

Trade Unions in Transition

Trade unions have important challenges ahead of them

The [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#) identified four drivers that impact the world of work. These are globalization, demographic, environmental and technological changes. These drivers affect the labour markets of today and tomorrow, and with that the [future of trade unions](#): the potential of organizing and servicing workers, and to speak with one voice to participate in inclusive and effective social dialogue.

Whereas important challenges existed before the ongoing pandemic, **Covid-19** has aggravated many of these. Think of massive job losses, whole sectors that may disappear, or people in precarious employment with no access to unemployment benefits or health care. The current pandemic, and trade union responses, will determine the future of trade unions. ILO guidance for tackling the socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis has been structured around [four pillars](#), based on international labour standards: stimulating the economy and employment; supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes; protecting workers in the workplace; and relying on social dialogue for solutions.

Societal changes affect the future of trade unions

Social, economic, environmental and developmental changes affect the future of trade unions. The shift from manufacturing towards services, environmental change, the informalisation of the economy, automation and technological change determine the capacity of trade unions to organize and service workers.

Today, legal restrictions and violations of trade union rights, such as the right to organize and to bargain collectively for ALL workers, are widespread. Not surprisingly, **trade union membership is lower there where there are violations of trade union rights.**

Trade union membership in the world is in decline

Trade union membership is going down over time, both in developed and developing countries.

This is even stronger for people in non-standard or precarious types of employment, such as temporary and own-account workers or workers in the informal and gig economy. In other words, the **changing employment relationship is not only a threat to workers, but also to workers' organizations.**

Four scenarios to respond to these challenges

In this context of rapid change, of multiple challenges and opportunities, **what can we expect for and from trade unions in the future?** Four possible scenarios:

Marginalization - decreasing rates of unionization and aging unions

Dualization - defending current positions and servicing members closest to them

Replacement - a process of replacing trade unions by others, such as NGOs, social movements, states, employers or other intermediary agencies

Revitalization - innovating tactics and coalitions to strengthen trade unions as strong, relevant, democratic and representative actors in organizing and servicing the 'new unstable workforce' in the Global North and South

Or, all of these? The future will tell.

Successful experiences of trade union revitalization

Trade unions have been taking action and there are a many **experiences of trade unions organizing and servicing** emerging or traditionally underrepresented groups of workers.

- For many years, trade unions have addressed the needs of workers in the informal economy, for instance by **organizing informal economy workers** and integrating them into the formal structures of the trade union movement.
- There are many obstacles to organize and service workers in the **gig-economy**, such as the treatment of gig workers as independent contractors or obstacles to engage in collective bargaining. However, ILO principles on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, apply broadly to ALL workers. **Gig workers are organizing**, through both traditional and innovative means.
- Trade unions across the world have put in place policies, strategies and action plans to **organise and service young workers** and to incorporate them in the trade union decision making bodies. Research shows that 62 per cent of trade unions globally have policies for the integration of youth in trade unions.

The capacity of workers to defend their rights and conditions depends on their **ability to act collectively**, at the national, regional and global levels. In countries or regions with a high trade union proliferation and fragmentation, improved trade union cooperation, where trade unions speak with one voice results has contributed to enhanced representation and weight in decision making.

Sound internal governance is not only key for effectively operating trade unions, but also to preserve the organization's integrity and credibility among workers and the general public. Trade unions need a transparent set of rules that governs its mandate, management, elections and activities.

Trade union revitalization, through innovative tactics and coalitions to organize and service workers, through the ability to speak with one voice, and through sound internal governance, has to assure **inclusive and effective social dialogue on the issues of today and tomorrow**. The **2030 Sustainable Development Agenda** is an important platform for trade unions to engage in social dialogue on broader socio-economic and sustainable development issues affecting workers globally, even more in times of **Covid-19**.

It is time to act

In light of these challenges, **ACTRAV works to support trade unions to engage in debate and transformative action on the future of trade unions**. ACTRAV activities address issues of trade union revitalisation, ranging from innovative organizing tactics and services, to inclusive and effective social dialogue, enhanced trade union cooperation and internal governance. Through various activities, ACTRAV will continue to collect examples, to draw lessons with regard to best practices, and work with trade unions to disseminate, scale up and replicate good practices.

The current Covid-19 crisis makes trade union revitalisation and organising only more relevant and timely. Covid-19 may have serious consequences for trade unions, such as increased pressure on labour markets, rise in unemployment, precarious employment or decrease in trade union membership. However, during the crisis, workers have also relied on trade unions to enhance job and income security and access to social protection.