



International  
Labour  
Organization



Decent Work in  
Construction



# ► Stories of change: Advancing Decent Work

Vol. 1

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), are implementing a four-year initiative (2022–2025) to improve working conditions and labour rights in Southern Africa's construction sector. Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are the pilot countries, targeting some of the sector's most urgent decent work deficits.

The project aims to strengthen labour rights for the informal and short-term contract workers, and the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that employ them.

Within this volume, we explore the effects of the project through three stories:

1. **Decent work isn't just a concept but a strategy for more productive enterprises**
2. **The SMEDCO Effect: Leading with Decent Work**
3. **Reimagining Solidarity: Southern African Trade Unions launch Multi-Country Platform for advancing Decent Work for All**



# 1. Decent work isn't just a concept, it is a strategy for more productive enterprises

Fifteen years ago, Neo Khubela founded DSM Construction and Supplies with a vision to offer reliable, high-quality services in general building, plumbing, facility management, and waterproofing. Today, DSM is a certified National Home Builders Registration Council contractor with level 4 and 5 Construction Industry Development Board accreditations and a workforce of 40 skilled and dedicated employees. But it is her recent focus on the promoting decent work that has led to significant results in her business.

In 2023, Neo enrolled with Property Point, a business development service provider, to get guidance on how to grow her business and respond more confidently to the fast-moving and often unpredictable construction environment. 2023 was a deeply personal and difficult year, as she had just lost her husband. *"Sometimes I would break down,"* she shares, *"but the Property Point team never judged me. They believed in me when I was rebuilding not just the business, but myself."*

The training marked a complete shift, from sitting in boardrooms discussing ideas to walking construction sites, facing challenges directly, and solving them together. *"That's where the real issues and opportunities are,"* she explains. *"They took my hand and walked with me."* This hands-on approach helped her tackle real-time challenges and adjust workplace practices where they mattered most. Through the Property Point support, Neo was introduced to the Decent Work Agenda, an approach that promotes a productive and safe working environments and places workers at the heart of business performance

One of the first areas where this shift made a difference was in workplace cooperation and teamwork. Through her leadership, Neo has created opportunities for all workers to contribute through meetings. These efforts led to more confident, communicative teams and improved worker morale. *"We've seen workers speak up more and support each other better,"* Neo says.



***A happy worker is a productive worker.  
I've seen this with my own eyes.***

Neo Khubela

As teamwork improved, Neo also began weaving decent work principles into daily operations and policies. She strengthened her workers' access to social protection by enrolling them in group medical aid and workers' compensation schemes. She improved job security by introducing results-based contracts with clear performance indicators. She also developed clear workplace policies covering leave, flexible work, conflict resolution.

None of these changes would have been possible if Neo had not changed her leadership style to a more people-centred approach. This approach pushed her to reflect on her own mindset, something that not only shaped the changes above but also strengthened her confidence. As part of the people-centred leadership approach, she began training her supervisors in workplace rights, effective communication, and health and safety. This investment in people has created a stronger, more resilient company culture.

**The payoff?** Her reputation is growing, *"about 80% of my old clients are back,"* she says proudly. And in a recent tender process, she not only pitched for the job, but she also presented DSM's full Decent Work strategy for 2025. The panel was impressed and according to Neo, the understanding of workplaces cooperation has gone up among workers, *"Not just in safety, but in how we speak and work together,"* she says.



## 2. The SMEDCO Effect: Leading with Decent Work

***“Decent Work is not a separate stream, for us-it is integrated into how we train, finance, and mentor our clients.”***

Ms Bernice Moyo, Training and Development Manager, SMEDCO

As a state-owned Development Finance Institution, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Corporation (SMEDCO) in Zimbabwe has taken deliberate steps to embed Decent Work principles both internally and in its service delivery model. The organisation promotes fair recruitment, inclusivity, and compliance with national labour legislation and ILO standards. SMEDCO maintains full regulatory compliance-paying taxes, contributing to NSSA (social security), and implementing gender and ESG policies to ensure fairness and accountability in both internal operations and client services.

This internal commitment has shaped how SMEDCO interacts with construction sector enterprises. Through its Business Development Services and mentorship programmes, the Corporation has mainstreamed Decent Work components into enterprise support. Training modules are designed to raise awareness and build capacity around fair wages, workplace safety, formal employment contracts, and non-discrimination. These principles are not treated as peripheral topics, but rather as core aspects of building sustainable, productive and responsible businesses.



SMEDCO's training of construction enterprises, Zimbabwe

**The result?** Early signs of positive change are already visible among participating enterprises. Several businesses have begun formalising employment relationships, adopting written contracts (8) adhering to minimum wage standards, and invigorating their OSH practices (5) by reviewing their OSH plans and providing basic personal protective equipment (PPE) to their workers.

In addition to enterprise-level support, SMEDCO is leveraging its role as a lender to reinforce Decent Work standards through its credit assessment processes. Traditionally focused on financial viability and repayment capacity, these assessments now also consider how enterprises manage their labour practices. This includes reviewing whether applicants provide written contracts, comply with wage laws, maintain safe working environments, and respect workers' rights. By factoring social and labour compliance into financing decisions, SMEDCO is using its financial influence to reward responsible business conduct and promote better working conditions across the sector.

This approach is further reinforced by the Corporation's efforts to shape the broader enabling environment. SMEDCO actively engages with public procurement authorities, SME and industry associations, and institutional partners to promote the inclusion of Decent Work standards in funding criteria, procurement systems, and workspace allocation mechanisms.

Through this dual strategy-supporting enterprises directly while influencing systems-SMEDCO is contributing to a more inclusive, safer, and fairer construction sector in Zimbabwe.

### 3. Reimagining Solidarity: Southern African Trade Unions launch Multi-Country Platform for advancing Decent Work for All

*"This gathering marked a pivotal moment for trade unions in Southern Africa. Together, we laid a solid foundation for a united front to tackle informality while advocating for decent work for all workers in the construction sector,"* said Fozert Mugabe, the Deputy General Secretary for the Zimbabwe, Construction and Allied Trade Workers Union

A Trade Union Dialogue event, organised by the ILO Decent Work in Construction Project in collaboration with the Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC) and the SADC Secretariat, brought together more than 20 Trade Union leaders from Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The event included representation from Building and Wood Workers International, a Global Union Federation. Held under the theme "Extending Decent Work to Informal Workers in the Construction Sector within Southern Africa," the dialogue tackled the systemic exclusion of informal workers and migrant workers from formal trade union representation and advocacy.

Examples from Tanzania, Sierra Leone and Ghana, presented by the ILO on how other Trade Unions have already opened doors to informal workers, confirmed that this was not only possible, but that it was already happening. "Without intentional reform and tailored outreach strategies, "unions will remain inaccessible to the growing number of workers in the informal economy." David Dorkenoo, the ILO Senior Specialist on Workers' Activities warned,

COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions added urgency to the call. Acknowledging that systemic barriers such as fear and rigid membership rules prevent informal and migrant workers from joining Trade Unions. "We need to rethink what inclusivity looks like, Migrant workers want representation, but our

systems often make them feel unsafe or unwelcome". Thabo Mahlangu, from COSATU noted. "Trade Unions should support a model where all workers, regardless of status or origin, have access to union protections." He said.

#### **Inspired, the Trade Unions, took action.**

They formed a regional platform, united front for advocating for the rights of informal and migrant workers. They pledged to rewrite their constitutions, launch education campaigns, and create helpdesks for migrant workers. They committed to engaging employers and policymakers to formalize informal work.

The Dialogue event wasn't just a meeting. It was a turning point in how the Southern African labour movement understands and responds to informality, which is no longer a peripheral issue, but a reality of the labour market and a challenge that demands systemic and institutional transformation. Through the discussion, informal and migrant workers were no longer seen as outsiders.

The platform is foreseen as the tool for fostering cross-border collaboration and learning among unions, for supporting policy advocacy at both national and Southern African Development Community (SADC) levels and facilitate the development of common organising and representation strategies.

The SATTUCC message was clear: Trade Unions must be a space for all workers. Mavis Koogotsitse, the SATTUCC Executive Secretary called for deep structural change within trade unions. ***"The trade union movement is witnessing a reduction in workers' representation. As trade unions, we have a duty to extend our reach to all vulnerable workers, Trade unions should be a space for all workers"***



Participants at the Southern African Trade Unions launch Multi-Country Platform