



Asia-Pacific regional event

02 July 2020

► Background note

Context

In June 2019, the International Labour Organization's 187 member States adopted the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work. This called on the Organization to pursue "with unrelenting vigour its constitutional mandate for social justice by further developing its human-centred approach to the future of work, which puts workers' rights and the needs, aspirations and rights of all people at the heart of economic, social and environmental policies".

At the end of 2019, a virus first emerged that triggered a health crisis followed very quickly by an evolving socio-economic crisis. By early 2020, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) had spread first within Asia Pacific, then Europe and ultimately the whole world. By mid-2020, the economic, financial and labour consequences of the virus had plunged the world into a supply- and demand-side crisis of unprecedented scope and scale. This crisis has made the imperatives set out in the Centenary Declaration even more urgent as member States and the international community engage in a collective endeavour to tackle the devastating human, economic and social impact of the pandemic.

The health response has been, and will remain, a priority of the COVID-19 response, but the strict confinement measures applied in most countries to suppress transmission of the virus have resulted in massive economic and social shocks and high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about the future of work. Even as countries start to ease their more severe lockdown restrictions, the combined effects of disrupted supply chains, depressed household income and low consumer and business confidence will continue to negatively impact workers and enterprises for an as-of-yet undefined period to come.

The incidence of COVID-19 has varied significantly throughout the region, hitting especially hard the countries and population groups that were already the most vulnerable. The adverse socio-economic impact has been profound and continues to have a major impact on virtually all enterprises and workers. According to the 4th edition of the ILO Monitor on COVID and the World of Work, working hours in the Asia-Pacific region declined in the first quarter of 2020 by an estimated 6.5 per cent (equivalent to approximately 135 million full-time jobs, assuming a 40-hour working week), compared to the pre-crisis situation (fourth quarter of 2019). In the second quarter of 2020, the equivalent estimates indicate a much sharper decline, with a loss of 10 per cent of the hours worked compared to the last pre-crisis quarter; that is equivalent to 6 million full-time jobs. In some countries, the crisis has disproportionately impacted women, who are overrepresented in at-risk sectors and young people, who face deteriorating education, training and employment prospects. The loss of incomes and livelihoods has amplified the vulnerabilities of workers and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that operate in the informal economy. With still two in three worker operating in the informal economy in the region, the impact of COVID-19 and the tendency for the informal sector to fall through the cracks of policy responses measures, the ILO estimates that relative poverty will increase from 22 per cent to 36 per cent. This has profound adverse implications for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Countries across the region have introduced a series of stimulus packages to rescue their economies and support their citizens. The efficiency and effectiveness in which the expansionary measures to reach the real economy will ultimately influence how economies and societies will emerge from the crisis. But the very nature of this crisis means that

individual country actions alone will not be sufficient to ensure recovery: a coordinated international response is needed. A key challenge faced by many countries in the region is to respond to the emergency while at the same time laying the foundation for a sustainable and inclusive recovery. The recovery of the private sector would help generate decent work, productive employment and improved living standards for all. This presents a great opportunity to give effect to both the ILO's Centenary Declaration and the Social Justice Declaration.

This regional event will contribute to the ILO Virtual Summit on the World of Work COVID-19 Response, which will take place 7-9 July 2020. The regional event will highlight emerging practices around the region to tackle this unprecedented crisis and its social and economic impact, share views on initial results and mitigation strategies and develop a joint way forward that puts humans at the centre of the recovery effort.

Objectives

- ▶ To provide a high profile regional platform for the tripartite constituents to address the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and examine policy responses required during lockdown and return to work to drive an accelerated recovery that is centralized on the objective of the elimination of poverty and imperatives of rights and social justice, and sustainability of enterprises.
- ▶ To better understand how jobs, businesses and the world of work are changing in a post-COVID environment and what it means for the Future of Work.
- ▶ To focus particularly on the application and relevance of the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work in the promotion of full and productive employment and decent work in the pandemic and post-pandemic setting with an inclusive and sustainable recovery and increased resilience of labour markets; and
- ▶ To guide priorities for future ILO activities in the region, including opportunities for regional cooperation and global collaboration/multilateralism and linking to funding mechanisms for COVID-19 response.

Participants

Participation in the event will be open to all ILO tripartite constituents in the region. Ministers, high-level representatives of the social partners and selected stakeholders from regional and multilateral entities.

Participants will connect via an online meeting platform. Interaction will be facilitated by session moderators. Speakers and panellists will be identified to reflect the geographical and economic diversity of the region, with the aim of gender parity across panels.

ILO Country Offices across the region will liaise with their respective governmental counterparts at the national level to ensure active participation and engagement. Participation and inputs by social partners will be coordinated with the Bureau for Workers' activities (ACTRAV) and the Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP).

Programme

I-Opening Session: COVID-19: What will a post COVID-19 future of work look like?

The ILO Regional Director will introduce the event with an outline of the challenges imposed by COVID-19 to the world of work in the region and reflecting on the role of the ILO in shaping the post-COVID-19 future of work.

The opening session will set the scene with a broad introduction to world of work disruptions brought by the COVID-19 crisis, including the macroeconomic impacts and highlighting issues such as trade, migration, domestic and global

supply chains, international relations, etc. The session will focus on gathering lessons from the vulnerabilities exposed by the crisis, including the sustainability of large-scale COVID response packages, the risks that come with disrupted domestic and global supply chains, and the persistence of inequalities linked to the nature of work relationships, the struggles of micro, small and medium enterprises and the breadth of the informal economy. In moving forward towards a future of work that is more firmly rooted in the principles of the ILO Centenary Declaration, panellists will be asked to share their views about how the practices applied in the immediate COVID-19 response will link to the longer term perspectives for the future of work. Reflections will be gathered on what countries are pursuing as a “better normal”, which will then be taken up further in the second session, which will focus on the operational aspects of on-going responses and building back better under the guiding framework of the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work.

The discussion will cover some of the following topics:

- ▶ How can a post-COVID future of work promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, including in global supply chains?
- ▶ How can the promotion of social justice and social dialogue be placed as central objectives of the recovery process? How can we strengthen the capacity of employer and worker organisations to institutionalise tripartite social dialogue? What will be the collective efforts and commitment of the ILO tripartite constituency to move the world of work forward from the COVID-19 crisis to the better future it committed to build in its 2019 Centenary Declaration?
- ▶ Which groups of people and organisations have been most adversely affected by the crisis and what are the most effective measures taken to mitigate these impacts?
- ▶ How can COVID-19 responses be designed to lift the global economy quickly out of recession and put it on a course to navigate the challenges of just-digital, demographic and environmental transitions?
- ▶ How can we all work towards creating more jobs to ensure livelihoods, stimulate investment and support the economy?
- ▶ What is the scope for national, regional and multilateral cooperation to be redirected to the delivery of the UN 2030 Agenda? How can we promote the work of ILO tripartite constituents with the UN Country Team and Resident Coordinators?

II-Thematic Session (Panel discussion): Supporting enterprises and protecting workers in Asia and the Pacific

This tripartite session will consist of two government representatives, one workers’ and one employers’ representative and will discuss some of the responses applied in the region to date, and provide an outlook on the challenges ahead. As much as possible, participants will be asked to identify what the crisis has taught them about the roles of labour market institutions and focus on their vision for a post-COVID future of work. Building on the ILO four pillars of policy response, panellists will be asked to share what worked or did not work in meeting the objectives of supporting enterprises and protecting workers both immediately and with a view to emerging from the crisis on stronger foundations.

The discussion will cover some of the following topics:

- ▶ What combination of active fiscal and monetary policies is needed to stimulate the economy and spur job growth?
- ▶ How best to manage employment retention, changes in working hours and wages policies and the effect of the crisis on occupational safety and health, including well-being and mental health?
- ▶ What needs to be done to address the massive vulnerabilities in the world of work made more evident by the pandemic, including for vulnerable groups of workers like migrants and those in the informal economy?
- ▶ How to scale up the task of formalizing the informal economy and addressing the particular needs of micro, small and medium sized enterprises?

- ▶ How to move decisively towards sustainable social protection coverage? What are the barriers to sustainable social protection? How do we help countries that are struggling with their own schemes?
- ▶ How the recovery process can embody a transformative agenda for gender equality and diversity, supporting work-family measures, eliminating discrimination and violence and harassment at work and increasing voice and representation of women?
- ▶ How to minimise the negative impact of the crisis on young people in the world of work?
- ▶ How workers' rights can be protected in the recovery and return to work?
- ▶ How the promotion of employment and enhancement of productivity can be placed as central objectives of the recovery process while also promoting social justice?
- ▶ How the current labour laws can be effectively reviewed to allow flexibility (e.g. working from home and flexible working hours) to allow business and workers to return to income-generating activity?
- ▶ What are the future skills needs and demands post Covid-19 in the region?
- ▶ The role of social dialogue and specific actions of employers' and workers' organisations during the crisis.

III-Summary session: The road to recovery

The summary session will bring together three discussants (1G+1W+1E) to sum up the views emerged during the event, provide forward-looking policy scenarios based upon the Centenary Declaration guide ILO's future action across the region. Based on this discussion, the Office will prepare a visual summary note that will feed into the ILO Virtual Summit, 7 - 9 July 2020.

▶ ILO policy framework: Four key pillars in tackling the COVID-19 crisis on the basis of international labour standards

Pillar 1

Stimulating the economy and employment

- ▶ Active fiscal policy
- ▶ Accommodative monetary policy
- ▶ Lending and financial support to specific sectors, including the health sector

Pillar 2

Supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes

- ▶ Extend social protection to all
- ▶ Implement employment retention measures
- ▶ Provide financial/tax and other relief for enterprises

Pillar 3

Protecting workers in the workplace

- ▶ Strengthen occupational safety and health measures
- ▶ Adapt work arrangements (e.g. teleworking)
- ▶ Prevent discrimination and exclusion
- ▶ Provide health access for all
- ▶ Expand access to paid leave

Pillar 4

Relying on social dialogue for solutions

- ▶ Strengthen the capacity and resilience of employers' and workers' organizations
- ▶ Strengthen the capacity of governments
- ▶ Strengthen social dialogue, collective bargaining and labour relations institutions and processes