

# Inclusive governance, innovative services and reach

Trade unions adapting to  
a diverse workforce

Jane Parker and Jim Arrowsmith

With Paula Mejía González and  
Marouane Laabbas el Guennouni

Edited by Rafael Peels

Report 2026.05



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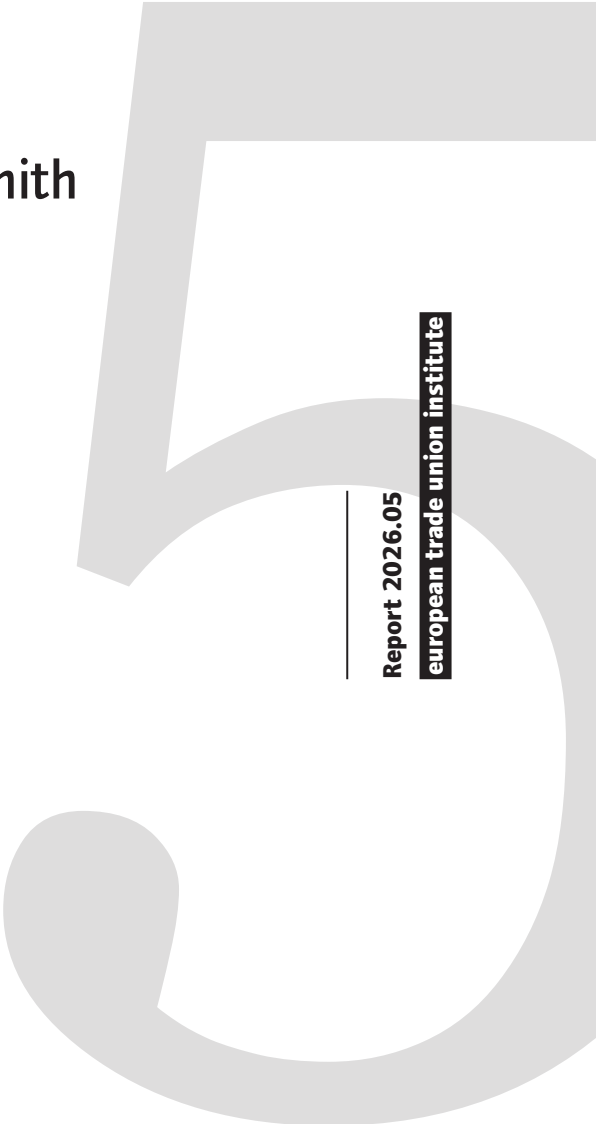


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**european trade union institute**

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## Foreword

Trade unions are operating in a period of profound transformation. Technological disruption, climate transition, demographic shifts, geopolitical instability and the continuing fragmentation of employment relationships are reshaping labour markets across the world. At the same time, the need for strong and representative workers' organisations has rarely been greater. For as these transitions reshape labour markets, they can also deepen inequalities, intensify insecurity and place renewed pressure on fundamental labour and trade union rights. This study therefore arrives at a particularly important moment because it clearly shows, with practical evidence, that trade unions' efforts to navigate this multi-layered complexity, rapid change and disruption are not an abstract aspiration: they are already underway, through innovation in inclusive union governance, renewed services and expanded outreach to an increasingly diverse workforce.

The study is situated in a context of persistent pressure on fundamental labour and trade union rights, notably freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Figures show that in many countries respect for these core principles remains limited or, worse, is deteriorating. Too many workers, particularly those who are self-employed, in the gig economy, migrants and domestic workers, continue to face legal and practical barriers to trade union organising and representation.

In many parts of the world, good governance, civic space and democracy itself are under growing strain. In this context, strong and inclusive trade unions are indispensable. By ensuring that workers have a voice, and by strengthening workplace democracy and social dialogue, unions help anchor, sustain and deepen democracy more broadly.

The state of the world today reminds us that progress cannot be taken for granted, and that workers' organisations need the institutional, technical, representational and policy capacities to respond effectively to major transformations and pressures in the world of work. This is not only at the core of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) mandate, but also of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the Massey People, Organisation, Work and Employment Research group (MPOWER) of Massey University/The University of New Zealand/Aotearoa.

This report speaks directly to that ambition. Its focus on inclusive governance, diverse membership and innovative services goes to the heart of what it means to build strong, resilient and representative trade unions in a changing world of work. The research offers several important findings. It shows that inclusive governance is becoming a strategic priority for unions across regions, with many developing targeted mechanisms to involve women, youth, migrant, informal economy, emerging sector and other workers in decision-making processes. It shows that union services are widening and deepening: for example, legal support, training, welfare and digital tools are increasingly being adapted to the realities of a more diverse workforce. It demonstrates that governance, servicing and reach are most effective when treated not as separate functions, but as mutually reinforcing pillars of trade unions' ability to navigate complexity, change and uncertainty. These are powerful insights for trade unions seeking to remain relevant and effective amid rapidly transforming labour markets.

Building on key lessons learned, the report sets out a number of recommendations for trade unions globally. It argues that inclusion should be made systematic in union constitutions, leadership structures and decision-making; that governance, services and outreach should be integrated into a coherent trade union transformation strategy; and that innovation must be backed by learning and foresight. These are strategic choices for unions to remain resilient, navigating the major transformations and pressures that reshape the world of work, and to strengthen their relevance, representativeness and power, in the world of work today and tomorrow.

This publication is a testament to the value of collaboration across complementary institutions and partners. ILO ACTRAV brings a global mandate within the United Nations system and a longstanding commitment to strengthening workers' organisations worldwide. ETUI contributes deep research expertise and a strong European focus, helping connect evidence, policy debate and trade union practice. Based at a university in New Zealand/Aotearoa, MPOWER adds a distinct educational and research expertise on labour studies.

Together, this partnership demonstrates how global policy engagement and rigorous, evidence-based applied research, grounded in trade union practice across all regions of the world, can reinforce one another, producing knowledge that both draws from and strengthens union action.

We hope this study will be used widely by trade union leaders, educators, researchers and policymakers. Its message is ultimately one of realism and ambition: realism about the scale of the pressures facing workers and their organisations, but ambition grounded in the many positive examples already emerging of trade unions navigating these multiple pressures. In a time when violations of trade union rights remain widespread and the world of

work is being reshaped at speed, strengthening inclusive, representative and innovative unions is not optional. It is essential to social justice, decent work and democracy itself.

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## Executive summary

Inclusive governance is about who participates in trade union decision-making and how. It is critical to the effectiveness of unions, as member-driven organisations, and their inclusiveness in engaging with diverse worker groups. This means that inclusive governance is strongly connected to measures to enhance member services and reach. All three are vital responses to the important challenges of key transformations in the world of work and broader society, spanning socio-economic and political shifts, environmental, demographic and technological disruptions, and widespread violation of core labour rights worldwide.

In seeking to navigate this rapidly changing world of work, unions are no strangers to innovation. This report explores current trade union actions, challenges and opportunities around inclusive governance, servicing and reach in response to key transitions. It draws on a mapping exercise of documented practices worldwide, focusing on results from an international survey and interviews with global union leaders.

### Key findings

#### i. Inclusion is a priority in union governance

An overwhelming majority of unions surveyed for this study report targeted strategies or mechanisms to include diverse worker groups in internal decision making. Youth and women workers are the most consistently prioritised, followed by migrant workers, workers in the informal economy (IE), platform and technology sector workers and, to a lesser extent, others such as self-employed and green sector workers. Governance mechanisms range from well-established approaches including designated committees, quotas, reserved seats and proportional representation to more flexible and experimental arrangements, including participatory forums, digital engagement and collaboration with external organisations. Inclusive governance is therefore a multi-level participatory process.

#### ii. Union servicing is widening and deepening

All surveyed unions provide member services in addition to collective bargaining. This can include legal assistance, employment relations advice,

welfare and training. Increasingly, unions are extending and adapting services to meet the needs of underrepresented and emergent worker groups, as well as adding new services for those such as platform and IE workers. Many innovations relate to better use of ICT, making their provision more efficient as well as extending their reach. Servicing remains focused as a benefit for existing members but is also increasingly viewed as a strategic tool for attracting new members and supporting broader organising efforts.

### iii. Reach and engagement strategies are diversifying

Most unions report active efforts to reach both existing and potential members through awareness campaigns, training of representatives, special membership provisions and growing use of digital tools in an emerging combined organising and servicing model. Digitalisation is the most frequently cited driver shaping reach strategies, particularly for engaging young workers, migrants and platform workers, for instance, by increasing the use of social media. At the same time, effective reach still depends on face-to-face engagement, a strong workplace presence and in some cases community level organising.

### iv. Governance, servicing and reach are understood as strategically interdependent

Unions commonly understand governance, servicing and reach as strategic and mutually reinforcing. As the interviewees and respondents stressed, inclusive governance strengthens legitimacy and participation; innovative services enhance relevance and recruitment; and effective reach expands representation and voice. Unions that explicitly link governance reform, service innovation and reach strategies are better positioned to respond to labour market and wider changes.

### v. Resource constraints and limited evaluation remain key challenges

Widespread experimentation is driving positive change but unions face persistent constraints. These include limited financial and human resources, restrictive legal frameworks (for instance, for organising platform and IE workers) and competing priorities such as between serving established members and reaching new groups. Resourcing is particularly problematic for groups such as platform and IE workers due to worker dispersion, turnover and resistance, necessitating dual approaches based on physical as well as virtual visibility. Recognising such challenges can be a stimulus to strategy and action. However, the use of technology is also constrained by financial resources, slow uptake and a scarcity of specialist staff. A further constraint

is limited monitoring and evaluation of practice. This restricts the ability to learn, prioritise, scale and share successful actions.

## Conclusions and implications

The evidence underscores that union revitalisation is not just possible but is underway through inclusive governance and innovative servicing and reach. However, success is uneven and depends on some key interventions:

- **Make inclusive governance systematic**

Embed inclusion of diverse worker groups (e.g. women, youth, migrants, IE, platform and emerging sector workers) into union constitutions, strategies, leadership structures and decision-making processes, using a mix of formal mechanisms (e.g. quotas, reserved seats) and participatory practices to ensure meaningful voice.

- **Integrate governance, servicing and reach into a single renewal strategy**

Ensure inclusive governance, innovative services and outreach are treated as mutually reinforcing, aligning them within a coherent strategic framework across confederal, sectoral and enterprise levels.

- **Innovate services to meet changing worker needs**

Expand and adapt union services to reflect labour market transformation, including digital delivery, support for non-standard and vulnerable workers, embracing skills and retraining for technological and green transitions, and focusing on services that strengthen social protection and well-being.

- **Strengthen reach through multi-channel engagement**

Combine digital tools, workplace organising and community-based approaches to reach and represent groups of existing and potential members, including relationship building with relevant civil society actors where appropriate.

- **Build long-term capacity through learning, evaluation and advocacy**

Successful anticipation and experimentation need to be based on robust evaluation of existing and new initiatives, and lessons from tried and tested initiatives should be systematically shared across the union movement. At the same time, unions have to continue efforts to advocate for legal and institutional frameworks that enable freedom of association, collective bargaining and inclusive representation for all workers.



## Résumé

La gouvernance inclusive concerne à la fois les personnes qui participent à la prise de décision au sein des syndicats et les modalités de cette participation. Elle constitue un levier essentiel de l'efficacité des organisations syndicales, en tant qu'organisations fondées sur l'engagement de leurs adhérents, ainsi que de leur capacité à mobiliser des groupes de travailleurs diversifiés. À ce titre, la gouvernance inclusive est étroitement liée aux initiatives visant à renforcer les services proposés aux membres et à accroître leur portée. Ensemble, ces trois dimensions apportent des réponses indispensables aux profondes mutations qui traversent le monde du travail et la société : transformations socio-économiques et politiques, bouleversements environnementaux, démographiques et technologiques, mais aussi atteintes généralisées aux droits fondamentaux du travail à l'échelle mondiale.

Dans un monde du travail en constante évolution, les syndicats ne sont pas étrangers à l'innovation. Le présent rapport examine les initiatives actuellement menées par les organisations syndicales, ainsi que les défis et les opportunités liés à la gouvernance inclusive, aux services aux adhérents et à l'élargissement de leur portée dans le contexte des grandes transitions en cours. Il s'appuie sur un travail de recensement des pratiques documentées à travers le monde, fondé notamment sur les résultats d'une enquête internationale et d'entretiens menés auprès de dirigeants syndicaux internationaux.

## Principaux constats

### i. L'inclusion : une priorité de la gouvernance syndicale

Une très large majorité des syndicats interrogés déclarent avoir mis en place des stratégies ou mécanismes ciblés visant à inclure des groupes de travailleurs diversifiés dans les processus décisionnels internes. Les jeunes et les femmes sont les catégories les plus systématiquement prises en compte, suivies des travailleurs migrants, des travailleurs de l'économie informelle, des travailleurs des plateformes et du secteur technologique, puis, dans une moindre mesure, d'autres catégories telles que les travailleurs indépendants ou ceux des secteurs liés à la transition écologique. Les mécanismes de gouvernance vont des dispositifs bien établis (comités dédiés, quotas, sièges réservés ou représentation proportionnelle) à des approches plus souples et expérimentales, telles que les forums participatifs, les outils numériques

d'engagement ou encore la coopération avec des organisations externes. La gouvernance inclusive apparaît ainsi comme un processus participatif déployé à plusieurs niveaux.

## ii. Des services syndicaux élargis et renforcés

L'ensemble des syndicats interrogés proposent des services à leurs adhérents au-delà de la négociation collective. Ceux-ci peuvent inclure une assistance juridique, des conseils en matière de relations de travail, des prestations sociales ou encore des actions de formation. Les syndicats tendent de plus en plus à étendre et adapter ces services afin de répondre aux besoins de groupes de travailleurs sous-représentés ou émergents, tout en développant de nouvelles offres destinées notamment aux travailleurs des plateformes et de l'économie informelle. Nombre de ces innovations reposent sur une meilleure utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la communication, permettant à la fois d'améliorer l'efficacité des services proposés et d'en élargir la portée. Si les services demeurent principalement conçus comme un avantage offert aux adhérents existants, ils sont aussi de plus en plus perçus comme un levier stratégique pour attirer de nouveaux membres et soutenir des démarches d'organisation plus larges.

## iii. Diversification des stratégies de rayonnement et d'engagement

La plupart des syndicats déclarent s'engager activement afin de toucher aussi bien leurs adhérents actuels que de potentiels nouveaux membres, notamment au moyen de campagnes de sensibilisation, de la formation des représentants, de dispositifs d'adhésion spécifiques et d'un recours croissant aux outils numériques dans le cadre d'un modèle émergent combinant organisation et services aux adhérents. La digitalisation est le facteur le plus souvent mentionné comme influençant les stratégies de rayonnement, en particulier pour mobiliser les jeunes travailleurs, les travailleurs migrants et les travailleurs des plateformes, notamment par une utilisation accrue des réseaux sociaux. En parallèle, l'efficacité des stratégies de rayonnement continue de reposer sur des échanges en présentiel, une forte présence sur les lieux de travail et, dans certains cas, des formes d'organisation à l'échelle des communautés locales.

## iv. Gouvernance, services aux adhérents et rayonnement : des dimensions stratégiquement interdépendantes

Les syndicats considèrent généralement la gouvernance, les services aux adhérents et le rayonnement comme des dimensions stratégiques qui se renforcent mutuellement. Comme l'ont souligné les personnes interrogées,

une gouvernance inclusive renforce la légitimité et la participation ; des services innovants accroissent la pertinence et favorisent le recrutement ; et un rayonnement efficace permet d'élargir la représentation et l'expression collective. Les syndicats qui articulent explicitement réforme de la gouvernance, innovation des services et stratégies de rayonnement sont mieux armés pour répondre aux évolutions du marché du travail.

#### v. Contraintes de ressources et évaluation limitée : des défis majeurs

Si les nombreuses expérimentations en cours favorisent des évolutions positives, les syndicats restent confrontés à des contraintes persistantes. Celles-ci tiennent notamment à des ressources financières et humaines limitées, à des cadres juridiques restrictifs (par exemple pour l'organisation des travailleurs des plateformes et de l'économie informelle), ainsi qu'à des priorités concurrentes, entre les services destinés aux adhérents existants et la volonté d'atteindre de nouveaux groupes. Les ressources constituent un défi particulièrement important pour les travailleurs des plateformes et de l'économie informelle en raison de leur dispersion, du taux de rotation et des résistances rencontrées, ce qui nécessite des approches combinant visibilité physique et visibilité virtuelle. La prise en compte de ces difficultés peut toutefois constituer un moteur pour l'élaboration de stratégies et d'actions. Par ailleurs, l'utilisation des technologies demeure freinée par des ressources financières insuffisantes, une adoption lente des outils et le manque de personnel spécialisé. Enfin, le suivi et l'évaluation des pratiques restent limités, ce qui réduit la capacité à tirer des enseignements, à définir des priorités, à déployer les initiatives efficaces à plus grande échelle et à partager les actions ayant produit des résultats positifs.

## Conclusions et enjeux

Les éléments recueillis démontrent que le renouveau syndical est non seulement possible, mais déjà à l'œuvre, porté par une gouvernance inclusive et par des approches innovantes en matière de services aux adhérents et de rayonnement. Les résultats demeurent toutefois inégaux et reposent sur plusieurs leviers d'action essentiels :

#### – **Rendre la gouvernance inclusive systématique**

Intégrer l'inclusion de groupes de travailleurs diversifiés, notamment les femmes, les jeunes, les travailleurs migrants, les travailleurs de l'économie informelle, les travailleurs des plateformes et ceux des secteurs émergents, dans les statuts, les stratégies, les structures de direction et les processus décisionnels des syndicats, en combinant des mécanismes formels (tels que les quotas ou les sièges réservés) et des pratiques participatives afin de garantir une représentation effective de ces groupes.

– **Intégration de la gouvernance, des services aux adhérents et du rayonnement dans une stratégie unique de renouveau**

Veiller à ce que la gouvernance inclusive, les services innovants et les stratégies de rayonnement soient conçus comme des dimensions qui se renforcent mutuellement, inscrites dans un cadre stratégique cohérent aux niveaux confédéral, sectoriel et de l'entreprise.

– **Innovation en matière de services pour répondre à l'évolution des besoins des travailleurs**

Développer et adapter les services syndicaux afin de tenir compte des transformations du marché du travail, notamment à travers la prestation de services numériques, l'accompagnement des travailleurs atypiques et vulnérables, le développement des compétences et la reconversion dans le cadre des transitions technologiques et écologiques, ainsi qu'un renforcement des services contribuant à la protection sociale et au bien-être.

– **Renforcement du rayonnement au moyen d'une mobilisation multicanale**

Combinaison des outils numériques, l'organisation sur les lieux de travail et les approches ancrées dans les communautés afin d'atteindre et de représenter les groupes d'adhérents actuels et potentiels, y compris par le développement de relations avec les acteurs pertinents de la société civile, le cas échéant.

– **Développement de capacités durables grâce à l'apprentissage, à l'évaluation et au plaidoyer**

Pour être efficaces, les démarches d'anticipation et d'expérimentation doivent s'appuyer sur une évaluation rigoureuse des initiatives existantes et nouvelles, et les enseignements tirés des initiatives ayant fait leurs preuves doivent être systématiquement partagés au sein du mouvement syndical. Parallèlement, les syndicats doivent poursuivre leurs efforts de plaidoyer en faveur de cadres juridiques et institutionnels garantissant la liberté d'association, la négociation collective et une représentation inclusive de l'ensemble des travailleurs.

## Resumen ejecutivo

La gobernanza inclusiva se centra en quién participa en la toma de decisiones de los sindicatos y cómo. Es fundamental para la eficacia de los sindicatos, como organizaciones orientadas a sus miembros, y su inclusión al interactuar con diferentes grupos de trabajadores. Esto significa que la gobernanza inclusiva está fuertemente vinculada con medidas para mejorar los servicios y el alcance de sus miembros. Las tres dimensiones son respuestas cruciales a los principales retos de grandes transformaciones en el mundo laboral y la sociedad en general, que van desde cambios socioeconómicos y políticos, conflictos medioambientales, demográficos y tecnológicos, hasta una violación generalizada de los derechos laborales fundamentales en todo el mundo.

En sus esfuerzos por desenvolverse en este mundo laboral en constante cambio, los sindicatos están habituados a la innovación. El presente informe explora las acciones, los retos y las oportunidades actuales de los sindicatos en el ámbito de la gobernanza inclusiva, la prestación de servicios y el alcance en respuesta a transiciones cruciales. Traza una hoja de ruta de prácticas documentadas en todo el mundo, centrándose en los resultados de una encuesta internacional y entrevistas con líderes sindicales mundiales.

## Principales conclusiones

### i. La inclusión es una prioridad en la gobernanza sindical

Una abrumadora mayoría de los sindicatos encuestados menciona estrategias o mecanismos específicos para incluir varios grupos de trabajadores en la toma de decisiones interna. Los jóvenes y las mujeres son los más priorizados sistemáticamente, seguidos de los trabajadores migrantes, los trabajadores de la economía informal (EI), los trabajadores de plataformas y del sector tecnológico y, en menor medida, otros como los autónomos o los trabajadores del sector verde. Los mecanismos de gobernanza van desde enfoques consolidados como comités designados, cuotas, puestos reservados y sistemas de representación proporcional hasta acuerdos más flexibles y experimentales, como los foros participativos, la captación digital y la colaboración con organizaciones externas. Por consiguiente, la gobernanza inclusiva es un proceso participativo multinivel.

## ii. Los servicios sindicales se amplían y se refuerzan

Todos los sindicatos encuestados ofrecen a sus miembros otros servicios además de la negociación colectiva. Se trata de servicios como asistencia jurídica, asesoramiento sobre relaciones laborales, beneficios sociales y formación. Cada vez más, los sindicatos amplían y adaptan sus servicios para satisfacer las necesidades de los grupos de trabajadores infrarrepresentados y emergentes, además de añadir nuevos servicios para otros grupos como los trabajadores de plataformas y de EI. Muchas de estas innovaciones están vinculadas a un mejor uso de las TIC, que mejora su prestación y aumenta su alcance. La prestación de servicios sigue centrada en beneficiar a los miembros existentes, pero cada vez más se ve como una herramienta estratégica para captar a nuevos miembros y proveer más esfuerzos organizativos.

## iii. Las estrategias de alcance y captación se diversifican

Muchos sindicatos mencionan esfuerzos activos para llegar a miembros existentes y nuevos a través de campañas de sensibilización, formación de representantes, normas de afiliación especiales y un mayor uso de herramientas digitales en un modelo emergente combinado de organización y prestación de servicios. La digitalización es el eje citado con más frecuencia para determinar estrategias de alcance, en particular para captar a trabajadores jóvenes, migrantes y trabajadores de plataformas, por ejemplo, con un incremento del uso de las redes sociales. Al mismo tiempo, el alcance efectivo todavía depende de la captación directa, una fuerte presencia en el lugar de trabajo y en algunos casos, una organización de ámbito comunitario.

## iv. La gobernanza, los servicios y el alcance se consideran estratégicamente interdependientes

En general, los sindicatos consideran que la gobernanza, los servicios y el alcance son estratégicos y se refuerzan mutuamente. Como señalan los entrevistados y los encuestados, la gobernanza inclusiva refuerza la legitimidad y la participación; unos servicios innovadores aumentan la relevancia y la captación; y el alcance efectivo amplía la representación y la voz. Los sindicatos que vinculan explícitamente la reforma de la gobernanza con la innovación de los servicios y las estrategias de alcance están más capacitados para responder a los cambios del mercado laboral.

## v. La escasez de recursos y una evaluación limitada siguen siendo desafíos clave

La experimentación generalizada está generando un cambio positivo, pero los sindicatos se enfrentan a restricciones persistentes, como unos recursos

financieros y humanos limitados, marcos legales restrictivos (por ejemplo, para organizar a los trabajadores de plataforma y de EI), y prioridades concurrentes, como proporcionar servicios a los miembros existentes o captar a nuevos grupos. Dotar de recursos es especialmente problemático en grupos como los trabajadores de plataforma y de EI, debido a la dispersión de los trabajadores, la rotación, la resistencia o la necesidad de enfoques duales basados en la visibilidad física y virtual. Reconocer estos retos puede ser un incentivo para adoptar estrategias y acciones. Sin embargo, el uso de la tecnología también está condicionado por los recursos financieros, una lenta incorporación y una escasez de personal especializado. Otra restricción es la limitada supervisión y evaluación de las prácticas. Esto limita la capacidad de aprender, priorizar, aumentar y compartir acciones eficaces.

## Conclusiones y consecuencias

La evidencia subraya que la revitalización de los sindicatos no solo es posible, sino que está en marcha a través de la gobernanza inclusiva y una prestación de servicios y alcance innovadores. No obstante, el éxito es irregular y depende de algunas intervenciones clave:

- **Sistematizar la gobernanza inclusiva**

Incorporar la inclusión de diversos grupos de trabajadores (p.ej. mujeres, jóvenes, migrantes, trabajadores de EI, de plataforma y de sectores emergentes) en las constituciones de sindicatos, estrategias, estructuras de liderazgo y procesos de toma de decisiones, a través de una combinación de mecanismos formales (como cuotas, puestos reservados) y prácticas participativas para garantizar una voz significativa.

- **Integrar la gobernanza, la prestación de servicios y el alcance en una única estrategia de renovación**

Garantizar que la gobernanza inclusiva, unos servicios innovadores y el alcance se refuerzan mutuamente y se alinean en un marco estratégico coherente en el ámbito federal, sectorial y empresarial.

- **Innovar los servicios para satisfacer las necesidades cambiantes de los trabajadores**

Ampliar y adaptar los servicios sindicales para reflejar la transformación del mercado laboral, como la prestación digital, el apoyo a trabajadores no convencionales y vulnerables, adoptar habilidades y nuevas formaciones para la transición tecnológica y verde, y centrarse en servicios que favorezcan la protección social y el bienestar.

- **Reforzar el alcance a través de una captación multicanal**

Combinar herramientas digitales, organización en los lugares de trabajo y enfoques basados en la comunidad para llegar y representar a grupos de miembros existentes y nuevos, como la creación de relaciones con actores relevantes de la sociedad civil, cuando proceda.

– **Crear capacidad a largo plazo a través del aprendizaje, la evaluación y la promoción**

Una anticipación y experimentación eficaz debe basarse en una evaluación sólida de iniciativas existentes y nuevas, y las lecciones de iniciativas de eficacia probada deberían compartirse sistemáticamente en todo el movimiento sindical. Al mismo tiempo, los sindicatos deben seguir esforzándose por promover marcos legales e institucionales que favorezcan la libertad de asociación, la negociación colectiva y la representación inclusiva para todos los trabajadores.

## 1. Introduction - Rising to challenges through innovation

Unions have always faced difficult and dynamic environments, but today's challenges are especially profound. Technological climate and demographic transitions as well as unanticipated geopolitical and other crises have accelerated economic restructuring that threatens membership and collective bargaining globally. The contemporary fragmentation of employment poses an acute challenge to worker protection while respect for core labour rights by employers and the state can be fragile and contingent on economic and political factors. In this context, unions face one or more possible scenarios (Visser, 2024): *marginalisation*, with decreasing and ageing memberships; *dualisation*, retrenching into defending the interests of core members; *replacement*, competing with other stakeholders; and *revitalising*, by using innovative strategies and tactics to extend influence and reach.

This report focuses on revitalisation. It provides insights into how unions across the world are navigating current challenges in terms of the key revitalisation pillars of membership governance, service activities and reach (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022). Inclusive governance ensures effective representation so that unions are legitimate and relevant to member concerns. Reach is essential to extend and replenish membership, and service activities help recruit and retain these members. The three areas are thus closely related (Figure 1). Retaining, replenishing and extending membership is key to union survival and continued relevance, and this requires appropriate services and effective involvement in decisions for increasingly diverse member groups. These three pillars are critical to membership growth and engagement and thus achieving union goals in achieving decent work and social justice for all workers.

The context is set out in Figure 2 overleaf. Unions have to address multiple political, economic and social challenges (Parker, 2023). At the international level, this includes global transformations due to unanticipated crises such as Covid-19, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) or geopolitical shocks such as regional conflict or tariff disputes. Technological transformation, including automation, the digital and gig economy and most recently the rapid spread of artificial intelligence (AI) are displacing, dispersing and changing the nature of jobs. At the same time, new technology can provide unions with opportunities to better serve their members through improved administration and services (Ford and Sinpeng, 2022).

Figure 1 The three pillars of membership growth and engagement



Source: authors' own elaboration.

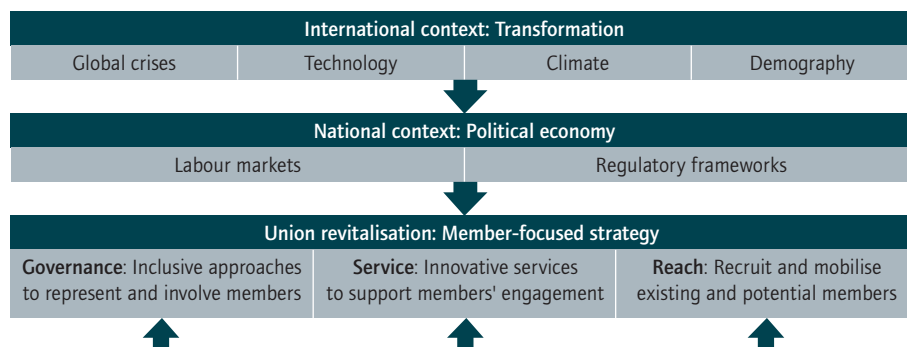
Climate change also poses a threat to the livelihood of many workers as well as profound occupational safety and health (OSH) risks (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2024). The Just Transition agenda is a positive strategy to involve unions in the shift to a green economy, addressing both environmental and social concerns with social dialogue at its centre, but faces obstacles due to competing interests, priorities and union resource constraints (Parker et al., 2026; Thomas and Pulignano, 2021). In difficult economic conditions, for example, these can mean that for unions, ‘short-term job interests often override their long-term common interests in climate protection and a sustainable planet’ (Peters, 2024: 139).

Demographic challenges refer to ageing populations and workforces on the one hand and youth lacking sufficient job opportunities on the other. They also involve increased labour market diversity and exclusion, and growing migration. The under-engagement of young people in unions is perhaps the greatest threat to renewal in many countries (Visser, 2019; European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), 2021).

Each of these challenges is reinforced (or cushioned) at the national level through different traditions in political economy, consisting of (fragmented) labour markets and (gaps in) regulatory frameworks. Depending on the political economy in a country, key transformations may accelerate or protect against precarious work, inequality and socio-economic and political volatility (Weil, 2014; Peels and Ponce del Castillo, 2024). Respect for trade union rights is a central pillar in this political economy.<sup>1</sup>

1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Indicator 8.8.2 on Labour Rights measures exactly this. Unfortunately, trade union rights are under pressure in many countries, in both more advanced and developing economies (ILO, 2025a).

Figure 2 A framework for unions navigating change



Source: authors' own elaboration.

Responding to these challenges, as Figure 2 also indicates, involves innovative solutions through involvement and governance, servicing and reach. As noted above, these are inter-related. Inclusive union governance means ensuring opportunities for participation and voice for all in decision-making processes, delivering better member engagement. Union servicing aims at strengthening the appeal to diverse groups of workers, ranging from inclusive collective bargaining to targeted services, legal support and member discounts. It also embraces new methods of organising. Reach activity concerns how unions contact and organise a diversity of workers to become members and activists. These are universal and inter-related priorities for trade unions, though may be articulated differently according to national, sector and local contexts.

This report explores innovative union strategies and practices along these three dimensions in response to key transformational challenges. It is based on an international survey and semi-structured interviews with union leaders and draws on an extensive literature review.<sup>2</sup> The report focuses on key empirical results and insights, with analysis grounded in the literature.<sup>3</sup> The next section draws on relevant literature to briefly set out the scope of the report in terms of what is meant by governance, service and reach activity before the results from the survey and interviews are presented for each in turn. The report concludes with consideration of the need for inter-connected strategising and makes specific recommendations.

2. Project methods: (i) comprehensive literature review to map the union revitalisation debate, inform research design and aid interpretation of results; (ii) survey of 30 senior union officials, including open questions for commentary and explanation, distributed in July-August 2025. Respondents are from Latin America (12), Africa (7), Asia Pacific (4), Europe and Eurasia (3), Middle East (3), and the Caribbean (1); (iii) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 8 respondents (3 from Latin America, 2 from Africa and one each from Eurasia, the Caribbean and the Middle East) in September 2025 to further explore expert insights.
3. A more complete treatment of the literature and findings is available on request from the authors.

## 2. Charting union innovation

Continuously changing and highly complex and demanding environments mean that unions are no strangers to innovation. Successful navigation of change requires the ability to use strategic thinking and organisational learning, or a ‘Triple-A’ framework based on Anticipation, Agility and Adaptation (Ramos et al., 2023). Union agility requires imagination to ‘unlearn’ conventional habits and reach out to learn from elsewhere. For instance, in Benin, Botswana and Mauritius, key union organisations developed a joint council of unions and a joint memorandum of understanding for working together in the national social dialogue forums. Information sharing and active learning is vital for unions to deploy relevant strategies and practices and to scale collective resilience worldwide (ILO ACTRAV, 2019a; ILO, 2025b). Important resources include ACTRAV’s Trade Unions in Transformation: Actors for Change Programme, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung’s Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0 Programme and the Trade Union Renewal Centre of the ETUC (2025), amongst others.

Linked to efforts to expand and service the membership base, a key pillar concerns governance efforts aimed at greater inclusion, especially for youth, women, and vulnerable and under-represented groups such as migrant workers and ethnic minorities, as well as IE and precarious workers (ILO, 2025c; André, 2022a; Connolly et al., 2018). These actions may take the form of changes to union structures, such as special committees, quotas and reserved seats; introducing networking, mentoring and training activities; developing focused information and communication; and boosting external advocacy. Unions across the world have also been active on a diversity of topics, such as equal pay and pay transparency (ILO, 2022a) violence and harassment at work and safe and inclusive workplaces generally (International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 2022).

Many of these initiatives are experimental and bottom-up, complementing traditional democratic approaches to governance. This range of union responses (governance and otherwise) therefore typically involves ‘a process of bricolage and building, bringing new and old elements together’ (Murray, 2024: 29). Successful innovation across a range of national institutional settings has been shown to involve a configuration of grassroots initiatives and active organisational learning, ‘affirming unions as adaptive democratic organisations while strengthening their internal capacity’ (Vandaele, 2026:19).

Greater emphasis has been placed on innovative union servicing in recent years, including the extension of membership to traditionally under-represented groups. This includes workers who may be on the margins of the labour market or comprise the ‘new unstable workforce’ across the global North and South, such as freelance, platform, migrant, domestic, IE and rural workers (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022). Concrete and relevant services are necessary to encourage membership for these workers in particular as they tend to be less familiar with trade unionism and are also typically low paid (Larsen et al., 2022; Bellini et al., 2024). Servicing may take the form of ‘strategic servicing,’ which targets specific groups of workers, and ‘traditional servicing’ which involves the general provision of rewards and specific benefits (such as financial or legal services) in addition to the gains associated with inclusive collective bargaining (Bellini et al., 2024).

Trade unions have been adapting to the rise of non-standard employment such as temporary also and freelance work by providing innovative targeted services (Larsen et al., 2022). This may include legal aid, contract assistance, job search and tax counselling and is complementary to other approaches such as specialised membership packages and new community-based organising strategies that aim to accommodate short-term and dispersed employment. Similarly, for IE workers, practical, tangible and affordable services can include facilitating access to social security benefits, education and skills training, and advocacy on specific demands including through alliances with other organisations (ILO, 2025c; ILO ACTRAV, 2019b). Successful strategies often involve a combination of different reach and servicing approaches (Xhafa and Serrano, 2024; Serrano and Xhafa, 2016). However, such initiatives can involve relatively high transaction and opportunity costs given the nature of IE work (ILO, 2025d; 2025e).

Effective union approaches to reach a diverse membership can assume many different forms. On the one hand they involve sustaining a membership proposition by maintaining a strong, functional union at workplace and branch level. They can also form part of strategic organising to embrace new and diverse worker groups as a route to building their participation. This links to the idea of an ‘organising model’ based on members’ direct participation and empowerment in the union (e.g. UNISON, 2024), in contrast to the ‘servicing model’ traditionally concerned with a union’s delivery of collective and individual benefits to members (Carter, 2000; Peetz and Pocock, 2009). UNISON Code emphasises the importance of regular information, for example, and meetings. active bargaining machinery driven by member involvement, comprehensive training for union representatives, and systematic engagement with community groups, media and political networks as appropriate.

However, the provision of benefits remains fundamental to union reach, whether to retain existing members or to penetrate previously unorganised groups. These additional and increasingly diverse groups of workers include workers in the IE, who are without a conventional employment contract, and platform or gig economy workers outside a conventional workplace structure.

A variety of reach approaches may be pursued. According to the ILO (2025b), union mechanisms to represent IE workers can include one or more of the following: directly recruiting them as union members; establishing specific union structures for IE members; organising a separate union for specific groups of IE workers; establishing a minority grassroots union for these workers; affiliating registered membership associations of IE workers to a union; or directly organising IE workers into an association and then affiliating it with the union. Training IE workers as activists and organisers is also important as a way of educating workers, disseminating knowledge and ‘introducing democratic culture’ into the IE (ILO ACTRAV, 2019b: 30).

Trade unions have also been adapting to new labour market players such as online labour platforms which are often difficult to organise (Piasna and Zwysen, 2022). Traditional labour unions have deployed resources to directly recruit platform workers; form novel networks and alliances with emerging workers’ associations; and/or lend assistance to the formation of new unions for workers in these occupations (Akorsu et al., 2022). A key innovation is deploying their own digital tools to contact and provide support to platform workers in the pursuit of fair pay, decent working time, social protection and labour rights. This represents a synergy between ‘the organisational capacity of the “old” and the imaginative spontaneity of the “new”’ (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017: 557). For example, organisation and reach can be based on a complementary approach using technological (and legal) tools, as well as physical visibility through techniques such as providing refreshments and bicycle repair services to delivery riders (Ranaraja, 2022).

Technological advances have strongly impacted union efforts to reach and engage a diverse existing and potential membership. Unions’ use of technology accelerated in response to the Covid-19 pandemic as a means to contact members and provide training and advice (Otieno et al., 2021; Bastidas Aliaga, 2021; Mwamadzingo et al., 2021). This includes investing in better equipment and new roles such as union IT consultants to improve communications and contact with a membership that is often dispersed yet also regularly connected online (André, 2021; Ford and Ward, 2021). For example, the Indonesian Teachers Association (Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia (PGRI)) had long used social media and its president has a dedicated WhatsApp channel to be in contact with members. The pandemic led PGRI to shift many meetings online. It rolled out additional digital tools to better engage with members (e.g. through a partnership with Microsoft and a local university to run a webinar-based professional development programme delivered in real time and asynchronously). It also developed a smartphone app to provide services including industrial support, consumer benefits such as discounted goods and services, and a toll payment facility (Ford and Ward, 2021).

Advanced use of union technology can involve better member mapping, data collection and analytics, marketing through social media, conducting remote meetings, and the delivery of targeted training and services as well as more efficient administration and decision-making. However, regional differences

exist in the level and quality of digital applications (Chinguwo, 2022). For instance, in Southern Africa, digital unionism (including the use of digital membership databases, e-voting during congresses, organising of workers in the digital economy and online services for members) has been described as ‘still relatively immature in the region. So far, trade unions can strengthen the use of targeted measures, such as tailor-made organizing strategies or services, in order to address specific groups of workers, such as workers in the IE, workers with disabilities or migrants’ (ILO, 2022b: 6). More generally, the sophisticated use of technology is often constrained by union resources and the scarcity of specialist staff (Townsend et al., 2016). Ford and Sinpeng’s (2022) Asia-Pacific study also observes that, while unions generally achieve far higher levels of engagement with members via direct messaging (used intensively for internal communications), the quality of engagement is a challenge. However, overall, unions reported that positive impacts outweigh the challenges associated with IT use, including the significant staffing and skills training costs involved in content creation and management.

Taken together, governance, service and reach innovations form three spears of a member-driven trident designed to progress union revitalisation based on member involvement not just membership numbers. Actions across the three areas are increasingly integrated as a way of strategic thinking and doing, based on member participation and organisational change. One particularly innovative example is the adoption of ‘strategic foresight’ planning by unions around the world (Peels and Ponce del Castillo, 2024).

## **2.1 Union innovation in action**

The literature review identified a range of trade union initiatives across governance, service provision and reach. These include responding to challenges such as climate and structural economic change; developing innovative responses to the pandemic crisis; introducing specific activities in relation to groups such as informal and platform workers; and developing better connections with external coalition partners. Some examples are highlighted below.

### **2.1.1 Climate change**

Actions around climate change require coalition efforts and are often complex to design and manage (Mehan, 2023). They involve reconciling different member views as well as positions held by partners (Parker et al., 2021). However, these collaborations also present opportunities for union learning, experimentation and demonstrating success to appeal to diverse groups. For example, Peters (2024: 139) notes that the labour-led Climate Jobs New York ‘successfully secured some of the most progressive climate policy and investments’ towards the building of a clean energy economy and winning high-quality union jobs that spur community development, inspiring further municipal and state-level coalitions across the US.

In Europe, unions have called on local public authorities and employer organisations to collaborate to map potential negative climate change impacts on the regional and sectoral economic environment and workers such as through health, working conditions, job losses, and the need for re-training and new qualifications, and to draw up relevant adaptation strategies (ETUC, 2021). Belgian unions are part of the country's national Climate Coalition, alongside civil service organisations (CSOs) (environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development cooperations, youth councils and citizens' movements). They help mobilise around the idea of a fair, climate-friendly society, and develop campaigns through thematic working groups. Belgian unions also set up a 'green collective bargaining database' encompassing collective agreements with green clauses. Relevant terms cover green procurement, waste management, workforce adjustment, training and whistle-blower protection (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022). Collaboration between unions and employer organisations to jointly manage crisis situations emerging from conflicts and natural disasters occur in many countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nepal, New Zealand/Aotearoa, Japan, the Philippines, the Bahamas and Sri Lanka (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022).

In the UK, the public sector union Unison has developed local climate action plans and education (Trappmann and Cutter, 2022). The Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV) also developed a Climate App which informs workers on risks related to climate, what they can do in case of extreme heat and what their employer should do according to their collective agreement. Unions in Southern Africa have also changed their internal governance by strengthening their capacity in relation to climate change pressures through administrative, technical and research initiatives (Chinguwo, 2022).

## 2.1.2 Navigating the pandemic

The Covid-19 crisis demonstrated the relevance of social dialogue for managing national emergencies and ensuring the protection of vulnerable workers in particular. Unions negotiated safeguards for front-line workers, the extension of social protection to independent or casual workers and relief packages in hard-hit sectors such as tourism and care (ILO, 2021). Kazakhstani union federations and the state negotiated a special package for employees affected by the pandemic, including compensation equal to the minimum wage while quarantined, a bonus for medical personnel, delays in payments for bank loans and utilities, and in-kind benefits for large families (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022).

Unions also negotiated short-time agreements to protect jobs in other sectors. For example, Germany's IG Metall and Gesamtmetall signed a collective agreement for short-time working, protecting 80% of workers' net remuneration, while enhancing parental and childcare leave. In Sweden, the white-collar union Unionen and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise agreed a nationwide collective agreement for short-term work (industriALL Europe, 2020).

Many unions also directly provided services to hard-hit members. Three quarters of surveyed unions globally offered advisory services on work issues to members in response to the pandemic (Otieno et al., 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, social protection and employment services were provided by unions to those who lost their jobs and livelihoods during the crisis (Mwamadzingo et al., 2021). Paraguayan unions ensured that workers have both biosafety equipment and access to isolation areas and can alternate periods of rest through staggered work schedules. They also assisted those who contracted the illness and bereaved families (Aliaga, 2021).

### 2.1.3 Platform work

Unions have pursued both traditional and novel approaches to organise and represent platform workers. The former includes collective agreements and litigation. In Denmark, 3F Transport and the Danish Chamber of Commerce negotiated a national sectoral agreement for delivery riders for 2021-23, potentially covering multiple platforms (Larsen et al., 2022). The agreement addresses pay, working conditions and the transition from freelance status to employment status. Collective agreements have also been adopted for couriers in Austria and Switzerland (UNI Global Union, 2021).

Unions have also pursued legal action to support the employment status and bargaining power of platform workers. Litigation is more common in countries where there are important potential gains regarding minimum wages, paid leave and other protections attached to achieving legally recognised employment status, and where it is a prerequisite for entering formal negotiations (Vandaele, 2018; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2019). Engagement in the law may also involve popular campaigns, which in Spain helped bring about the so-called ‘Riders’ Law’ (Law 9/2021) to ensure platform compliance.

Novel or experimental approaches include establishing or supporting new unions. In Indonesia, motorcycle and taxi drivers and unions established an Online Transportation Action Committee which has engaged in dialogue with firms and the Government to better regulate the sector. In the UK, the App Drivers and Couriers’ Union for platform workers started as an association and was later incorporated as a branch of the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain. The YouTubers Union was founded in 2018 as a Facebook group for people earning money by posting videos on YouTube who were unhappy with the company’s pay policies. It evolved into FairTube in 2021, a formally-registered organisation with union (IG Metall) support (Piasna and Zwysen, 2022).

These initiatives also link into collective agreements. In Denmark, DM’s Flexwerker and the 3F-Hilfr agreement initially emerged outside the established union movement. HK’s service bureau for freelancers resulted from a union-led, grass-roots initiative that emerged as an idea from their house HK-lab to facilitate the development of innovative union services.

A cross-border agreement between German-based Delivery Hero and the European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions in 2018 established a European Company Works Council (SE-WC) with representatives from each European country where the platform operates. And in 2019, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) won the first-ever unionisation vote at a major multinational enterprise food delivery service (Foodora). It combined creative, decentralised organising, implemented by local community union activists, with an overarching litigation and communications strategy to counter platform companies relying on independent contractors as couriers (Gebert, 2024). CUPW also supported a grassroots community union (Foodsters United), which started within a core of bike couriers transferring from a previous start-up company (Hurrier); it still provides a mutual help network to bike delivery couriers in Toronto.

#### 2.1.4 Informal economy

Unions across the developing world ‘are creatively leveraging their core roles to promote formalization and resist informalisation in today’s evolving labour landscape’ (ILO, 2025d: 43). There are also a plethora of initiatives to ensure better representation within the unions for these workers. Examples include Côte d’Ivoire, where the Confédération Ivoirienne des Syndicat Libres (CISL-DIGNITE) reorganised its national executive board to facilitate representation of IE and domestic workers. The Fédération des Syndicats Autonomes de Côte d’Ivoire-Confédération Générale set up a secretariat for the private and IE sectors, and regional inter-union branches that organise informal agricultural workers, and the Syndicat des Travailleuses Domestiques et Des Travailleuses dans l’Economie Informelle de Côte d’Ivoire changed its statutes to accommodate migrant domestic and other workers in the IE as members, and union officers with responsibility for migrants are represented on its executive board (ILO, 2025c).

Elsewhere in Africa, the Confédération Camerounaise du Travail (CCT) introduced gender parity in positions of responsibility in its Article of Association and Internal Rules, enabling women domestic workers to be part of its leadership. In Ghana, informal workers’ organisations affiliated to its Trades Union Congress (TUC) - the Union of Informal Workers Associations (the country’s first national union dedicated to organising IE workers) and the General Agricultural Workers’ Union (GAWU) - participate in all its meetings, including sending delegates to congress, the general council meeting and the steering committee. GAWU also extends its services to IE workers in agriculture. In Senegal, a union was set up for private security workers and entered into collective negotiations to regularise workers in the IE and enhance access to social protection (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022). In Kenya, a mobile app is used by IE transport workers to access national health insurance (Chinguwo, 2022a).

Unions in Latin America and Central and Southern Asia are also actively addressing IE work. The Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos-Autónoma

has set up federations of informal workers and encourages their participation in national and sectoral level discussions, and the Central Autónoma de Trabajadores del Perú set up a Secretariat for informal employment within the union, which works with other union secretariats to address social issues. The Nepalese Trade Union Congress (NTUC) revised its Constitution to include quotas for the representation of IE women and youth workers in its structures (33% and 10%, respectively). The Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions (FPSK) has amended its Constitution to allow self-employed, freelancers and seasonal workers in the IE to join and participate in meetings, votes, and be elected to its governing bodies. In Uzbekistan, unions organise seasonal workers and enable temporary dual union membership, modifying their constitutions to allow membership by IE workers.

Overall, union efforts to reach and engage with IE workers may take any combination of five forms. The first is *campaigns and alliances*. For example, in Bahrain, main unions developed a mobile app to recruit and mobilise unemployed youth workers, among other purposes, and established a nationwide alliance with civil society organisations to focus attention on vulnerable workers (Peels and Mwamadzingo, 2022). This included highlighting human rights violations in the run-up to the Formula 1 Bahrain Grand Prix (UNI Global, 2023). The second is establishing *new unions*. In the Philippines, the SENTRO movement, whose founding members include unions, set up the first domestic workers union in 2015, the United Domestic Workers in the Philippines. Unions have been set up for IE transport workers in Niger and Guatemala and for self-employed workers including street vendors in Bangladesh, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua and Spain (ILO, 2025d). The Ghana TUC has created the Union of Informal Workers Association (UNIWA) (ILO, 2019). Third is organising IE workers into *existing sector unions*, such as through the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) and the Fijian Trades Union Congress (FTUC), where affiliates negotiate with private companies to protect and formalise precarious, outsourced and temporary workers as permanent staff, especially in transport, security and hotel and tourism sectors.

A fourth approach is *recognising IE associations as unions* and affiliating them to the national centre. The Sierre Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) helps IE operators collectively register as unions under the country's labour laws, then affiliates them to the SLLC (ILO ACTRAV, 2019). The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) organises IE workers and operators through its associate affiliate, the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Association (ILO ACTRAV, 2019). Uganda's Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union organises informal minibus, taxi and motorcycle workers by affiliating their mass membership associations into the union (ILO, 2025e), and Mahila Kaamgar Sanhathana in India organises and represents informal garment factory workers, domestic workers, waste pickers and street vendors (ILO, 2025d).

Alternatively, groups of IE operators may be organised as *cooperatives* and other associations. The FTUC encourages informal workers (70% of

Fiji's workforce) to establish their own associations (e.g. of street vendors, market operators) and trains them on unionism (including benefits of sectoral organisation), constitutional democracy and business. Given income instability in the IE, FTUC aims to raise finances from higher dues for salaried workers to reach and serve own-account workers in the IE (ILO ACTRAV, 2019). The Union Nationale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Bénin (UNSTB) actively organises and supports professional associations of tailors, hairdressers and caterers to form and develop cooperatives through which they can support one another and also produce and sell to large clients (ILO ACTRAV, 2019). India's Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), registered as a union in 1972, is India's largest organisation of IE workers and advocates for the rights of its 3.2 million women members. It organises members into workers' cooperatives, producer groups, rural savings and credit groups, and social security groups. Services to members include savings and credit, housing, healthcare, childcare, insurance, legal aid, capacity-building and communications (ILO, 2025d).

Unions are careful to facilitate union involvement by special arrangements for membership fees. For example, the FPSK introduced a flexible contribution scheme for paying dues to reduce the financial burden on these members (ILO, 2025d). The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) adopted a concessional dues structure for specific sectors of informal workers. Some unions such as CISL-DIGNITE and SEWA collect annual member dues, including manually. The CCT has dues for domestic workers tied to taking voluntary insurance, and Union des Syndicats Libres du Cameroun (USLC) has a voluntary dues payment scheme for its informal members.

Unions are also active in focusing on workers at risk of informalisation, including temporary and casual employees and subcontractors. Australia's Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union, for example, organises outworkers (Serrano and Xhafa, 2016; 2024) and Malawi's Communication Workers' Union focuses on casual and contract workers in call centres. Casual and project-based workers have also been integrated into the sectoral Korean Construction Workers' Union, and Sweden's Unionen also focuses on recruiting the growing band of white-collar independent contractors and self-employed workers. Germany's IGMetall campaigns for and recruits temporary and agency workers as well as gig workers through such innovative mechanisms as FairCrowd.org.

### 2.1.5 Social and solidarity economy

Unions are increasingly working with the growing social and solidarity economy (SSE) sector. These include entities such as cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises and self-help groups. Following Alonso and Vlaminc's (2023) typology of union-SSE entity engagement, examples take five forms. First, as SSE *incubators*, unions help establish SSE entities. For example, a union within the Federation of Wood and Construction Workers of Togo (FTBC-Togo) set up the worker-

led Mutual Social Protection Scheme for Workers in the IE Sector to cover primary health care needs of members. In India, a union of waste pickers in the IE (KKPKP) set up a cooperative for its members to promote access to social protection, qualitative jobs and decent work. The General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions supported the establishment of Nari, a self-help group of Nepalese women working as domestic workers in Lebanon.

Second, unions can act as *allies* of independent SSE entities to provide services to members or to support the creation of employment and livelihood opportunities (or conversely, to offer services to SSE entities). In Argentina, the Union de Trabajaros y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP) was formed to represent IE workers and is linked to SSE entities, including a health mutual and workers' kitchens. Unions also collaborate with SSE entities around ecotourism and ecological agriculture in Mexico (ILO, 2018). In the Philippines, an alliance between FTUC and informal worker associations allows the latter to benefit from unions' organisational experience and political power, while the FTUC benefits from the numerical strength of the worker associations to obtain greater leverage in tripartite collective bargaining. Third, this can extend to joint *advocacy*, for example in protecting IE workers during the pandemic. Kenya's Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) assisted the Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation in drafting policy options for supporting street vendors during the pandemic and the Argentinian organisation for workers in the IE (UTEP), while not formally recognised as a union, played a leading role in 'social dialogue plus' with the government's Emergency Social Committee to address key pandemic issues. This led to concrete measures to improve food and income security for IE workers, for example through public food purchases and more frequent cash transfers.

Fourth, unions can act as *structural partners* of SSEs to extend membership base and reach. For example, the Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs au Rwanda (CESTRAR) has reached out to taxi drivers in Kigali through their mutual aid organisations. The FTUC uses a grassroots approach to encourage IE workers such as street vendors and market operators to establish associations. It then seeks to build alliances with these associations, and among other activities, provides information and training on union benefits and skills. Fifth, ultimately, *hybrid* union-SSE organisations may develop. In India, the SEWA Federation has a union and a cooperatives branch working together. The SSE focuses on service delivery and creating livelihood opportunities and the union focuses on worker representation and collective bargaining. The two branches support one another to promote access to goods and services, as well as decent work and livelihoods, for women working in the IE. In Ghana, Kuapa Kokoo Limited is a farmer-based organisation formed in 1993 using a cooperative model. It now combines a farmers' union, a farmer-owned private licensed company to buy and market cocoa, a trust company, a credit union and a chocolate manufacturing company. Kuapa Kokoo also promotes solidarity and collective identity among farmers, and has undertaken initiatives to promote labour rights and address child labour.

### **3. Inclusive trade union governance**

The following section discusses two dimensions that are key in determining trade union governance: first, broader drivers of change that affect trade unions' governance ability, ranging from technological disruption to climate shocks; and second, the potential of including an increasingly diverse membership.

#### **3.1 Main drivers of change affecting trade union governance**

The large majority (77%) of trade unions worldwide that participated in the research identified key transitions spanning technological, climate, economic, geo-political and demographic changes as key drivers affecting their governance ability.

Technology was the most important, identified by 90% of respondents, followed by structural economic changes (83%), geopolitical developments (77%) and climate and demographic changes (73%). Technological change was acknowledged to be a potential threat to the jobs and skills needs of members, but it was equally seen as a positive means by which to potentially enhance worker inclusion. Digitalisation and social media were found to enable improved two-way communication, remote participation and better streamlined union administration. The Union démocratique des travailleurs du Sénégal (UDTS) summarised for many that technology has brought the union 'a lot of visibility,' including with under-represented groups.

Climate change has led unions to consider new activities that could enhance inclusion of diverse worker groups, notably those workers and communities most impacted by the climate crisis. The Federación Nacional de Mujeres Trabajadoras (National Federation of Working Women in the Dominican Republic, FENAMUTRA) said that it was prompted to 'incorporate an environmental perspective and listen to affected communities and workers ... [it] strengthens its commitment to inclusive, participatory governance adapted to the challenges of the environment.'

This is also linked to structural economic change, accelerated by geopolitical uncertainty, which affect labour markets worldwide (e.g. the flexibilisation of labour) and trade unions' governance ability. The growth of casual and remote

work prompted unions such as the Federation of Free Trade Unions of Zambia (FFTUZ), for example, to ‘adapt its structures and decision-making processes to include workers in non-traditional sectors’ or to reconcile ‘governance to new ways of working and emerging sectors’ (FENAMUTRA). However, opinions may differ: one union interviewee, for instance, mentioned that while the union had observed changes in the world of work, this ‘has not yet directly required the union to establish new mechanisms for inclusion in internal governance.’

More relevant to governance concerns were demographic challenges, in terms of the need to better engage youth and other previously neglected groups such as women workers. In some countries, the issue is presented as the challenge of an ageing workforce and membership, but a common problem is unfamiliarity on the part of young people with trade unions. As well as better and targeted reach and service activities, unions have developed policies for women and youth and ‘quotas for youth and women in governing bodies to ensure their representation and to address their interests’ (FPRK). Unions without quotas may still set up specific representation structures and leadership pathways. Other relevant initiatives include targeted training for women, youth and migrant workers, for example in the Central Social Juanito Mora Porras-ANEP – Costa Rica (CSJMP-ANEP) and its affiliated unions.

## 3.2 Including diverse groups of workers

Of the 30 respondents, almost all (93%) said that they have targeted strategies or mechanisms for including diverse worker groups in their internal trade union governance. The most common are provisions for youth (93%) and women (90%) but others also widely addressed include migrant, emerging tech sector and IE workers (each 73%), green or sustainability sector workers (70%), people with disabilities (70%), platform workers (67%) and the self-employed (53%). Others referred to initiatives to involve ‘campesino’, or farmers and peasants (e.g. Colombia’s Confederación General del Trabajo, CGT). Overall, what emerges is that the definition of worker groups of relevance for union membership is broad and continuing to expand in different regions and countries.

Respondents were asked to describe the types of strategies or mechanisms they employ. For women and young people, the most common were designated structures such as committees (33% and 37% respectively) followed by reserved seats (30% and 27%). Quotas were used by 17% of unions for youth and 7% for women. Designated posts for both groups were utilised by 7% of unions and 7% used proportional representation for women workers. Reserved seats were the principal mechanism to represent other key groups of migrant workers (20%) and IE workers (13%). One union also used designated posts to involve migrant workers. Other initiatives across the four groups include designated secretariats, conventions and symposia; commissions and special expert evaluation of union policy and initiatives;

leadership training and capacity-building; and campaigns and relationship building with outside organisations.

The presence of mechanisms does not necessarily equate with active agency for workers in these groups, however. For instance, in a view echoed elsewhere, one interviewee observed that unions need to work hard to encourage women and young people to feel confident to participate in, and not just join, the union:

There are many female colleagues and young people too who feel a bit afraid to join union management. They see it as something that takes a lot of time, as an environment where they are not going to fit in, because it is ... dominated by men and, above all, by older men, no?

Certain groups, such as migrants and IE workers, might be still more difficult to involve. Although measures to include migrants and IE workers in union governance can be found in many unions, these more rarely extend to formally designated structures and posts. The same is true for other groups, such as platform workers. For example, only CGT Colombia indicated platform workers' representation and participation via a designated committee or a specific post, although others (e.g. Confédération des Syndicats Autonomes du Sénégal, CSA) do organise these workers into occupational groups which facilitates their representation within the federation.

In sum, there is a diversity of union strategies and mechanisms to enhance governance inclusion, targeted at some worker groups more than others. These approaches emphasise the need to use multiple means to engage with groups, often at different union levels, in formal and informal ways, and scaffolded by internal and external links and collaborations. Unions continue to explore new methods to extend inclusion in governance in the face of resource constraints and other challenges.

Survey respondents were invited to report up to four of their most innovative strategies or mechanisms for including diverse worker groups, and 59 initiatives were reported by 23 union bodies. As well as specific representation structures and quotas for women and youth, respondents also referred to other initiatives to better involve new or minority group members such as inclusive communication through social media, targeted support to migrants and training and capacity building for those in under-represented groups of workers. Unions noted how new innovations, such as opening a Migrant Resource Centre (Kenya's COTU), introducing migrant workers' consultative assemblies (Fédération Nationale des Syndicats des Ouvriers et des Employés au Liban, FENASOL), or providing a specialist training centre for domestic and care workers (FENAMUTRA), lends greater visibility, voice and influence over decision making to such groups.

The use of social media, and digitalisation generally, was seen as particularly important to engage young people and those in dispersed workplaces.

**Central General de Trabajadores (CGT) Paraguay explained how technology improves governance, as well as reach and services, by facilitating involvement:**

- '1. Equitable access to information: Digitalization allows more people, regardless of their location, to learn about their labor rights, training programs, and union activities.
2. Strengthening participation: Through social media and digital platforms, the active participation of workers and their representatives is facilitated, including those who cannot attend in person.
3. Visibility and defence of rights: Social media amplifies union voices, raises awareness of labor issues, and can be a tool for denouncing injustices and exerting social pressure.
4. Continuous training: Digitalization allows for the implementation of online courses, webinars, and other accessible formats, constantly updating the knowledge of union leaders and workers.
5. Connectivity and organization: Digital tools enable better coordination among local, national, and international unions, generating stronger support networks.'

According to the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM), embracing technology and, in particular social media, 'has represented an important cultural shift for the leadership, as the focus is now on younger generations who are unfamiliar with the role of unionism.'

Inclusive governance is seen as a process involving the provision of wider and more effective information and support to members, as a complement to more institutional mechanisms for representation. These mainly involved women's and youth committees or conventions, and quotas or reserved seats for these groups on elected or executive bodies. The latter was seen as important because they 'ensure genuine participation and representation' (FPRK) and 'go beyond a committee by guaranteeing decision-making power' (FFTUZ). Mixed representation also encourages greater interaction between different gender and age groups, referred to by the ZCTU as facilitating an 'intergenerational exchange of ideas.' On the other hand, inclusive governance as a process, for instance through specialist committees that offer spaces for the development of participation and leadership by women and youth, are often offered as an inclusion channel alongside reserved representation on decision making committees.

Although governance primarily concerns internal representation and involvement, it also relates to how unions can appeal to potentially new members and constituent groups, as noted earlier. Fifty percent (15) of the unions surveyed stated that they are considering initiatives to better include new and diverse groups of workers in their governance, and 34 potential groups were referred to. The most frequent were IE workers (5 examples), people with disabilities (4); migrant workers (3); youth (2); and cultural workers (2). Others represent a variety of demographic and occupational groups such as refugees, sexually diverse workers, those in non-standard

or self-employment, workers in micro-enterprises and agriculture. These initiatives may involve a range of formal and informal mechanisms, from committees to consultation processes and networks.

Resourcing remains an issue for unions, however, not least as for any of these various governance mechanisms to be effective, member training is required. As FENASOL commented, 'through our unions, our workers' committees, any grouping structure that we adopt, we try to do training ... for workers to raise their know-how - technical and professional - as much as possible.' This might help explain the prioritisation in governance of key constituencies such as women and youth, though these also intersect of course with other important groups.

## **4 Innovative servicing for a changing workforce**

This section discusses union servicing in terms of i) the main drivers of change; ii) innovations in servicing to retain and engage members; and iii) the design of services to attract new worker groups.

### **4.1 Main drivers of change affecting trade union servicing**

As with trade union governance, union strategies and activities around service provision are driven by key transformations in the world of work. Of the 30 union bodies, 80% said that technological change was having an impact on service provision; 70% noted structural changes; 63% the (geo) political context; and 60% that climate and demographic challenges were impacting union capacity to provide services to diverse worker groups.

Advances in technology were again largely seen as positive, helping to service existing members as well attracting and supporting under-represented groups such as young people and women workers. Communication and worker training were considered especially relevant in this context. Examples of the latter include ‘an online learning platform with modular courses to ensure up-to-date skills’ (FPRK); ‘ICT training, digital rights awareness, and retraining programmes to equip workers with future-oriented skills’ (FFTUZ); and using ‘the ZOOM platform to provide online training’ (Central Autonoma Trabajadores Salvadoreños, CATS). Other unions reported plans to improve technology but were constrained by current financial resources.

Climate change was linked mostly to member training and the development of Just Transition policies. FENAMUTRA, for example, developed specific actions around environmental awareness as a service for members, specifically a Solid Waste Management project which had a focus on domestic work and promoting Ecological Homes. Demographic changes connected most immediately to a growth in the number of women, youth and migrant workers, which led the FFTUZ, for example, ‘to provide gender-sensitivity awareness, youth empowerment programmes and migrant pre-departure labour rights education.’

Structural economic changes link to this through the growth of precarious and ‘gig economy’ work, which often draw on women and youth. The CSJMP-

ANEP-Costa Rica stated that economic changes had led to greater provision of services ‘to women, youth, migrants, the informal sector,’ and the FFTUZ noted that ‘with casualisation, informality, and gig work expanding, the union has strengthened services such as requalification, dispute resolution, and social security awareness for precarious workers.’ Connected to this were geopolitical developments driving a de-regulation of labour markets and greater international labour mobility. This could lead to new services such as ‘migrant pre-departure labour rights training and advocacy services that prepare workers for cross-border employment’ (FFTUZ).

Overall, as with respect to governance, survey respondents indicated that these various and multiple challenges ‘have a significant impact’ (FPRK), encouraging ‘increased awareness [of the] membership-base ... to identify members needs’ Kenyan Communication Workers Union (COWU), and which require unions to embrace ‘more inclusiveness and diversity’ (NTUC). For service, and reach, activities, we can distinguish between those directed at existing members and those designed to appeal to prospective members and member groups.

## **4.2 Service innovation for member retention and engagement**

All unions in the survey sample offer services for members, in addition to their core activities around collective bargaining and agreements. The most common are legal services (93%) and the related areas of employment relations services (77%) and information and education (77%), as well as welfare services (67%). Many unions also provide training (70%) and job assistance (33%), technical services (47%) and provision for digital and social media use (33%). This might be provided through (online) services and/or drop-in centres (47%). Tax assistance (47%) and financial services (40%) are also common, and some unions offer business (23%) and consumer services (17%) too. Most unions (63%) also provide a platform for other organisations to offer services to their members.

Each of these services can be multi-faceted, offering potentially multiple benefits. For example, employment relations services can involve offering individual negotiations with management and dispute resolution as well as general advice, and technical services might include help with IT use, employment contracts, and data protection. Respondents also indicated that some services may be targeted at particular worker groups for whom they have greater relevance. For example, the Tonga National Workers’ Council (TNWC) reported that it assists IE associations and workers in finding markets for handicraft and agricultural products, while Kenya’s COTU and some Central Unitaria de Trabajadores del Paraguay (CUT) affiliate unions offer psycho-social services and welcoming spaces for isolated workers such as those in platform work. In countries marked by crisis, welfare services and advising on social rights assume great importance. In Lebanon, FENASOL

has focused on human solidarity issues including distributing aid following the explosion in the port of Beirut in 2020 and subsequent economic crises, as well as routinely advising on housing issues, migrant and women's rights.

Unions were asked to indicate up to four services perceived to be innovative and a total of 57 were described by 73% of respondents. Many of these relate to better use of ICT, which makes service provision more efficient as well as extending their reach and uptake. For example, CROM shifted to online service provision, which 'represents a fundamental change from the services offered in the past, which were exclusively in person. This has allowed for greater participation and better understanding;' FENAMUTRA introduced a membership and services app, 'a technological approach that expands access opportunities and reduces exclusion gaps in communities... online services offer fast and accessible service, eliminating geographical barriers, and improving institutional coverage;' and FENASOL introduced a digital complaints and reporting mechanism in which 'the online platform allows workers to confidentially file complaints and track their progress, including for vulnerable migrant and informal workers.'

Education and legal services were seen as particularly important and were also increasingly underpinned by ICT. The FPRK 'uses digital technologies to improve accessibility and efficiency. The legal support platform and the online learning platform make services more accessible and personalized.' Lebanon's General Labor Union (GLU) noted that enabling workers to access the union's electronic platforms was a significant step to help them understand their rights under Labor and Social Security Law. The ZCTU stated that information and support on labour rights was increasingly vital because 'the labour market is changing faster and workers need to be abreast of the changes taking place.'

Member training was also extensive and seen as increasingly important. The FFTUZ indicated that this includes both job-related training, which 'prepares workers for the future of work by equipping them with new skills and formal certifications that go beyond traditional union services,' and activist training to 'strengthen members' leadership, advocacy, and self-representation skills, testing approaches that expand the role of unions beyond collective bargaining.' Notable innovations include agreements with universities by CGT Colombia to provide vocational training for workers and their families, and FENASOL introducing language as well as inclusion training for its officials and activists.

Welfare and financial services remain important. FENAMUTRA operates its own Savings, Credit, and Multiple Services Cooperative (COOPFENAMUTRA) which 'constitutes an innovative tool for the economic autonomy of members, facilitating access to credit, savings, and financial education.' The CSA in Senegal noted that 'supplementary pension funds and mutual savings funds, or worker participation in company capital, are new experiences in our country, developed by some of our affiliated unions. Medical coverage has been extended to the IE sector and to the families of members of the

CSA's mutual health insurance plan.' The CSJMP-ANEP-Costa Rica similarly extends health and life insurance benefits to members' families. The UDTs focuses help on drivers to obtain a CMU card (Couverture Maladie Universelle) to access state health cover. It has also pursued a shift to company-level collective agreements to ensure greater currency and relevancy to members.

### 4.3 Designing services to attract new worker groups

Almost all (93%) of the surveyed unions not only focus on retention of existing members, but they also develop services to attract potential new members, in an often similar if slightly less extensive pattern to those activities described above. A third (33%) have also developed or applied services focused on different types of worker groups, notably IE workers (10%), self-employed or freelancers (10%); workers with disabilities (7%); and platform workers (7%). Other groups include those in micro-enterprises, agricultural, refugee and unpaid care workers (3% each). FENASOL noted that workers in new forms of employment such as digital platforms and freelance work constitute 'a growing but largely non-unionized sector' and workers in the care economy provide 'an essential but invisible activity that must be recognized and protected;' similarly, seasonal agricultural workers are 'often in informal employment and excluded from social protection.' However, the practical difficulties discussed earlier are relevant in terms of extending services to these new groups of workers, including worker dispersion, a lesser familiarity with trade unions, and limited union resources which need to be directed towards sustaining the existing member base.

Respondents were asked to note up to four services provided by their union that are considered innovative in targeting potential members or workers in diverse groups of workers. A total of 49 services were described by 70% of unions, compared to 57 for existing members. Naturally, many are extensions of, or parallel, these initiatives. A common message was greater use of technology to disseminate information and market the potential benefits of membership in various ways. As examples:

- FPRK introduced 'associate membership' for migrants, freelancers, and workers employed under civil or commercial contracts and extended services supported by new technology: 'The digital legal support platform makes legal assistance accessible to any worker, even before joining a union, representing a new approach to recruitment. The creation of a trade union educational platform allows us to reach new categories of workers in need of retraining. The introduction of "associate membership" is an innovative step that recognizes and protects the rights of workers in precarious employment.' It has also promoted information campaigns on the rights and benefits of trade union membership for workers in the IE sector which 'demonstrate the union's willingness to test relevant ideas to expand its reach.'

- CGT Paraguay has focused on ‘promoting greater digitalization and fostering the strategic use of social media ... [This] is fundamental to expanding opportunities for access to information, training, and participation, both for communities and for workers and union representatives. These digital tools break down geographical barriers, facilitate direct communication, promote labor rights, and strengthen union organization at all levels.’
- CROM prioritises access to online information because this allows people ‘a better understanding of their rights, but also of the benefits they can obtain by joining a union.’
- FENASOL has promoted an online and remote membership program, ‘enabling workers, including migrant and IE workers, to join and pay their dues via a secure mobile platform ... an inclusive digital approach that facilitates access to the union for remote or precarious workers.’ Information campaigns include pre-membership union orientation sessions, free workshops explaining fundamental labor rights, the role of the union, and the benefits of membership, available in several languages ... a proactive approach to labor rights education even before membership.’ There is also a mobile information and alert app, which is ‘a tool for receiving real-time information on labor rights, union campaigns, and appeal procedures, with secure messaging to contact the union.’ New members are also provided with a welcome pack with access to a network of partner services, ‘a membership card providing access to discounts or services (medical, training, transportation) negotiated by the union. [This] offers a tangible benefit upon joining, linking union protection and social benefits, in line with the decent work agenda and the principles of social protection advocated by the ILO.’
- the CSA in Senegal has increased digitalisation and use of social media, which ‘contributes to strengthening the union’s communication.’ It is also one of the few unions to mention extending legal and labour relations services to non-members, observing that ‘providing support to workers who are potential members is an innovation, as unions are accustomed to supporting only their members.’

In summary, union services are recognised as a vital member proposition.

**The centrality of efficient and relevant services to future member reach and engagement was captured by two of our survey respondents (FENASOL and CGT Paraguay):**

'Union services should evolve towards a more inclusive, accessible approach, adapted to labor market transformations by

- developing specialized services for underserved groups (platform workers, the unpaid care economy, seasonal agricultural workers, refugees, people with disabilities);
- strengthening digital access to services (online membership, mobile information and complaints application, distance learning);
- expanding union training to include emerging issues (digital work, ecological transition, the care economy);
- building partnerships with NGOs, institutions, and international networks to ensure access to social and legal protections for all; and
- developing integrated social services (psychological support, legal assistance, access to health care) aligned with international labor standards and the ILO's Decent Work Agenda.'

'to effectively address the current and future challenges of the world of work, union services must evolve in several key directions:

1. digitalization of union services: It is essential to modernize communication and support channels, incorporating digital platforms that facilitate access to information, legal advice, training, and member participation, especially for those who work remotely or in non-traditional sectors;
2. continuous training adapted to new contexts: The union must strengthen its training offering, including topics such as labor rights in the digital economy, technological skills, collective bargaining in hybrid environments, and mental health at work. This will empower workers in the face of technological and economic changes;
3. inclusion of non-traditional workers: It is essential to expand union representation to include IE workers, the self-employed, digital platform workers, and other emerging sectors that are currently not protected by the traditional labor framework;
4. influencing public policies and labor reforms: The union must play a more active role in the debate on new labor regulations, ensuring that workers' rights are guaranteed in contexts such as automation, teleworking, and new forms of hiring;
5. promoting equity and diversity: Services must be geared toward ensuring gender equality and the inclusion of young people, people with disabilities, and vulnerable populations within the union movement.'

The adoption of new technologies has been fundamental in helping to transform communication and member engagement, widening and deepening the provision of education, advisory and training services. Efficiencies have also helped address a potential tension for unions between servicing existing members and attracting new groups of workers. As one union put it, a focus on marginalised groups such as IE, platform and migrant workers helps to 'expand the traditional boundaries' of the union movement, adapting to

modern challenges, and ‘is an innovative step that recognizes and protects the rights of workers in precarious employment.’ Others noted, however, that they were constrained in extending technology use, including in service provision, by limited resources. One union stated, for example, that it ‘should begin providing electronic services, disseminating publications through social media platforms, and creating groups to encourage workers to join unions, claim their rights, and become aware of their legal entitlements. However, this is not possible due to the lack of financial and logistical resources.’

## 5. Extending reach

Union reach activity can consolidate and replenish the existing member base and extend outreach to new groups of workers. For 87% of the 30 surveyed unions, reach was reported as a priority activity. In the following paragraphs, reach is discussed in terms of i) macro-transitions that influence union activity; ii) how reach can deepen engagement with members; and iii) how reach can be broadened to potential members.

### 5.1 Expanding reach in a changing world of work

Respondents were asked whether five sets of macro-transitions were relevant to union capacity to undertake reach activities for existing and potential members or diverse groups of workers. Technology was the most relevant, reported by 80% of the 30 unions. It was viewed both as a means to raise external profile and disseminate information more effectively, including through social media, as well as targeting workers in the emerging technology sector itself (e.g. fintech, platform economy). Unions, especially in developing countries, could better reach dispersed or mobile workers such as migrants and young people as a result. For example, new technology enabled the FPRK ‘to develop and implement digital solutions with online membership services, chatbots, and online fee payment to attract young and digitally engaged workers,’ and technology allowed the FFTUZ ‘to start activities aimed at reaching workers in emerging technology and fintech sectors, as well as exploring ways to engage gig and platform workers.’ FENAMUTRA stated that new ICT allowed it ‘to reach more working women, even in rural areas or in the IE sector. This requires investment in digital training and ensuring access to devices and connectivity to prevent further exclusion.’

The CROM pointed out that union officers were having to upskill to handle technological change (‘the biggest challenge’) as ‘our union work has migrated to digital platforms,’ as well undergo training in as how to address different worker groups to explain ‘more broadly the functions and benefits of unionism.’ This places a premium on ‘more present and empathetic union advisors’ as a result. Unfortunately, other unions reported that efforts to invest in hardware and training were hampered by insufficient financial and other capacity.

Structural economic changes were referred to by 63% of the unions, also often linked to technological change but in terms of the challenges of new forms of work. For example, the FPRK stated that ‘structural changes in the economy and the growth of platform-based employment have led the union to begin outreach to the self-employed, freelancers, and informal sector workers, creating multisectoral organizations for them and offering associate membership.’ Likewise, the FFTUZ observed that ‘informality, casualisation, and non-standard employment have encouraged the union to strengthen outreach through requalification programmes, capacity-building, and research on gig and IE work.’ FENAMUTRA noted that ‘the rise of informality, teleworking, and subcontracting opens up opportunities to organize those previously excluded from unions. This compels us to rethink flexible, inclusive, and non-traditional forms of representation to integrate fragmented sectors.’

Structural sectoral and broader economic change also impacts reach activities with other sectors and occupations. The Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC) said that it had reinforced efforts ‘to include work with migrants.’ For FFTUZ, ‘regional and global labour mobility has led the union to initiate outreach to migrant workers through rights education and advocacy, while also engaging in policy spaces that affect workers across borders.’ In Paraguay, the expansion of professional occupations ‘led CUT to create a national secretary to think about policies for educated workers, and expand its internal discussions on questions related to social security.’

Climate change was cited as an influence on 60% of the unions, including opportunities to recruit workers in new sectors and jobs. For example, FFTUZ observed that ‘the transition to greener economies has encouraged the union to design outreach activities such as green training and awareness programmes to attract workers in sustainability and energy sectors,’ and FENAMUTRA noted that it ‘generates opportunities for organizing around green jobs, recycling projects, renewable energy, and the circular economy.’ Also relevant is social mobilisation in coalition with other stakeholder groups; for example, the Confederación Ecuatoriana de Organizaciones Clasistas Unitarias de Trabajadores (CEDOCUT) Ecuador said that climate challenges led it to forge ‘new alliances with groups of people working in the environmental sector.’ The Senegalese CSA referred to both effects:

Programs for mitigating the impact of climate change are opening up many job opportunities for young people. Our Confederation participates, alongside the government and civil society, in monitoring Senegal’s national framework for social protection, employment, and integrated policies. One example is the campaigns to share the draft report on the stakeholder mobilization strategy for the carbon tax and market in Senegal.

Demographic change was also reported by 60% of respondents as necessitating new initiatives to reach diverse worker groups and in new ways. Again, migration was an important theme. CEDOCUT referred to the need to ‘integrate migration issues into the discussion with workers and migrant

organizations’ and the FFTUZ mentioned ‘targeted outreach mechanisms such as youth and women’s committees, gender-sensitivity training, and migrant pre-departure rights awareness ... with more women, youth, and migrants entering the workforce.’

FENAMUTRA also noted the impact of demographic change in terms of managing the needs of a rapidly growing elderly population, which also promoted strategic opportunities for union membership growth:

‘Population aging and migration flows have significantly increased the demand for care services, especially in the home. This scenario presents a strategic opportunity to incorporate migrant workers, young women, and older women into the sector, provided that union services are adapted to their different ages, nationalities, and family circumstances. Within this framework, the Federation, in partnership with the National Council for the Elderly (CONAPE) and the Dominican Institute for Occupational Risk Prevention (IDOPPRIL), is conducting training workshops on home care and occupational risk prevention in domestic work. These workshops combine theory and practice with the following objectives:

- to provide an introduction to caring for older adults with some degree of dependency in their homes;
- to present key recommendations for ensuring well-being and safety in home care;
- to educate informal caregivers in the Families of Care program on the dignified, humane, and respectful treatment of older adults;
- to provide training in occupational risk prevention in the home, protecting both caregivers and those receiving care.

In this way, the professionalization of care work is promoted, the dignity of older adults is upheld, and a more diverse and prepared union membership is strengthened to respond to current demographic challenges.’

## 5.2 Deepening engagement with existing members

A range of reach activities were reported in relation to existing members. Internally, this includes improving capacity, for example, by training union representatives on organising different worker groups (offered by 77% of the unions) and appointing to new union positions such as consultants to reach members (57%). A focus on internal infrastructure systems was also common, such as digitalisation of services to facilitate access and liaising with diverse worker groups (43%), strengthening administration, technical and/or research capacity (33%), improving apps and online tools for members to access union services (20%), and improving member mapping (60%). All of which also facilitated better profile and engagement, through public awareness-raising (73%), communication campaigns (70%), presence at novel events or locations attended by members (57%), organising new

structures and activities (40%) or operating centres and other spaces to share expertise and advice on personal or professional matters, to nurture a sense of community (33%). Grassroots and informal initiatives were also reportedly encouraged by 40% of the unions, as well as maintaining a community presence through door-to-door or street recruiting (33%).

At the other end of the engagement spectrum, 30% of unions reported increased focus on efforts to widen collective bargaining or encourage employment of unionised labour, for example through government or private procurement processes. A third activity was amending membership rules, including opening up eligibility (53%), introducing special dues arrangements such as reduced, deferred, free, or voluntary fees (47%), reducing or freezing fees for certain services (30%), and implementing transferable, double or guest membership arrangements (17%).

Unions were invited to provide examples of innovative reach activities. A total of 47 were given, from 63% of the unions, indicating that many were pursuing multiple innovations. For example:

- the FPRK developed its ‘Käsipodaq Mobile<sup>4</sup>’ application to ‘offer material and other incentives tailored to the needs of a modern audience;’ introduced a ‘Voice of the Primary’ project, designed to be ‘an innovative initiative that allows rank-and-file members to generate content and directly influence the information agenda, strengthening the sense of belonging and solidarity;’ and implemented ‘The Union is Always Near’ programme, which ‘enables the union to go beyond traditional workplaces and interact directly with workers in their daily lives.’
- FENAMUTRA has a multi-pronged strategy using member mapping, as ‘this allows for up-to-date and reliable information on the working conditions of women workers, identifying specific needs and designing more effective responses;’ digitisation of services because ‘this facilitates access to information, training, and support, reducing participation gaps and strengthening the inclusion of women workers in diverse contexts;’ training for union representatives as it ‘strengthens leadership and organizational capacities to integrate diverse groups of workers, promoting a more inclusive and representative unionism;’ as well as public awareness campaigns which ‘positions FENAMUTRA as a leader in the defence of labor and gender rights, raising public awareness of the value of care work.’
- FENASOL introduced multilingual awareness campaigns to reach all members, including migrants, and integrated workers’ testimonies into campaigns because it ‘humanizes demands and strengthens public

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4. ‘Käsipodaq’ means trade union in Kazakh and is also the common name for the FPRK.

awareness, in accordance with the principles of promoting labor rights and increasing the visibility of marginalized groups.’ It also introduced specialised legal support, including for complex cases related to informal work, discrimination or kafala (i.e. employer sponsorship of foreign workers); and established mutual aid networks providing temporary housing, food support, and medical assistance in response to social emergencies.

- Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores del Perú (CSP) focuses on assisting sector and professional associations transform into unions ‘through training and advice;’ developed a WhatsApp support group which ‘revitalizes union communication with multimedia resources;’ and introduced virtual training platforms and forums to ‘offer flexible and accessible training’ and ‘promote direct democracy in decision-making (to) strengthen identity and benefits for members.’

As noted above, digitalisation of reach activity was highlighted as important and innovative by many unions. This includes use of secure WhatsApp groups, webinars, and online surveys to quickly consult members and coordinate actions; interactive meetings with specific member groups such as domestic, care, and IE workers to coordinate and develop priorities; and videos and materials where members share experiences to strengthen internal solidarity and public awareness. The CROM noted how new technology ‘improves access to them [members] because we migrated from the traditional use of paper and stamps to a digital environment’ which is instantaneous and does not rely so heavily on meetings and people travelling. The CSJMP-ANEP-Costa Rica likewise started to utilise WhatsApp lists to disseminate and focus ‘information about different activities.’ Social media can also be used to target particular groups, as the CROM interviewee explained:

Social media is what moves young people today. We have seen the way in which social media like Tiktok, like Instagram dramatically capture the attention of young people ... We seek to generate capsules of a few seconds, 30 seconds, for example, to attract these young people. We are already starting with some pilots that are quite successful and we continue with this strategy on Facebook to attract an [older] audience. So, this seems to have worked.

Resourcing is an issue though, as one union explained: ‘social media accounts should be created and promoted to reach the largest possible number of workers... However, financial constraints do not allow for this.’ Others pointed out that uptake could be slow:

We have been working for more than two and a half years on the part of digitalizing all processes, but we do not reach even 15% of the membership ... We are developing an App so that everything is digitized and they continue coming. Personally, they continue writing by WhatsApp. They continue printing the documents ... That is a very strong, very strong limitation from one side ... The tools are there, the courses, we always manage marketing

strategy, digital marketing, positioning and leadership strategy ... We combine how those tools can help us to be efficient and effective in the advocacy we do but, honestly, we do not reach even 15% that can, in some way.

Other common innovative activities resemble a proactive organising model (Heery et al., 2000), utilising member mapping and training workers to mobilise and self-organise. This can also help in terms of managing union resources, as FENASOL explained:

We have campaigns that are in small businesses or small sectors ... A workplace where we organize workers themselves, we help them to hold a demonstration, etc. At the same time, we have the largest awareness campaigns at the national level. For example, it started with our campaign to organize domestic workers ... We worked for four years on a programme of worker capacity development, awareness-raising in Beirut and in the regions ... (A)t that time, we were talking about 250,000 migrant domestic workers, so it was an overloaded job to be able to reach this number – [with multiple] nationalities, languages spoken.

At the same time, more conventional techniques remain relevant and effective, depending on the context. In Africa, for example, Kenya's COTU focuses on outreach through roadside billboards which 'has had tremendous effect in reaching out to our potential members' alongside closer relationships with 'politicians who have a lot of influence in the society.' The CWU of Kenya has developed community recruiting and events because: 'it allows us to meet member at convenient places.' Similarly, the ZCTU develops a presence through road shows, book fairs, community radio stations, and public labour forums because 'they reach a wider audience,' including potential new members.

### **5.3 Broadening reach to potential members**

Potential members include those in primary membership occupations who are not yet organised, as well as new groups of workers. These are a focus for 40% of the unions, comprising mainly digital or platform workers (20%) as well as IE workers (7%) and agricultural workers (7%). Most of the activities used to enable or extend union reach to potential member groups closely resemble those used to contact existing members. The most common are communication campaigns (63%), visibility at public occasions such as sports or music events (60%), awareness raising activities such as speeches by leaders or research studies (57%), and training union representatives on organising diverse groups of workers (57%).

Although many strategies and activities to reach existing and potential groups are similar, respondents explained that more effort was needed with the latter in terms of information, education and involvement:

- We have a different way of doing things to our potential members and to our existing members. Normally, our existing members, they've been oriented already and ... they understand what it's all about, as in being in the labour movement ... For the new or potential members, this is where now we need to be, I think, on our tip-toes in order to woo them. And basically we have to make sure that when they come in, we orient them to our Federation's policies and everything so that they understand (FFTUZ).
- Activities should evolve toward greater adaptability and a targeted approach. It is necessary to create specialized programs and structures to reach new categories of workers (e.g., IT sector and platform economy workers) and conduct information campaigns tailored to their needs. It is also important to develop international cooperation to exchange experiences in reaching migrants and other vulnerable groups (FRPK).

Respondents provided 43 examples of innovative reach initiatives towards potential members. Activities such as mapping exercises were not common, which may reflect the challenges of undertaking this with relatively uncharted or dispersed worker groups, but several unions said these were used as a basis for 'effective organizing' (Kenya's COWU) and 'political mobilisation' (NTUC). The Timor-Leste TUC stated that 'we need to have information based on assessment and we do the mapping before we plan to organise [a] campaign.' Likewise, technological solutions were less commonly mentioned than for existing members, but still often seen as important. For CROM, 'digitalization substantially improves the identification of potential members, and, where applicable, provides them with a simpler onboarding process.'

In contrast, physical outreach efforts were more frequently referred to. The Senegalese CSA reported that public events served as 'awareness-raising activities for potential members on the importance of unions ... in order to sustain and expand the membership base.' In Brazil, Central Unitaria de Trabalhadores de Brasil (CUT) provided examples of complementary reach activities aimed at familiarising workers with trade unions:

Cultural spaces ... - a musical or poetry contest - ... you open it up to the entire union base, and you end up bringing these workers closer to the union, those who are not yet unionised. The professional qualification and training work are also important doors ... You establish a relationship with [them] to later bring about unionisation ... [And] in some places for platform workers, we are setting up support points ... where the worker can rest, charge their cell phone, eat ... We don't have many ... but they are innovative initiatives because they are just starting. These workers are on the street all the time. They are delivery workers, drivers, but other informal workers. The idea is to create spaces for the worker to rest, socialize, have a meal.

Many workers do not have a workplace as such, so the CTC also reported using campaigns to support platform workers in their informal meeting places:

the approach to platform workers in undefined urban locations is innovative, since the platform (the employer) does not provide them with a designated arrival point and their delivery work covers the entire national territory.

Another recent example of innovation with the potential for international dissemination is the ‘truckers hotline’ initiative by the Belgium Transport Workers’ Union (BTB/UBT). Flyers publicise a QR code that workers can use for information about their rights in 21 languages and to gain access to union support.

A dual approach based on technology and face-to-face visibility was elaborated by FENASOL. First, information sessions in workplaces and community spaces provide ‘direct methods for informing and mobilizing workers,’ accompanied by union open days, inviting non-members to learn about services, meet representatives, and participate in workshops. Partnerships with NGOs and community organisations also help reach marginalised or isolated groups, including migrants, refugees, and IE workers. Second, they ‘utilize current technological tools to quickly and effectively reach workers, including those in the informal or geographically dispersed sectors’ and use targeted digital campaigns on social media to ‘test an interactive format that promotes transparency, dialogue, and trust with non-member workers.’ Multilingual content is also used as ‘a collaborative approach that expands the union’s reach to marginalized or hard-to-reach groups.’

New membership provisions were also widely used to facilitate outreach. The FFTUZ introduced a heavily discounted affiliation fee (to about 10%) to encourage new members to join. The FPRK, in addition to the initiatives mentioned above, referred to new mechanisms ‘to attract new, non-traditional groups of workers, which is a key task for revitalizing the trade union movement. The creation of multisectoral organizations and the introduction of “associate membership” are new, flexible approaches to organizing IT workers, freelancers, and migrants.’

At the same time, constraints on reach activities were acknowledged. For instance, one respondent observed that most outreach activities ‘are important but, due to economic constraints, we cannot carry them out ... We can’t apply any for now.’ Practical problems are particularly acute in terms of reaching new groups of workers as worker dispersion, turnover, and employer resistance compound the problem of limited union resources. As an example, the FPRK referred to platform drivers where attempts to organise were reportedly impeded by worker dismissals from the app; their focus has therefore shifted to seeking changes to the labour code.

## **6. Trade union governance, innovative servicing and diverse reach as interconnected strategy**

Unions face a series of major challenges and transformations in the world of work, but respondents often noted how these also serve as a stimulus to strategy and innovation. Brazil's CUT, for example, observed that external 'changes raise new needs for union intervention, creation of new communication strategies and union action.' The scale of major societal transitions has resulted in multi-level innovations:

- These transitions prompted the union to strengthen its outreach to migrant workers, incorporate specific agendas for young people, and promote the inclusion of women and people in the IE sector. They also motivated the adoption of digital tools and new spaces for union training. Taken together, these developments have allowed the union to modernize its activities, broaden its representation, and respond to changes in the world of work with innovative and participatory strategies aimed at greater organizational cohesion (CSP).
- Taken together, these transitions expand the potential universe of affiliates, but they also demand that FENAMUTRA innovate in its organizational, communication and representation strategies to attract a more diverse and resilient membership (FENAMUTRA).

This has had positive results. For instance, responding to challenges 'has helped us reach our members (and) identify members needs' (Kenya's CWU) and 'enhance the union capacity' (NTUC), especially to ensure that 'activities are carried out with young people' (CSJMP-ANEP-Costa Rica).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they understood their inclusive union governance, innovative servicing and/or reach activities to be strategic in nature. This was confirmed by 73%, 67% and 60% of respondents respectively. Comments indicated that they are strategic because they form a response to new challenges and pursuit of union renewal based on enhanced relevance and performance - 'This process enhances the union capacity more inclusively and effectively' (NTUC); 'Today, organizations must innovate in the face of constant change' Central del Movimiento de Trabajadores Costarricenses (CMTC); 'The world of work is changing, and it is necessary to strengthen trade union organization with new actors' (CEDOCUT Ecuador). Their strategic importance was also emphasised in terms of enhancing democratic processes: 'It is very important to attend to these activities to improve the democratization of the union organization' (CSJMP-ANEP-Costa Rica); 'It's about democratizing decision-making' (CGT Colombia).

Several unions also identified the integrated and complementary character of each area of activity:

- All these areas are strategic. They aim to build a new model of the trade union movement - transparent, open, dynamic, and inclusive... Internal governance is being modernized through digital tools and ethical codes, contributing to renewal. Innovative services, such as online platforms and mobile applications, are designed to attract new generations of workers. Outreach efforts focus on engaging workers in non-standard employment, which is a key task for the union's sustainability in an era of change (FPRK).
- Internal governance activities: These are strategic because they aim to strengthen union democracy and inclusion, notably through statute reform, the integration of representation quotas, and the creation of committees for underrepresented groups, thus directly contributing to union renewal. Innovative service initiatives: These address the real and emerging needs of members (existing and potential) by implementing digital services, specialized legal support, and multilingual training, in accordance with international labor standards, thereby retaining members and attracting new ones. Reach activities targeting potential members: These are designed to broaden the union base through targeted campaigns, community partnerships, and open days, reaching non-unionized workers, including those in the informal sector and new forms of employment (FENASOL).
- In a union, you have to offer services to attract more members. Good internal governance is essential for internal democracy, transparency, term limits, etc. Communication is always necessary (UDTS).

Building on this, respondents were also specifically asked to indicate whether they perceived that the three union areas were connected. Only one referred to siloed activities ('When they are done, it is separately, they are not linked'). Most felt that they were closely linked, with 57% responding affirmatively in relation to inclusive governance, 60% to innovative servicing and 53% to reach activity.

In part, this is because each are concerned with union democratisation as well as growth. The NTUC explained that each set of activities 'promotes more radically democratic process of unionization and obviously overall capacity building of trade unions,' and the CSP that they enable 'decisions to reflect the real priorities of the union's rank and file, strengthening legitimacy, democratic participation, and trust in the representation offered by the CSP.' The activities are commonly seen as mutually reinforcing and indeed effectively combine to form a unitary system:

- The three dimensions are closely linked and reinforce each other. Internal governance: ensures democratic structures, transparency, and membership participation; it generates legitimacy for action. Service initiatives: translate this governance into concrete benefits for

workers (training, advice, social protection), responding to their real needs. Outreach activities: broaden the union's visibility, strengthen alliances, and attract new groups of workers, providing feedback to both governance and services. Together, these activities form a cycle in which good internal management allows for the provision of relevant services, which in turn enhance the union's reach and impact (FENAMUTRA).

- Governance, services, and outreach activities for members (both existing and potential) are closely linked, as they reinforce each other within an integrated strategy for union renewal. Inclusive governance allows for the setting of priorities aligned with workers' needs, which guides the design of appropriate services (legal, training, digital) and the planning of targeted outreach activities to attract and mobilize new members. In turn, a broader and more diverse membership base infuses governance with fresh perspectives, ensuring that decisions, services, and actions are representative and relevant to all groups of workers (FENASOL).
- The three activities are part of an ecosystem that can no longer be conceived separately; consequently, they have become necessary functions for a full union reform. Internal governance provides security for members, which must be reinforced with innovative services, not only to keep union activity active, but also to keep pace with technological developments, which requires the permanent support of outreach activities (CROM).
- These areas are interconnected and form a single system. Internal governance is linked to the interests of (potential) members, which are identified through online services and outreach activities. For example, the digitalization of services, including a mobile application, simplifies access to the union and enables the collection of feedback, which is then used for management decisions. Outreach, in turn, directly influences which services will be in demand and how the governance structure should evolve (FPRK).

Respondents also highlighted how strategising is multilevel. The FFTUZ interviewee, for example, pointed to the complementary nature of strategies at peak body and affiliate levels, and the FENASOL interviewee observed that its governance activities with domestic, education and health workers (such as sector committees) in turn helped to build membership and sustain its internal capacity.

There was one major gap that was consistently identified, however. Across each of the three areas of governance, services and reach, respondents noted the need for better evaluation of - and learning from - activities. In terms of governance, although 57% of the 30 union bodies reported some form of evaluation, this was largely informal or indirect, as part of general feedback and consultation, or conducted through ad hoc surveys. Several respondents recognised that this needs to be improved:

- [FFTUZ] does not currently have a formal evaluation process ... While mechanisms such as women's and youth committees exist, there is no structured monitoring or evaluation framework in place to measure diversity representation in governance ... change is something that we are looking into in terms of measurement and evaluation because I think in every organisation, we have to measure whatever we are doing and whatever affiliates are doing in order for us to achieve our objectives
- [the FPRK] intends to regularly assess organizational effectiveness at all levels and implement a feedback system from members (e.g. ratings, surveys). To effectively address key challenges in the world of work, the trade union governance structure must become more open, inclusive, and modern. This requires introducing a system of key performance indicators and applying ethical standards for leaders at all levels
- current assessments must evolve toward indicators based on hard data and performance indicators, and be periodically adjusted to remain up to date (CROM);

Similarly, in terms of services, of the 57% of the union bodies indicating that they evaluate their servicing of diverse worker groups, only a few could elaborate (usually obliquely) how such evaluation takes place, and six stated that evaluation is insufficient. The need for more specific measures and technology was a common theme: 'evaluation must improve to be based on indicators, hard data and performance metrics' (CROM). This was echoed by the FPRK, which 'plans to conduct surveys and satisfaction studies to measure the effectiveness of trade union actions in key areas.' Likewise, although 60% of unions indicated that they evaluate their reach activity, few elaborated on how this takes place. Often this was through informal or partial information gathered from training feedback or site visits. Social media and other digital analytics were rarely mentioned. Several unions highlighted the need for further progress in this area, as well as systematic use of 'metrics and performance indicators' (CROM).

Of course, evaluation, like activities themselves, can be restricted by resources, though one interviewee (Brazil's CUT) pointed out that the scarcity of resources makes evaluation even more imperative in order to direct appropriate interventions. Similarly, FFTUZ noted that evaluation is fundamental to the successful evolution of relevant and effective initiatives: 'going forward, reach activities should evolve by developing a formal monitoring and evaluation framework to assess whether outreach truly reaches women, youth, persons with disabilities, migrant, gig, and IE workers.'

## 7. Discussion and recommendations

In this final section, we provide an overview of key findings from the survey and expert interviews that followed the original scoping review, and elaborate relevant recommendations. We first examine notions of inclusive union governance, innovative servicing and broad reach activity before considering the diverse worker groups involved and initiatives used to this end. Building on this, we provide recommendations in three areas: how unions *conceptualise* and contextualise inclusive governance and relate this to diverse worker groups; relevant *strategies* and mechanisms for developing union governance, servicing and reach activities that effectively target and include such groups; and how unions can *assess* these activities and outcomes.

### 7.1 Inclusive union governance

The promotion of inclusive union governance is a priority for supporting unions in transformation globally. In general terms, this concerns who can participate in union decision-making processes, how they thereby exert influence, and how this determines better outcomes for workers. This is all the more critical amid signs of weakening of union membership and multiple pressures relating to violations of core trade union rights, the changing employment relationship, and multiple transformations in labour markets worldwide. Unions need revitalisation strategies to ensure they continue to be strong, relevant, democratic, representative and engaged actors (Visser, 2019; 2024).

This study finds that unions most commonly develop policies or initiatives in relation to youth (often noted as key to union revitalisation), women workers (including those in the care economy and domestic work), tech sector and platform workers, but also IE workers and migrants, alongside others such as workers in the green sector or workers with disabilities. There is increasing union attention to precarious and informal workers in many countries, which now constitute a large proportion of the world's employed population (Yerrabatti, 2025; ILO, 2018), even if this may not pay immediate dividends in terms of membership growth. A strong sense of social mission (which in some cases extends services to non-members) leads to campaigns and lobbying for worker rights more generally, which might also serve to raise the public profile and relevance of trade union activity and enhance the potential for alliance building. Unions may therefore encompass both established and emergent worker groups, some of which have traditionally fallen outside the

scope of union membership but are increasingly regarded as relevant for building union capacity and organising.

However, providing reach, services and engagement initiatives to new constituencies that are often dispersed and unfamiliar with trade unions can be resource hungry. Organising precarious workers involves a constant campaign due to work fragmentation and high rates of labour turnover and mobility. Proximity and visibility are key, hence the growing importance of grassroots campaigning as well as public lobbying and alliances with other stakeholders. Local campaigns need to focus on real issues of concern and engage workers in a language and in terms that they understand. At the same time, inclusive and effective social dialogue is important making sure that all workers feel represented.

The findings also make clear that inclusive union governance is considered to be conceptually and practically interwoven with servicing and reach activity, including that targeted at diverse worker groups, a relationship that was less explicitly indicated in some of the scholarship reviewed. Unions commonly face a series of often related challenges deriving from technological, climate, demographic, structural and (geo)political transitions that reinforce a common goal of sustaining membership replenishment and growth. This involves establishing a clear appeal to both existing and potential member groups through the provision of core services of collective and individual representation, alongside other relevant benefits and support, and by providing more effective voice within the union too. This inclusive governance enhances democracy to ensure that union strategy and activities are relevant, thereby underpinning reach and services, as well as helping to sustain activist commitment. Successful reach and service activities bolster membership groups, thereby enhancing inclusive governance. Union leaders and experts clearly perceived that inclusive governance, reach and services form part of an inter-connected whole in terms of strategy and practice that best responds to transition challenges.

Virtually all the union respondents were committed to delivering more inclusive governance, and a range of mechanisms were pursued in response to specific national and sector contexts. This includes designated structures and posts for targeted worker groups alongside measures to enhance their numerical representation and participation in the union (such as proportional representation, quotas, and reserved seats). Other relevant initiatives include leadership training or establishing policy commissions to inform learning and inclusion processes. To some extent, types of union governance initiatives are contextualised in terms of particular worker categories. For instance, women workers are often targeted or served via what are now often well-established designated structures and posts, as well as proportional representation, quotas, and reserved seats. With the exception of proportional representation, a similar profile of mechanisms emerges for youth. Other groups such as migrant, platform and IE workers were likely to be offered other more bespoke and innovative initiatives, such as provision of resource centres or specific IE unions or sections. Union outreach can also

extend to youth before they enter the workforce, but again such grassroots initiatives can present challenges in terms of resourcing.

Inclusive governance initiatives are designed to increase the representation and influence of relatively marginalised groups within union structures and activities. A positive development is that some respondents referred to a focus on the education and training of existing union organisers, officials and members as to how these changes might be brought about. Education and training has long been central to sustaining union functions and capacity building, and closer attention to innovative and inclusive governance within these activities can only enhance the extension and effectiveness of enabling inclusion mechanisms.

Evaluation of activity is essential to assess its utility, benchmark progress and performance, and inform broader strategy formulation. Effective evaluation enables the calibration of initiatives, identifying best practice and supporting the sharing of insights with other unions. Although a wide range of initiatives to encourage inclusive union governance were identified, only just over half of unions (57%) stated that these were evaluated and (more tellingly) few were able to offer concrete examples or details of evaluation processes or outcomes. Often this was conceived in the generic sense of accountability mechanisms or, more occasionally, specific practices such as participation surveys. Limited, loose or absent evaluation may undermine the legitimacy of inclusive governance priorities and initiatives. A number of respondents commented that they were aware of the importance of evaluation mechanisms, and were planning such arrangements, but were constrained by resources and capacity. They hoped that ongoing modernisation of internal administration (through digitalisation and new technology, as well as staff training) might support greater evaluation as well as provision itself in the near future.

## **7.2 Servicing and reach**

As noted, study participants view inclusive union governance, innovative service and reach activity as strategic and inter-related. The findings indicate that while inclusive governance initiatives are wide-ranging, services and reach activities involve an even broader collection of measures. The most commonly offered services in addition to collective bargaining are legal and employment relations services, information and awareness raising, and retraining and certifying workers. Around two-thirds provide welfare services and support other organisations in their service provision. Most of these arrangements are also extended to potential members. More novel services are tailored to groups such as IE workers, which can include business help as well as social support.

The most common union reach activities also reflect a mix of classic and more novel approaches. These include training union representatives to organise diverse groups of workers, and appointing specialist organisers

or consultants; public awareness and communication campaigns; mapping exercises; and favourable membership terms including lower rates and access to benefits. More activities are focused on reaching existing than new member groups. Again, unions provided an extensive list of innovative activities, both established or emergent, which demonstrate creativity and application, but without systematic evaluation it is difficult to assess coherence or effectiveness. Only around half of respondents evaluate their services or reach activities in some way, though with very little detail forthcoming. Still more respondents indicated that further evaluative activity in these areas were vital. This is also stressed in that around a third of unions again reported a range of service and reach initiatives, planned or considered, that were aimed at a diverse set of categories of workers as well as existing membership groups.

The survey and interview evidence indicates that virtually all of the sample unions are concerned with including diverse worker groups in their governance, servicing and reach activity. While unions converge and diverge in the emphasis of initiatives in these three areas, both well-established and emergent initiatives are widely indicated at different levels of organisation, with an increasing array of mechanisms reflecting outward-facing efforts to connect with relevant external stakeholders. Moreover, both formal and increasingly informal measures exist or are planned for existing members, potential members and even workers who may be unlikely to become members, emphasising shifts in conceptions of who constitutes a union constituent, how they should be included, serviced or reached, and to what intended effect.

There was a consensus view among the unions that these activities can be strategic in nature and are interconnected in response to common sets of important transition pressures. Nevertheless, while often mutually reinforcing and with many elements regarded as innovative, these three areas of union function were not found to always fully align in practice and are not widely evaluated. Indeed, participants indicated that much work remains to be done, not just in evaluation but in terms of refining, connecting, upscaling and disseminating successes, both targeted and otherwise.

In conclusion, as challenges for workers mount, so does the case for unions increase. However, unions are under threat in many contexts due to structural economic change and antipathetic government policies. The literature review and empirical study underline that unions must focus on strategic innovation, inclusion, transparency, democracy and organisational capacity if the movement is to remain effective in defending and extending labour rights. The results also show that union leaders are well aware of the multiplicity of challenges and the importance of effective governance, servicing and reach activities to ensure union relevance and renewal. There are many positive signs of imaginative and innovative responses across each of these key areas. The ongoing challenge is how to address the needs of both existing and prospective member groups while using scarce resources effectively. This places a premium on information, active strategizing and internal operational efficiency through the modernisation of processes based on investment in

technology and people, as well as robust evaluation techniques. This is no easy prospect but as a movement based on solidarity, unions are also well placed to leverage mutual understanding and support, including internationally. Trade union unity and cooperation are vital to reinforce member growth, voice and influence in different sectors, occupations with and across countries.

## 7.3 Recommendations

The unions in this study undertake an array of inclusive governance, servicing and reach initiatives, with areas of convergence and divergence informed by their conceptualisations of such activity within their different contexts. However, none indicated that these were optimal but rather that more could be done, particularly with respect to finding ways to build their capacity and better pursue workers' interests in the face of work fragmentation and labour market diversification. While strategies must remain context specific, the following recommendations provide a common framework for action.

### **Unions need to establish a vision and processes for the prioritisation of governance-servicing-reach activities based on clear analyses:**

- There is a strong consensus on the importance and interconnectedness of governance, servicing and reach. Unions should explicitly link governance reform, service provision and reach activities within a single strategic framework, treating these dimensions as mutually reinforcing. Unions must therefore articulate a vision of this relationship and use it as a strategic roadmap in support of wider union renewal aims. This involves elaborating a triadic vision statement which is values-based, purpose-driven and future oriented around these three strategic goals.
- Unions vary in their understanding of what constitutes inclusive union governance. Given this, and evidence of workers' diverse identities and areas of work, unions should explicitly identify which worker categories are prioritised as targeted for enhanced involvement in their decision-making processes. The rationale for this needs to be clearly articulated, alongside strategies for how this might be achieved. This includes attention to relevant sub-categories (such as IE or platform work) to ensure appropriate focus, drawing on union research and regulatory definitions.
- This links to the need for comprehensive mapping of extant and potential members in terms of presence and prospects (e.g. work areas, interests, scale, propensity to participate) to precede the elaboration of activities for inclusion in union governance, servicing or reach activity. Without such data, targeting can be 'like shooting in the dark' (CROM interviewee). Mapping is needed to identify priority areas and enable scalability. It is particularly salient when unions are considering the inclusion of large and relatively uncharted worker population groups.

- Identification of priority worker groups and activities needs to reflect democratically determined strategic union goals and relate to core principles, values and ideology. Relevant approaches and tools also need to be informed by cost-benefit analysis of alternatives, including opportunity costs. For example, if inclusion of IE workers is established as a policy goal, how far should union resources best be invested in lobbying for legal rights and formalisation in pursuit of decent work, compared to organisation efforts within the IE? This particularly applies to diverse groups of workers where activities might diverge from the mainstream core membership.

**Strategy needs to be based on robust methods, developed and implemented through systematic collaboration:**

- Unions can deploy strategy development techniques, such as SWOT, PESTLE analysis, horizon scanning, strategic foresight methodology and scenario planning.
- Technology emerged as crucial to effective reach, servicing and governance. Unions need to ensure they have sufficient investment and capacity in this area.
- There is a need to conduct internal capacity audits to assess and apportion their capacity to serve extant and potential members. This includes an evaluation of staffing and infrastructure (e.g. IT and administrative support), training needs and strengthening mechanisms for external networking and collaboration. This should also link into strategy formulation and build resilience by anticipating multiple, overlapping areas of uncertainty and change.
- Unions need to provide a complement of mechanisms to ensure greater democratisation of trade union spaces, involving youth, women, and vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, platform and informal workers, and persons with disabilities. This can include institutional arrangements such as reserved seats and specialist committees; participatory and flexible approaches (e.g. forums, assemblies, digital participation) to ensure meaningful voice; and investing in targeted information, leadership development and confidence building for under-represented groups to strengthen their effective participation.
- Innovative strategies are needed to mobilise and organise workers in the IE and new forms of work such as the platform economy. This can involve novel networks and alliances with emerging associations, such as self-organised workers.
- Experimentation should be encouraged but phased and piloted initiatives could be implemented and evaluated prior to roll out, especially where these are new and previously untested and/or involve outreach to previously unorganised groups. Both the literature and survey results

of this study provide many examples of governance, servicing and reach approaches and practices that may be investigated for adaptation and experimentation.

- In pursuit of this, active external learning mechanisms need to be prioritised, including establishing dynamic Communities of Practice (CoP) based on inter-union and wider stakeholder engagement. Problem-focused CoPs can determine relevant thematic priorities of collaboration, focusing on localisation of success stories based on education and support. They can also formally connect with established institutional expertise through international bodies such as ILO ACTRAV, ITUC, the Global Union Federations (GUFs), the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0 or the ETUC Trade Union Renewal Centre.
- A focus on governance, service and reach should not be introspective nor merely instrumental but connect to broader transformations in the world of work and the union's mission.

**Innovative servicing and reach are essential in a diverse and rapidly evolving labour markets:**

- Where viable, services should be extended beyond traditional constituencies to reach workers in nonstandard, informal, platform and emerging forms of employment as a pathway to participation, collective identity and union membership. This should involve leveraging digital tools (e.g. online advice, mobile applications, remote training) while maintaining face-to-face engagement where it remains essential.
- Reach can be strengthened through data-informed and multi-channel approaches, combining digital innovation with grassroots organising and community engagement. Unions are encouraged to invest in mapping, data collection and analysis to better understand workforce composition and target outreach initiatives; use multiple channels - workplace, community, digital and sectoral - to engage both existing and potential members; and collaborate with civil society organisations and community groups where this enhances access to hard-to-reach workers.

**Evaluation of activities is essential to ensure relevant focus and outcome success. This needs to be specific and based on robust techniques:**

- Unions need systematic evaluation techniques to provide timely, valid and reliable measurements of progress and success. At the more advanced end, dashboard metrics can be used to facilitate real-time assessment and benchmarking, or more conventional evaluative surveys can be used. Quantitative data enable comparisons with others and over time, especially in terms of outcomes, but this needs to be complemented by qualitative techniques that offer more in-depth and contextualised understanding of success factors and constraints. This is likely to require

investment in technology and skills, but upfront costs should be offset over time by greater operational relevance, efficiency and effectiveness and membership growth.

A variety of evaluative methods and frameworks may be deployed including the ITUC Trade Union Development Effectiveness Profile (**TUDEP**) or ILO ACTRAV's Trade Unions Future Readiness Self-Assessment. Union leaders also need to develop clear ownership of evaluation systems to ensure systematic application and monitoring, which may include establishing internal champions, and these activities need sufficient resourcing.

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## List of acronyms

|                   |                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ACTRAV</b>     | Bureau for Workers' Activities (ILO)                                                      |
| <b>AI</b>         | Artificial Intelligence                                                                   |
| <b>AWGs</b>       | Additional Worker Groups                                                                  |
| <b>CATS</b>       | Central Autonoma Trabajadores Salvadorenos                                                |
| <b>CEDOCUT</b>    | Confederación Ecuatoriana de Organizaciones Clasistas Unitarias de Trabajadores (Ecuador) |
| <b>CGT</b>        | Confederación General del Trabajo (Colombia)                                              |
| <b>CGT</b>        | Confederación General del Trabajo (Paraguay)                                              |
| <b>CMTC</b>       | Central del Movimiento de Trabajadores Costarricenses                                     |
| <b>COP</b>        | Community of Practice                                                                     |
| <b>COTU-K</b>     | Central Organization of Trade Unions (Kenya)                                              |
| <b>COWU-K</b>     | Communication Workers Union (Kenya)                                                       |
| <b>CROM</b>       | Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana                                                    |
| <b>CSA</b>        | Confédération des Syndicats Autonomes du Sénégal                                          |
| <b>CSJMP-ANEP</b> | Central Social Juanito Mora Porras-ANEP (Costa Rica)                                      |
| <b>CSP</b>        | Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores del Perú                                           |
| <b>CTC</b>        | Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia                                                 |
| <b>CTUI</b>       | European Trade Union Institute                                                            |
| <b>CUT</b>        | Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Brasil                                                |
| <b>CUT</b>        | Central Unitaria de Trabajadores del Paraguay                                             |
| <b>ETUC</b>       | European Trade Union Confederation                                                        |
| <b>FENAMUTRA</b>  | Federación Nacional de Mujeres Trabajadoras (Dominican Republic)                          |
| <b>FENASOL</b>    | Fédération Nationale des Syndicats des Ouvriers et des Employés au Liban                  |
| <b>FFTUZ</b>      | Federation of Free Trade Unions of Zambia                                                 |
| <b>FPRK</b>       | Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan                                  |
| <b>GFC</b>        | Global Financial Crisis                                                                   |
| <b>GLU</b>        | General Labor Union (Lebanon)                                                             |
| <b>IE</b>         | Informal Economy                                                                          |
| <b>ILO</b>        | International Labour Organisation                                                         |
| <b>NGO</b>        | Non-governmental organisation                                                             |
| <b>NTUC</b>       | Nepal Trade Union Congress                                                                |
| <b>TNWC</b>       | Tonga National Workers' Council                                                           |
| <b>TUDEP</b>      | Trade Union Development Effectiveness Profile                                             |
| <b>UDTS</b>       | Union démocratique des travailleurs du Sénégal                                            |
| <b>ZCTU</b>       | Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions                                                         |



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