



BUILDING THE FUTURE OF WORK

Session Briefing

Next Generation Trade Event
3rd December 2019, London

As part of events to mark the 100th anniversary of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations General Assembly held a high level dialogue in April 2019 on the Future of Work. The summary of the session noted "...wide agreement that the world of work is experiencing rapid transformations brought by technological advances, demographic transitions and climate change, leading to profound impact on the nature of work, new forms of employment and to the creation and destruction of jobs in many sectors. While these changes will create opportunities for some, many others face the risk of increased vulnerability and inequality."¹

Technological changes such as robotisation are likely to eliminate millions of jobs around the world. At the same time, many more jobs could be created over coming decades in emerging industries such as renewable energy among others. The so called "fourth industrial revolution", which refers to rapid technological advancements including automation, artificial intelligence, digitalisation and other new technologies, is increasing demand for job skills that will require widespread investment in education and training to avoid even greater economic inequalities within and between societies.

With profound disruptions in labour markets only set to expand over coming years, the time to rethink all aspects of work, including the role of trade in fostering decent work for all people, has reached a critical point. It is estimated that over 90% of workers in global supply chains continue to work in insecure, low-wage, and unsafe jobs in addition to the mounting evidence of a global slump in wages and collective bargaining. Urgent problems of child labour and forced labour persist as well. For example, estimates suggest that at the current pace of reduction, the 2030 UN Development Agenda target to eradicate child labour by 2025 will not be met.² Likewise, measures to date to eliminate all forms of forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery have not been adequate to overcome the scale of the problem.

Many countries, which for years sought to attract investment, production and jobs through labour-intensive assembly work by large exporters or foreign corporations, today face difficult policy choices, in particular those with young and growing populations. Due in large part to expanding automation, such manufacturing may no

1 <https://www.un.org/pga/73/wp-content/uploads/sites/53/2019/05/Presidential-Summary-of-the-HLM-on-the-Future-of-Work-FINAL-13-May-Final-revkod.pdf>

2 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_653987.pdf p.4

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longer support developing countries in creating labour intensive work, thus raising profound questions about how these countries should prepare for the future.

The ILO's 2019 Global Commission on the Future of Work³ highlighted the urgency for governments, alongside employers', workers' organisations and others to address challenges and seize opportunities that will emerge from changes in the world of work. Among its recommendations, the Commission called for "the establishment of more systemic and substantive working relations between the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Bretton Woods institutions and the ILO" and stressed that the success of human-centred growth and development agendas "depends heavily" on coherence between trade, financial, economic and social policies.⁴

As the UN Conference on Trade and Development 2018 report notes, "Governments have begun to acknowledge the need to fill regulatory deficits that harm the public, to provide stronger safety nets for those adversely affected by technological progress and to invest in the skills needed for a twenty-first century workforce. But so far, actions have spoken more softly than words."⁵ The ILO's Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification (STED) programme⁶ is an example of how technical assistance can support countries in promoting economic diversification and employment creation that can expand trade opportunities but scaled up efforts of this kind are needed involving corporations, trade unions and others to achieve sustainable impacts.

Questions for consideration:

1. What are the most promising approaches to fostering decent employment opportunities in all regions, but in particular in countries with large and rapidly growing youth populations? What role should trade policies play in this regard?
2. How should responsible companies engage with governments, trade unions and broader civil society to address ongoing concerns about the rights of workers in global supply chains who continue to face insecure employment and poor working conditions? Are international standards already in place sufficient to improve business practices in this area?
3. What more should we expect of multilateral institutions like the ILO, WTO and Bretton Woods institutions in terms of working with governments and other actors to ensure national and international policy coherence on issues relating to decent employment?

3 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf

4 Ibid p. 56

5 https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/tdr2018_en.pdf p.1

6 <https://www.ilo.org/skills/projects/sted/lang--en/index.htm>