



International
Labour
Organization



Decent Work in
Construction



► Stories of change: A movement takes root

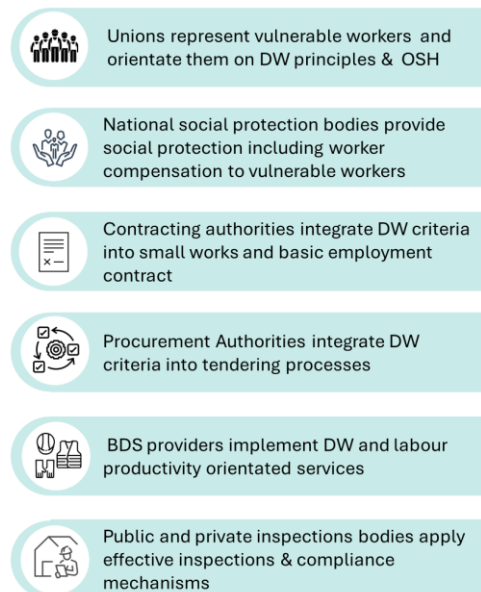
Vol. 2

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.

Country level interventions strengthen labour rights for the informal and short-term contract workers, and the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that employ them.

Systemic change is driven by key actors, including unions expanding their representation to informal and short-term contract workers; social protection bodies extending coverage to informal and short-term contract workers; contracting and procurement authorities integrating decent work criteria into contracts and tenders; business development service providers embedding decent work in productivity support; and inspection bodies incentivising compliance within MSMEs.

Decent Work in Construction Targeted Systems Changes



At the sub-regional level, lessons from the pilot countries inform policy change and scale up effective interventions across SADC member States. Through collaboration, innovation, and strategic action, decent work is taking root in the region's construction sector, shaping its future.

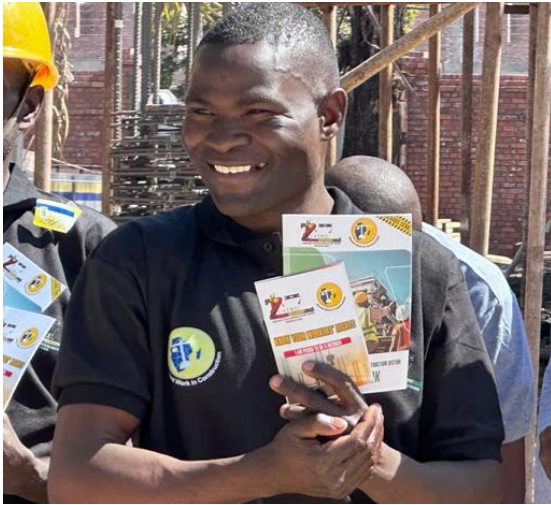
Within this volume, we explore the effects of the project through five stories:

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- [JEV Construções, LDA: Building a Stronger Foundation from Within B](#)
- [uilding a Foundation of Justice: NUM's Fight for Construction Workers](#)



Sweden
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1. Empowering Construction Workers: A Journey Towards Dignity and Compliance



Chenjerayi Makona
Construction sector worker

For six years, Chenjerayi Makona has worked across multiple construction sites, facing a pattern of instability, underpayment, and informal employment practices that define much of the sector. His most recent job, which lasted six months, ended abruptly due to persistent wage delays and non-payment. Like many others, he moved between sites in search of “better” conditions, only to find the same issues repeating - no formal contracts, inadequate safety measures, and a general lack of recourse for workers like him.

“Conditions on site are harsh and, we usually don’t have basic personal protective equipment, or breaks. Most of us keep quiet cos if you talk, you make yourself a target, and maybe next month you don’t have work”.

A **turning point** came when a representative from the Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Workers’ Union (ZCATWU) visited the site. At first, Chenjerayi and his colleagues were sceptical. But through the union-led session and two booklets on labour rights and occupational health and safety, Tinashe experienced a shift. The materials gave language to what he had experienced for years, confirming that the absence of lunch breaks, protective gear, contracts, and dignified accommodation were not just unfortunate they were all violations of existing laws and collective agreements.

The knowledge gained during the training began to ripple across the team. Chenjerayi and his peers no longer saw their experiences as isolated or unavoidable. Instead, they began to view themselves as rights-holders, capable of demanding compliance and advocating for dignity at work.

This awakening shifted the focus from individual survival to collective action. The group is now actively discussing the need for a workers’ committee and is seeking further engagement with the union to support advocacy around the unfair contract practices. What was once an unchallenged norm has become a shared concern, with workers now ready to take action.

“It is my hope,” Chenjerayi shared, *“that now, as most of us know our rights and have these booklets to go back to and check, we will be in a position to demand what is due to us.”*

Chenjerayi’s story reflects the immediate power of rights awareness and the broader momentum it can generate. From a single training session and a few well-prepared materials, a group of informal workers moved from silent endurance to informed mobilization. This transformation not only empowers the workers themselves but contributes to reshaping the norms of employment in the construction sector-laying the groundwork for improved compliance, accountability, and ultimately, a more equitable industry.



ZCATWU Organisers engaging workers during the Union Decent Work Outreach Programme

2. JEV Construções, LDA: Building a Stronger Foundation from Within

Founded in 2014, JEV Construções, LDA has a vision to project a modern and reliable image in Mozambique's construction industry. With operations spanning across Maputo, Sofala, Gaza, and Nampula, the company has undertaken diverse projects-from building construction and road maintenance to urban regeneration and the manufacture of metal structures. Yet, despite its strong technical capabilities, JEV faced internal challenges that limited its potential for growth and sustainability.

As a small company, JEV's team often found themselves juggling multiple responsibilities. Naira Lopes, an accountant at the company, illustrates this reality clearly:

"Here at JEV, the same person is often the director and the engineer. In my case, I'm the accountant, but when we have tenders, I have to put accounting and Human Resources management aside to focus on preparing documentation-because we don't have a dedicated finance department."

This overlap of functions meant that crucial administrative tasks were often sidelined. Before participating in a training on decent work essentials offered by Apricont and supported by the ILO Decent Work in Construction Project early this year, the company had no employment contracts for many workers, no systematic way of recording expenses or revenues, and no clear hiring procedures.

Recruitment was typically informal- based on recommendations when a new project came in. Despite the quality of their construction work, JEV's internal operations lacked the structure required to support the growth of the company. sustainable growth.

Recognizing these gaps, JEV participated in a training and mentoring program aimed at improving business operations and internal governance. For Naira, the experience was eye-opening.

"I really enjoyed the training and mentoring. I've already started applying what I learned-we're now preparing proper contracts for workers, recording cash inflows and outflows, and I've identified the need for ISO certification. These things are essential for tenders and inspections," she said.

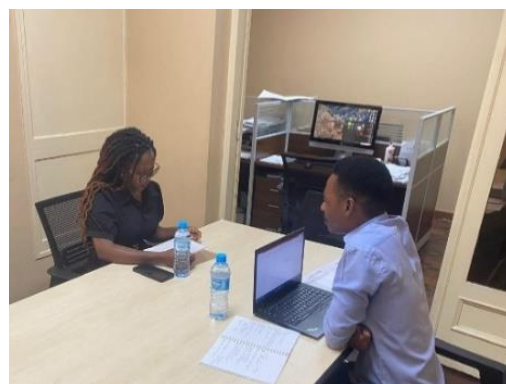
While the changes is still ongoing, real progress is already visible. JEV has begun formalizing its employment relationships with workers and improving financial transparency. These steps not only support compliance with labor laws but also improve the company's standing in competitive tender processes, where proper documentation and certifications are often a prerequisite.

Naira sees a clearer path forward for JEV Construções. She believes that by continuing to organize internal processes and pursuing certification, the company will not only pass inspections but also win more tenders.

"Certification is important because it's part of the preliminary qualification. If we keep our documents in order, we stand a better chance."

With the training support, this small construction company is evolving into a more structured and compliant to become competitive in Mozambique's construction sector. The changes sparked by training and mentoring in have laid the foundation-but the next chapter will depend on sustained leadership engagement, strategic investment in systems, and continuous learning.

JEV is not just building infrastructure. It's rebuilding itself-from the inside out.



JEV mentoring session provided by Apricont

3. Building a Foundation of Justice: NUM's Fight for Construction Workers

For too long, construction workers in South Africa have laboured under precarious conditions-without formal contracts, payslips, access to Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits, or even proper housing. Many moved from one short-term job to another on hazardous sites, often in silence, without recourse or representation. Their daily reality was not just hard work, but a constant struggle for survival in a sector that left them invisible.

In response to these long-standing challenges, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is renewing effort to reach construction workers where they are: on site. Through face-to-face engagements, workshops, and worker-led dialogues, the union took time to listen. The concerns raised were consistent and urgent-workers spoke of the need for job security, fair and timely wages, better health and safety measures, and most critically, a formal structure through which their voices could be heard. The absence of proper contracts and representation was not just a technical gap-it was a denial of basic rights.

Further actions include, NUM launching a purposeful drive to organize these previously unorganized workers. The goal is to provide them with a collective voice at the bargaining table, ensuring their concerns are heard and addressed, and to build real, impactful representation on construction sites across the country. This initiative extends to ensuring that women's issues, such as the provision of proper ablution facilities and safe working environments, are no longer marginalized.



NUM Members group work during the Training of Trainers on Decent Work in the Construction sector

NUM's concentrated focus on the construction sector is driven by both the urgent necessity and the tangible opportunity for change. The union is rolling out targeted campaigns on sites to reach vulnerable workers, establishing a dedicated women's structure to champion gender-specific issues, and pushing for proper representation in Bargaining Councils. A significant emphasis is also placed on the stronger enforcement of health and safety standards, always keeping the workers' well-being at the forefront.

Looking ahead to Congress 2025, NUM is building on this momentum with a set of resolutions that reflect the voices heard on the ground. These include the formal recognition of the Construction Women's Committee, a national campaign for a R15,000 living wage, and expanded skills development for youth and women. While policies and legal frameworks matter, NUM understands that real change begins where workers are. On-site, in dusty boots and hard hats, they are building not only the cities of tomorrow but also the movement for justice, recognition, and dignity. The union stands beside them-not to speak on their behalf, but to build power with them, one site at a time.

"If we are able to organise these workers, they will finally have a chance-at job security, proper contracts, and a real voice in Bargaining Councils. This is not just union growth-it's transformation."

MS. Nthabiseng Khumalo, Secretary of NUM's Women's Structure
