trade union achievements in social dialogue during the COVID-19 crisis**

**Germany:** IG Metall and Gesamtmetall signed a collective agreement with the following provisions: arrangements for short-time working that protected 80 percent of workers' net remuneration; eight-day paid leave for parents with children up to the age of 12 years and five-day paid childcare leave - which would not be deducted from their annual leave.

**Italy:** Government and social partners signed an agreement on 14 March 2020 to relax telework regulations and ensure the health and safety of workers who cannot work from home.

**Kazakhstan:** Trade union federations in Kazakhstan negotiated with the Minister of Employment and Social Protection a special package for employees affected by COVID-19, including compensation equal to the minimum wage for workers while in quarantine; a bonus for medical personnel; delays in payments for bank loans and utilities; and in-kind benefits for large families.

**Malawi:** The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions has urged employers with more than 1,000 employees to split their workers into different shifts to reduce congestion given the threat of COVID-19.

**Paraguay:** The trade unions CESITP, CGT, CNT, CUT and CUT-A\* have jointly proposed to the Government a reduction in fuel prices and prices for public transport, controls on medicines and food, reductions in VAT on a basic basket of goods, suspension of personal income tax for young workers, protection of employment, no payments of less than the minimum wage, and so on.

**Sweden:** On 18 March 2020, Unionen, the Swedish white-collar trade union, and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise agreed on a nationwide collective agreement for short-term work.

\* CESITP: Central Sindical de Trabajadores del Paraguay; CGT: Central General de Trabajadores del Paraguay; CNT: Central Nacional de Trabajadores; CUT: Central Unitaria de Trabajadores del Paraguay; CUT-A: Central Unitaria de Trabajadores del Paraguay Auténtica.

Source: [https://www.ilo.org/actrav/pubs/WCMS\\_767224/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/pubs/WCMS_767224/lang--en/index.htm).

Indeed, the pandemic stimulated trade unions to experiment with digital tools, not only to participate in social dialogue, but also to reach out to their membership. One interesting case is trade unions in Ukraine which, through the "Stop Wage Drop Pandemic" campaign, advocated for increases in and protection of workers' wages, but also highlighted occupational safety and health risks during the pandemic through social media and online platforms, using videos, newspapers, radio broadcasts, webinars and so on (Andreeva, forthcoming). Another example is the Caravan of Labour Rights organized by trade unions

in Kyrgyzstan. This was mostly oriented towards young people, whose situation during the COVID-19 pandemic became even worse than before. Trade unions decided to shift to a virtual format, producing animated videos on labour rights for social media, organizing webinars for young trade union activists to strengthen their knowledge of national and international labour standards, developing a chatbot through which trade union members could obtain answers to their questions about labour and union rights simply and rapidly, and developing a mobile application (app) for trade union members where they could quickly access trade union services and contact one another and trade union officials. These activities created a completely new format of activism for many trade unions, enabling them to keep connected with their members during lockdown (Andreeva, forthcoming).

We can highlight similar positive experiences in Africa where, apart from massive challenges due to COVID-19 and often limited access to digital technology (the “digital divide”), the shift by many trade unions towards “digital unionism” has brought certain positive impacts: “Now, thanks to digital technology, it has made organizing protests far much easier, it has also improved decision-making because one can easily consult without organizing a physical meeting as we used to do as trade unions. Amidst COVID-19, at a click of a button, trade unions are able to widely share information and to run a campaign or mobilize workers for a certain cause.” (ITUC Africa, 2021, in Chinguwo, forthcoming a).

Despite the enormous pressure on trade union membership and income from membership dues during the pandemic, some trade unions have been able to increase their membership, often as a result of successful collective negotiations. This has been the case in Malawi, and also in Mozambique, where a trade union organizing workers in the informal economy has achieved an important increase in its membership during the pandemic. This was possible because the trade union, through social dialogue, entered into an agreement with city and town council authorities such that, for someone to be allocated a space to trade in the markets, she or he must first be registered with the trade union (Chinguwo, forthcoming b).

In a very different, but equally complicated, trade union context – the United States of America – trade unions have been able to demonstrate positive developments during the pandemic in organizing workers and establishing new trade unions in places of employment ranging from Amazon and Starbucks to Apple. These developments have come amid a broader wave of workplace activism in the United States that has emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and which was partly explained by increased pressure on labour demand caused by the “great resignation” (Sherman 2022; Molla 2022; Thorbecke and Isidore 2022).

### ***Innovative strategies to improve services and extend membership***

A second dimension of trade union revitalization is the ability of trade unions to introduce innovative services and extend their membership to traditionally under-represented groups of workers, such as workers in the informal economy, platform workers, migrant workers, domestic workers, workers in the rural economy, and so on.

There is a wide range of examples of unions that have organized workers in the informal economy and integrated them into the formal structures of the trade union movement (ILO 2019b). In Jordan, trade unions have worked with the Government to support Syrian refugees in transitioning from the informal to the formal economy. The Government established an office at the trade union premises to support access to work permits for refugees. In the case of Senegal, a trade union was set up for private security workers, which entered into collective negotiations to regularize workers in the informal economy and enhance access to social protection. In the case of Uzbekistan, unions have been organizing seasonal workers and enabling temporary dual union membership. Trade unions have also modified their constitutions to allow, for instance, for membership by workers in the informal economy.

One particularly challenging, but also vibrant, field of trade union work has been the platform or gig economy. In Argentina, the Platform Economy Staff Association is organizing workers in the gig economy through a new union supported by the main trade union federations. In Indonesia, motorcycle and taxi drivers and various trade unions established an Online Transportation Action Committee, which has engaged in dialogue with firms and the Government to better regulate the sector. In Denmark, trade unions signed a collective agreement with a Danish-owned digital labour platform, addressing matters such as transition from freelance status to employment status, insurance coverage and dispute resolution. In the case of Kenya, a mobile phone app is being used by informal economy workers in transport – “Matatu operators” – to access national health insurance (Chinguwo, forthcoming a).

In 2020 in Colombia, the National Union of Workers in the Agricultural Industry (Sintrainagro), the National Unitary Agricultural Trade Union Federation (Fensuagro), the Trade Union Federation of Agricultural Workers of Colombia (Festracol), the Union of Agribusiness Workers of Colombia (Sintragroindcol) and the National Union of Agricultural Workers (Sintragropecurios) implemented a strategy to attract non-salaried rural workers, resulting in an increase of 8.1 per cent in the number of affiliate members. The union’s growth strategy consisted of designing and offering new services, such as complementary training courses, in partnership with training centres such as the National Learning Service (SENA) and the Cooperative University of Colombia.

Similarly, organizing young workers is of key importance to ensure trade union relevance for the workers of tomorrow as well as today. In the case of the Australian unions, young workers’ centres are a one-stop-shop for young workers to learn about their rights at work and seek personalized advice or legal assistance. Furthermore, trade unions have been using virtual organizing, social media, podcasts and the social media platform TikTok. In the case of Bahrain, trade unions developed a mobile app to mobilize and recruit unemployed youth workers in the country, among other purposes, and established a nationwide alliance with various civil society organizations. Trade unions in Serbia are utilizing a mobile app which is freely accessible in order to target young workers. The app is based on an educational and entertaining quiz on labour law. It is key that these new members are also



incorporated into the trade union structures and leadership, and that their priorities are reflected in the trade union's organization and tactics.

To address the issue of migration, trade unions in the Republic of Moldova started to build collaborations with trade unions in the countries of destination for Moldovan migrant workers, including Israel and Romania, to ensure the protection of Moldovan migrants working abroad. In Kyrgyzstan, trade unions have started to organize Kyrgyz migrant workers. To this end, the Kyrgyz Migrant Workers' Union was founded in 2019, focusing on several key areas, such as pre-departure labour rights training, maintaining an electronic membership database and partnering (through a cooperation agreement) with Russian unions that organize and protect migrant workers in the Russian Federation. In both Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova, these collaborations have been shown to be effective in mitigating the adverse effects of the COVID-19 crisis for migrant workers (Andreeva, forthcoming).

### ***Mobilizing workers in emerging jobs, sectors and themes***

A third dimension of trade union revitalization is the ability for trade unions to reach out to workers in emerging jobs and sectors and to incorporate new themes into trade union agendas. Trade unions are increasingly organizing and advocating for workers' rights in emerging and growing sectors, ranging from the care economy, the green or blue economy (see section "Workers' voice and social dialogue" below) or the platform economy (see section "Innovative strategies to improve services and extend membership" above), to sports or gaming, to name but a few. Most recently, UNI Global Union launched a campaign around working conditions and organizing in the global gaming sector (UNI Global Union 2022a). In the area of sports, trade unions have been campaigning for decent working conditions at major international sporting events, for instance in respect of occupational safety and health at the Tokyo 2021 Olympics, forced labour and the FIFA Qatar World Cup 2022 or human rights violations in the run-up to the Formula 1 Bahrain Grand Prix (UNI Global Union 2019; 2021a; 2021b). Another example is the Fight for 15\$ Movement, which is a broad coalition of trade unions, civil society organizations and other labour advocates in the United States, which campaigns on the broader issue of economic justice, arguing for an increase in minimum wages. The campaign targets most precarious low-wage workers across sectors such as cleaning or fast food, and across gender, racial or identity lines (Rushe 2021). Similar actions are being taken in other parts of the world (UNI Global Union 2022b).

In terms of emerging themes, trade unions increasingly take positions on a variety of issues, ranging from non-discrimination, multinational enterprises and global supply chains and just transition to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see section "Workers' voice and social dialogue" below).

Trade unions have increasingly picked up the topic of non-discrimination, ranging from incorporating gender clauses in collective agreements and campaigning on equal pay and pay transparency to the establishment of women committees and introduction of quotas for female leaders. In this regard, trade unions in Brazil have been considered to be at

the forefront of feminist trade union action (Castro 2017). Similarly, trade unions have shown solidarity with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) community, being at the forefront of the movement to create safe and inclusive workplaces, free from violence and harassment (ITUC 2022). The #MeToo movement worldwide has offered an opportunity for trade unions to advocate against violence and harassment against men and women in the workplace, ranging from public-sector workers in Argentina, transport workers in Canada and bank sector workers in Brazil to workers in the hotel and restaurant sector in Sweden (Pillinger 2017). In 1990, the ILO adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). Trade unions in Africa have increasingly incorporated the interests of workers with disabilities into trade union agendas: Malawian trade unions established a branch in which the majority of members are persons with disabilities; in the case of Zambia, trade unions established a department responsible for the topic and they involve workers with disabilities in the negotiation teams during collective bargaining or provide training to equip workers with disabilities with skills for leadership positions (Chinguwo, forthcoming b).

Trade unions worldwide have undertaken a variety of innovative actions to address challenges related to globalization, including monitoring activities of multinational enterprises along global supply chains, for instance through due diligence, international framework agreements, campaigning on the inclusion of labour provisions in trade and investment agreements, regional integration schemes and the lending activities of regional development banks and international financial institutions (Herberg 2018; Chinguwo, forthcoming a).

### ***Trade union internal governance***

A fourth dimension of trade union revitalization is trade union governance. Democratic internal governance is not only key for effective trade union operations (that is, to deliver), but also for assuring credibility among workers and the general public. Based on a series of webinars organized by ACTRAV and held in various regions in the world, Chinguwo (forthcoming a) highlights major challenges, but also positive experiences related to internal governance of trade unions: strengthening union democracy; enhancing representation and participation in internal decision-making by some categories of workers, for instance migrant workers, youth or women; strengthened administration, technical and research capacity of trade unions; well-functioning union structures at the shop-floor level; enhanced financial accountability and transparency; and financial independence.

As an illustration: in the cases of Ghana and Vietnam, trade unions have put governance high on their internal agenda by prioritizing the actual performance of the unions and the union leaders, that is, ensuring that they acting with knowledge, integrity, transparency and accountability. In the case of Malawi, trade unions conducted an internal evaluation to assess their own sustainability, addressing key aspects of revitalization, such as the strengthening of internal democracy, rebuilding of trust among workers and society,

intensification of efforts to organize workers in the informal economy and other vulnerable categories of workers, enhancing coordination among unions and merging splinter unions, and developing viable means for resource mobilization (Chinguwo, forthcoming b).

In the case of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, since 2011 there has been a strong push for wide-ranging democratization, the so-called “Arab Spring”. While trade unions often played a central role in these popular uprisings, the uprisings also resulted in a push to democratize the trade union movement itself, through the existing national confederations or the establishment of new trade unions, strengthening broader worker participation and representation and independence from governments (Majed and El Moullem, forthcoming).

### ***Workers’ voice and social dialogue***

A fifth axis of trade union revitalization is an inclusive and effective workers’ voice and social dialogue on the issues that matter to workers.

In the outcomes of the ACTRAV webinar series on trade unions in transformation, held in various regions in the world, participants stressed the need to incorporate new topics on the agenda for social dialogue, ranging from COVID-19 recovery to structural transformation and industrial policy, trade and labour, climate action, digital skills, and so on. “Trade unions can no longer simply see their mandate as solely organizing and representing workers on bread-and-butter issues. Gender, culture, ethnicity, migration, climate change, sustainable development and sexual violence against women, among others, are extremely important to be included in social dialogue”. (EATUC 2021 in Chinguwo, forthcoming a)

The SDGs, for instance, have provided an important platform for trade union engagement in topics that have not necessarily been high on unions’ social dialogue agenda. In Colombia, unions have been involved in alternative social dialogue forums, for example at the municipal and departmental level, on issues such as skills development, territorial planning or post-conflict situations. In the Russian Federation, trade union engagement in national social dialogue secured the adoption of new legislation on teleworking, which is of course relevant in the current context of COVID-19.

Good examples also exist of trade unions incorporating a variety of technology-related issues into social dialogue, ranging from the right to disconnect, data protection and algorithmic management to the introduction of technological surveillance of workers at the workplace. Various examples exist of collective agreements that cover platform workers, such as bicycle couriers in Austria, Uber EATS riders in Switzerland and freelance domestic workers in Denmark (ILO 2021d; UNI Global Union 2021c). A recent agreement between the Spanish Government and social partners over workers’ rights vis-à-vis algorithmic management ensures more transparency and also helps to mitigate the risk of unfair and discriminatory algorithmic decision-making (De Stefano and Taes 2021).

Just transition is another important topic that has been taken up by trade unions and gradually incorporated into social dialogue. Various examples exist at the European Union level for the establishment of “green social dialogue”, for example in sustainable construction. Belgian trade unions established the “green collective bargaining database”, encompassing collective agreements with green clauses with partners ranging from Australia to Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States and covering green procurement, waste management, workforce adjustment, training and whistle-blower protection (ILO 2018).

### ***Coalition-building and campaigning***

The sixth dimension of trade union revitalization is the entry by trade unions into broad coalitions and campaigns with other actors, such as civil society, NGOs or the private sector.

In many countries around the world, the trade union landscape is characterized by a proliferation of and fragmentation among unions. However, we also observe many examples of strengthened trade union cooperation, notwithstanding existing rifts between organizations. In Benin, Botswana and Mauritius, the main trade union organizations developed a joint council of trade unions or a joint declaration, charter or memorandum of understanding for working together in the national social dialogue forums. In Lithuania and Ukraine, unions are collaborating across borders through joint campaigning and a bilateral cooperation agreement to enhance recruitment and representation of Ukrainian truck drivers in unions in both Ukraine and Lithuania. Also at the national level, Government attempts to reform the labour and trade union laws gave the trade unions in Ukraine the necessary impetus to speak and act as one (Andreeva, forthcoming).

As mentioned above, worker mobilization played an important role in the popular uprisings that pushed for democratization in different countries across the MENA region. In many countries, trade unions entered into broad coalitions, liaising actively with other civil society organizations and the broader public (Majed and El Mouallem, forthcoming).

Many good examples exist worldwide where trade unions have been collaborating with employer organizations in jointly managing crisis situations emerging from various types of conflicts (for example long-term violence) and disasters (such as storms, earthquakes, and floods). Examples include every stage of the conflict cycle and cover Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Nepal, New Zealand, Japan, the Philippines, the Bahamas and Sri Lanka (ILO 2022).

Just transition is another topic where trade unions have increasingly been campaigning alongside other non-state actors. In the case of South Africa, trade unions campaigned with NGOs and social movements to pressure the Government to implement just transition strategies. In the United States, labour and environmental justice groups have worked together to influence regulatory responses and industry practices to meet climate goals, for instance by addressing energy efficiency or the inclusion of labour standards in public procurement projects. This is also an area where trade unions have been collaborating with entities from the social and solidarity economy, for instance in the case of ecotourism and ecological agriculture in Mexico (ILO 2018).

## Trade unions navigating change

While the previous section brings together a diverse list of experiences on trade union revitalization worldwide, there are two core elements that run through these examples. The first is the capability to critically reflect and to anticipate change; the second is the willingness to experiment and to adapt. This section further examines these two core elements by discussing the underlying dimension of trade union revitalization, in terms of how successfully trade unions have been able to deal with navigating uncertainty and change. We use the Triple-A governance framework (see Introduction) to examine various approaches, strategies or tools for trade union revitalization, and how these can be applied most effectively to respond to particular needs in the different trade union contexts that have been illustrated above.<sup>3</sup>

### *Triple-A governance framework in action for trade union revitalization*

Based on the examples in the good practices section above, we find that some trade unions opted for a mostly **anticipatory approach** towards trade union revitalization, focusing on a better understanding of key areas of change. This is reflected by, for instance, adopting a research method (for example by gaining an understanding of trends and drivers in the growing gaming industry), exercises in long-term strategic thinking and foresight (such as when assessing challenges related to globalization) and anticipating skills needs (for example when dealing with just transition).

Other illustrations focused on the socializing dimension (**agility approach**), placing emphasis on broader organizational change, raising awareness, shifting mindsets, involving members in union activities, reaching out to other organizations to build broad coalitions, and so on. For instance, opening up unions towards informal economy or migrant workers or introducing differentiated membership fees or dual membership often involves a substantial shift in mindset. The same is true for trade union action relating to delivery services, which have often emerged in direct competition with established trade union members (such as taxi drivers). In the area of #MeToo or violence and harassment in the workplace, the socializing aspect has been central. The same is true for the various examples relating to internal governance, where organizational learning has been first and foremost.

The third approach is about the ability to act (**adaptation approach**), translating anticipation and agility into strategic decisions, actions, working plans, budgets and resources. This is the logical sequence: understand–socialize–act. However, adaptation may also precede anticipation and agility, for example, by focusing on experimentation or prototyping through the establishment of young workers' labs to build, co-design and test new tools (such as mobile apps to organize platform workers). This has been the case, for instance, in the context of COVID-19, which took most trade unions by surprise. Trade unions have reflected upon what these insights means for future crises and how lessons learned can be

---

<sup>3</sup> This section builds on Ramos et al. (forthcoming).

scaled up, such as in the area of digital unionism, renewed organizing around occupational safety and health. The same is true for the examples of organizing at Amazon and Starbucks during COVID-19, which create important learning and positive spillover effects for other employment situations.

### ***Tools for navigating change for trade union revitalization***

Depending on the context or needs of trade unions, different methods can be used to support navigation of change within the Triple-A governance framework.<sup>4</sup> When addressing anticipation is the main objective, the use of foresight could be most appropriate, reflecting upon the future through analysing trends, drivers of change (such as horizon scanning, the Future Wheel, 3Horizons, wild cards, weak signals, and so on) and scenario-building (for example, scenario archetypes, Manao scenario-building, 2x2 uncertainty matrix, and so on). When addressing agility is the main objective, methods can be used to “unlearn” (such as U-learn), to help organizations to better understand “how we usually do things” and individual and collective belief systems, to change patterns of behaviour and address obstacles to change (such as “immunity to change”). A method such as “collective impact” focuses on social agility, where change is leveraged through multiple organizations, recognizing different strengths and complementarities. This is relevant in a trade union context, where change is often broad, societal and complex (such as in the case of labour law reform in the Russian Federation and democratization in the MENA region and so on), where people are more effective together than alone. Other tools address socialization by focusing on experiential activities: games, immersion, virtual reality, drawing, collage, artefacts, and so on. These tools can support reflection, for instance regarding the way the workplace may look in 20 years and, with that, workers’ needs regarding trade union services. When adaptation is the main challenge, methods such as “backcasting” can be used to translate future scenarios into action plans. Trade unions can start to make small “bets” or changes that shape and allow learning at low cost. Prototyping or experimentation are ways to explore emerging spaces, to imagine, to model and test new services and, with that, to further inform direction and decision-making within the union.

### ***Lessons learned from trade union experience***

Based on the trade union examples depicted above, we can draw four key lessons. The first lesson is that trade unions have rich experience in addressing uncertainty and change. They need to build on their experience to become even more resilient in the future.

Second, depending on the particular needs of trade unions and the local context, trade unions may focus on one of the three As: anticipation, agility or adaptation. For instance, if organizational openness is a challenge, trade unions may want to focus on socialization. If knowledge is the issue, the organization may consider anticipation to be the answer. On the other hand, if the challenge is to translate insights into action, a trade union may prefer adaptation approaches.

---

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of methods, see ITC (2017) and Ponce Del Castillo (2019).

Third, existing trade union approaches are not always comprehensive or integrated. For instance, a trade union organization may first want to understand a given scenario better, then socialize, and then eventually take action. Another approach, however, would be to act through experimentation, for instance in the COVID-19 context, then try to understand the outcome, and then potentially scale up.

Finally, trade unions are undertaking many interesting and innovative strategic actions, but these are not always done in a formal manner; there is therefore potential for more systematic strategic thinking and foresight for trade union revitalization.

## Conclusions and the way forward

In a context of multiple uncertainties, emerging crises and transitions causing a constant state of flux, this paper assesses international experiences of trade union revitalization through the lens of trade unions' ability to navigate change.

This paper finds that trade unions worldwide have rich experience in navigating change and translating this into trade union revitalization; other trade unions can build on this. However, challenges still exist in relation to increasing awareness among trade unions that change should be managed in a more comprehensive and formal manner, for instance by strategizing around trade union revitalization.

As contexts differ and needs vary among trade unions, this paper discusses several tools that can be used by trade unions, depending on their particular needs, to reflect and act upon revitalization. The advantage of these tools is that they are: (1) not prescriptive, but rather offer a framework to trade unions to support them in conducting such an exercise; (2) participatory, allowing for bottom-up or grass-roots reflections through the involvement of workers, trade union leaders and other stakeholders; (3) based on democratic approaches, dynamic pluralism and inclusive methods that recognize different or divergent views; (4) compatible with complexity – for instance, organizing informal economy workers depends on many elements, including the state of the economy, the informalization of the labour market, the strength of the legal framework, the credibility of existing social dialogue mechanisms, alliances with political parties and demographics such as increased youth unemployment; and (5) empowering, entailing not only a reflection about future challenges and opportunities for trade union revitalization, but also the possibility to translate insights into concrete strategies and road maps.

In the framework of the ongoing ACTRAV work on Trade Unions in Transformation: Actors for Change, future research should document trade union experiences of strategic planning, foresight and experimentation in different parts of the world, assessing what works and in which institutional context, and how exactly these insights feed into the trade union revitalization agenda.

## References

- Andreeva, Anna Forthcoming. *Trade Unions in Transformation: Experiences from Europe and Central Asia*.
- Castro, Nazaret. 2017. "CUT-Brazil, a Trade Union Centre at the Forefront of the Feminist Struggle". *Equal Times*. 4 October 2017.
- Chinguwo, Paliani Forthcoming a. *Trade Unions in Transition*.
- Chinguwo, Paliani Forthcoming b. *Trade Union Revitalization: Experiences and Key Lessons from Southern Africa*.
- De Stefano, Valerio, and Simon Taes. 2021. *Algorithmic Management and Collective Bargaining*. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).
- Herberg, Mirko, ed. 2018. *Trade Unions In Transformation. Success Stories From All Over The World*. Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- ILO. 2017. *Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205)*. Geneva.
- . 2018. *Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- . 2019a. *ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work*. Geneva.
- . 2019b. *Organizing Informal Workers into Trade Unions – A Trade Union Guide*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- . 2021a. *Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient*. International Labour Conference, 109th session.
- . 2021b. *A Global Trend Analysis on the Role of Trade Unions in Times of COVID-19*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- . 2021c. *COVID-19, Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- . 2021d. *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021. The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work*. Geneva.
- . 2022. *Dealing with Crises Arising From Conflicts and Disasters. ILO Training Manual for Workers' Organizations*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- . n.d. "Trade Unions as Actors for Change".
- ITC. 2017. *A Contribution to the Future of Work Centenary Initiative. Foresight Toolkit. Foresight Strategies, Tools and Techniques to Anticipate Future Scenarios*. Turin.
- ITUC. 2022. "Trade Unions Stand in Solidarity With LGBTIQ Workers". 17 May 2022.
- Majed, Rima, and El Mouallem, Hussein Forthcoming. *Trade Union Revitalization: New and Improved Means of Organizing and Servicing Workers in the MENA Region*.
- Molla, Rani. 2022. "How a Bunch of Starbucks Baristas Built a Labor Movement: Inside Starbucks's Successful 21st-Century Union Drive". *Vox.*, 8 April 2022.



- Pillinger, Jane. 2017. *Violence and Harassment against Women and Men in the World of Work. Trade Union Perspectives and Action*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.
- Ponce Del Castillo, Aida. 2019. *Anticipating Change, Staying Relevant: Why Trade Unions Should Do Foresight: A Foresight Field Guide*. Brussels: ETUI.
- Ramos, Jose, Ida Uusikyla and Nguyen Tuan Luong. 2020. "Anticipatory Governance — A Primer". *UNDP Viet Nam* (blog). 18 February 2020.
- , Gareth Priday, Reanna Browne, and Chimal Abril. Forthcoming. *Trade Unions Navigating and Shaping Change: Examples of Triple A Governance from Around the World*.
- Rushe, Dominic. 2021. "'Hopefully It Makes History': Fight For \$15 Closes In On Mighty Win for US Workers". *The Guardian*, 13 February 2021.
- Sherman, Natalie. 2022. "Amazon Workers Win Battle to Form First US Union". BBC News, 2 April 2022.
- Thorbecke, Catherine, and Chris Isidore. 2022. "Union Wins Right to Represent Workers at an Apple Store for the First Time". CNN. 19 June 2022.
- UNI Global Union. 2019. "After Sustained Push from the Global Labour Movement, Human Rights Groups and the ILO, Qatar Commits to Dismantle Kafala System of Modern Slavery".
- . 2021a. "Best Practice Measures to Protect Public and Athlete Health at the Tokyo Olympics".
- . 2021b. "New F1 Boss Urged to Launch Independent Inquiry into Bahrain Grand Prix As Human Rights Concerns Continue".
- . 2021c. "Ubereats Contracted Riders Reach Historic Agreement in Switzerland".
- . 2022a. "Video Game Workers Crushed by Excessive Hours, Low Pay, Reveals Global Survey of Digital Entertainment Industry". 16 June 2022.
- . 2022b. "Cleaners and Security Officers Bounce Back Together For International Justice Day". 15 June 2022.
- Visser, Jelle. 2019. *Trade Unions in the Balance*. Geneva: ILO ACTRAV.

