

Reflections on the new social contract

Michelle Bachelet

Former President of Chile and
former United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights



The planet and society are undergoing a series of transformations that have a direct effect on how humankind relates to its surroundings. At the environmental level, the effects of climate change are putting habitats and ecosystems under pressure, and people are desperately seeking to understand their relationship with nature in the context of prolonged climate events that are rapidly giving rise to marked inequalities.

At the societal level, it is disturbing to note the increase in conflict globally, with millions of people being set adrift, with minimal prospects for the future and the complete violation of their fundamental human rights.

The economic model has generated, albeit with notable exceptions, complex issues of inequality that, in recent years, have widened the gaps in access to minimum subsistence needs, forcing millions of people worldwide to leave their countries, to live in poverty or extreme poverty and with limited opportunities to improve their living conditions, thereby resulting in a harmful cycle from which there is no apparent escape.

To promote real changes in the situation being faced across the globe, national and international responses are endeavouring to take measures to ensure that commitments are made in an accelerated manner and to foster the will among leaders to establish the necessary conditions for positive change. The global effort is represented by the Sustainable Development Goals, which outline the courses of action to be taken to achieve better conditions for humanity. In addition to this is the system of international instruments for the promotion and protection of rights drawn up by the United Nations and other organizations, a system that takes on special relevance in view of the pressurized conditions of today.

On the labour front, technological development has profoundly changed the industrial relations model and generated both new opportunities and significant challenges for millions of workers. Automation processes and changes in modes of production in general have created new perspectives on the future of work, an issue on which the International Labour Organization and the United Nations have identified and proposed basic support measures so that the human dimension of work is not lost.

In September 2021, in response to the request made by the General Assembly in its declaration on the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, the Secretary-General of the United Nations published a report entitled “Our Common Agenda”.¹ The report contains an overview of the need to propose new guidelines to increase the prospects of achieving the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals and to present “a new social contract anchored in human rights, better management of critical global commons, and global public goods that deliver equitably and sustainably for all” (UN 2021).

¹ *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*. New York; United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/>.

This holds special relevance for the world of work, since it is an area in which there has been significant regression in the realization of rights.

A new social contract devised in the context of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, such as the overarching development framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, must be based on the strengthening of social dialogue as an essential tool for achieving democratic consensus in the world of work. The pursuit and attainment of better labour conditions for workers based on respect for human rights is also required.

To achieve a new social contract, the reform of labour governance systems is essential so as to ensure that these systems can effectively respond to the new and varied priorities and needs that are emerging from and for social actors in a context of rapid transformation.

A new social contract requires a vision to save the fundamental values that have given, and continue to give, life to modern democracy and have laid the foundation for an international rights protection system that understands the need to promote opportunities for all. It calls for an integrated vision of labour that incorporates a rights-based approach and global solidarity.

To establish a new social contract, all voices promoting the plurality of ideas must be heard, in accordance with the human rights framework. In addition, the conditions must be created for the most vulnerable persons to gain access to labour markets and modes of production that are respectful of the environment in its various dimensions.

I am certain that this edition of the *International Journal of Labour Research*, which will enable further reflection on the theme “A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change”, will serve as a significant contribution to the required discussion on a more promising future.

Reference

UN (United Nations) 2021. “Secretary-General’s Report. Our Common Agenda”. New York.

