

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE

BUREAU FOR WORKERS ACTIVITIES (ACTRAV)

The New Social Contract for Social Justice: An African Trade Union Perspective
Regional Conference, Windhoek, Namibia
10-11 September 2024

Concept Note

Background

The African continent is undergoing significant political and economic transformation, driven by changing patterns in globalization, rapid technological advancements, and the ongoing climate crisis. These shifts profoundly impact upon the world of work, posing challenges to sustainable economic development and social cohesion. Many African governments are struggling to keep regulatory pace with these changes, making it difficult to uphold the social contract and ensure the well-being of their people.

Technological changes - particularly the rise of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and automation - are reshaping the nature of work across Africa. While these advances offer workers opportunities for flexibility and autonomy, they also contribute to precarious employment conditions, job insecurity, and income inequality. The increase in non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary contracts and self-employment, often lacks protections and benefits, including social protection and collective bargaining rights. Additionally, rapid technological change is driving the growth of platform economy and risks exacerbating the digital divide, further widening inequalities both within and between countries.

The current “poly-crisis” environment, characterized by recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the fallout from increased geopolitical tensions, has significantly impacted upon the macroeconomic landscape. African countries face heightened economic uncertainty as they attempt to balance the need to control inflation while sustaining economic growth and essential fiscal spending in a context of dwindling public finances. Decades of liberal economic policies - marked by deregulation, privatization, and reduced state intervention - have often neglected the drive toward decent work, leading to increased inequalities and social instability. There is a pressing need for coherent public policies that prioritize economic diversification through industrial policies, job creation, and protecting workers' rights.

In this context, the concept of a “new social contract” is emerging as a framework to redefine state-society relations. It provides a framework to take stock of the existing social contract between the state and its people, and assess whether it is effectively adapting to the political and economic transformation in a manner that is inclusive enough to cover all workers, particularly those in vulnerable situations. This new social contract should aim to ensure social progress, justice, and inclusivity in all aspects of social and economic life. It should emphasise the crucial role of the labour market in aligning economic, social, and employment priorities to ensure everyone benefits from economic development through decent work and social protection. Furthermore, it must emphasise a just transition to a sustainable economy, creating new job opportunities in renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, while ensuring that no workers are left behind.

Trade unions play a pivotal role in advocating for inclusive economic policies and a just transition. This conference aims to empower them with the knowledge and tools needed to shape the new social contract and promote decent work and social justice across Africa.

Objectives

1. To provide a platform for regional dialogue among trade unions, governments, employers' representatives, and academia on the evolving social contract in the context of the changing economic, social and environmental landscape.

2. To advocate for comprehensive economic strategies that promote sustainable growth and equitable job creation, particularly for marginalized groups such as youth, women, and persons with disabilities.
3. Facilitate exchanges on good practices and lessons learnt on robust policies and frameworks that address the challenges and opportunities posed by automation and digitalization, ensuring that workers are protected and equipped for the future of work.
4. Develop actionable recommendations for policy and practice to strengthen labour rights and protections by addressing informal employment, eradicating child labour, and combating workplace discrimination.
5. Develop actionable recommendations for policy and practice to strengthen the role of governments, employers', and workers' organisations in shaping the new social contract.

Tentative Programme

The two-day conference will consist of a series of sessions designed to facilitate in-depth discussions on a new social contract for social justice.

Day 1:

- Opening Session.
- High level Panel: Establishing a New Social Contract: The limitations of existing national and international governance structures to deal with transformational change in the world of work. The way forward.
- Session 1: Panel discussion on economic development: Recovering in a “poly-crisis” environment; the impacts of macroeconomic policies on the world of work.
- Session 2: Workshop on Sustainable Economic Growth: Prioritizing job creation and inclusive growth strategies targeting youth, women, and persons with disabilities. Developing policies to promote investment in productive agriculture, manufacturing, and renewable energy.

Day 2:

- Session 3: Panel Discussion on Technological Change, AI and big data: Addressing the impact of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and automation on jobs and workers' rights.
- Session 4: Workshop on Social Dialogue: a mechanism to manage technological advances in workplaces.
- Session 5: Workshop on Labour Rights and Protections: strengthening labour rights and protections by addressing informal employment, eradicating child labour, and combating workplace discrimination.
- Session 5: Roundtable on a New Social Contract: Development of a common agenda and strategies for trade unions in the region.
- Closing Session.

The panel discussions will involve trade union leadership, academic experts, government, and employers' organisations, to provide a comprehensive platform for discussion. The workshops will give the ILO constituents the added opportunities to exchange views and practical experiences on each of the topics at hand. Lastly, the roundtable is a collective exercise, giving all participants the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of the meeting. The goal is to equip participants with the knowledge and tools they need to shape a new social contract in their respective countries, and at the regional and international level.

Proposed Participating Countries

The conference will invite at least 25 participants from across the African continent, from between eight and ten countries. The participants and speakers will be senior trade union leaders from national, regional and sub-regional trade union organizations, along with representative of employers, governments, and academics and researchers.

