

Regional Priorities

Subregional groupings, notably the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Islands Forum, and cross-subregional groupings such as ASEAN + 3 and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) have been deepening in form and expanding in areas of cooperation. Their increasing interest in labour and social issues offers the potential for ILO collaboration in the areas of research, information systems, policy dialogue, common frameworks and joint action on employment strategy, human resource development, decent work indicators, promotion of fundamental labour rights, social protection and managing labour migration and trafficking. Workers' and employers' organizations, particularly in ASEAN, are calling for efforts to enhance their capacity to participate in regional integration processes.

Working out of poverty

The region is home to two-thirds of the world's extreme poor living on less than one dollar a day, of who two-thirds are women and three-quarters live in rural areas. These numbers swell in crisis situations because of the lack of basic social protection. Poverty is also evident in high levels of child labour and youth unemployment and underemployment, lack of productive assets including basic education, lack of markets for informal economy operators and lack of voice of the poor. Gender-sensitive, age-specific labour market information is critical for the formulation of policies and programmes that promote employment-intensive growth, protect workers throughout all stages of their lives and prevent the perpetuation of poverty from one generation to the next. Promoting basic education for all children and facilitating the transition from school to productive employment for youth is critical, given that 18 per cent of the population is between 15-24 years, another 30 per cent is below 15 years and youth unemployment rates are more than double total rates. The trend towards decentralization of authority and resources to the local level together with the need to reach the poor where they live and work calls for greater attention to local development strategies.

Addressing vulnerabilities and advancing gender equality

Globalization has resulted in new and intensifying forms of discrimination and vulnerability, which have significant gender dimensions and affect specific groups. The vulnerabilities include trafficking of human beings, occupational safety and health risks and HIV/AIDS. Among the most vulnerable are children and young women in particular from ethnic minorities and indigenous groups, contract migrant workers (in particular those entering domestic service), workers in the informal economy and workers with disabilities. Asian women have been among the main beneficiaries of new employment opportunities created in the expansion of transnational production chains and international labour migration. However, their working conditions remain poor, if not deplorable, and deep-rooted gender inequalities have been slow to change. The region is expected to fully operationalize its gender mainstreaming strategy (GEMS) to achieve equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women at work, and in relation to work and life; the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women workers; and the equal participation of women and men in decision-making in the employment, labour, social protection and social partner fields in the countries served by ILO in the region, with a specific focus on gender equality and empowerment of low-income women. Since gender discrimination cuts across other forms of discrimination, targeted action will be on women and girls facing multiple forms of discrimination.