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Social protection as a key component of the new social contract: a leading role for trade unions

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Overview

The pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) brought enormous suffering and economic turmoil: death, long illness, business failure, job loss, recession and reversals of the poverty reduction achieved in recent years. On the heels of the pandemic, the world is now experiencing the hottest temperatures on record, with accompanying storms, floods, droughts and fires. Both calamities are playing out in environments where the quality of life and work are on the decline: inequality is increasing; non-standard forms of employment, including informal employment, platform work and temporary employment, are on the rise; and, in some regions, civil unrest and violence are disrupting life and work. Predictably, the most vulnerable members of society have been hit hardest – i.e. small businesses; workers with low skill levels; those in non-standard forms of employment, including platform work; those in informal employment; young people; and people with disabilities. Women have been doubly disadvantaged by disproportionate job losses in service sectors coupled with an increased need for family caregiving.

These turbulent times have focused increased attention on a long-known, but unaddressed, shortcoming of public policy: While social protection is recognized as a basic human right by virtually all governments and international institutions, in reality most of the global population – more than 4 billion people – still have no coverage. That is, less than half of the world’s population (46.9 per cent) is covered by one or more cash benefits. With so many people left to fend for themselves through back-to-back crises, it is not surprising that distrust in governments and public institutions, already on the rise in most countries, is becoming more widespread (UN DESA 2021).

Recognizing the dangers of these trends, leaders in many realms – government, business, civil society and workers’ organizations – are calling for a new social contract between governments and citizens. While these advocates differ somewhat on the protections the contract should provide, they are in full accord on one point: the need for a guarantee of basic social protection for everyone. Such a guarantee would provide both greater help in hard times and more equal sharing of future prosperity. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) offers a blueprint for making social protection as a key component of the new social contract. It provides ILO constituents with a relevant model for developing and establishing universal, comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection floors.

This analysis takes a fresh look at Recommendation No. 202 in light of both the newly exposed weaknesses of existing social protection and recent government efforts to build social protection floors. It focuses in particular on design decisions for social protection floors that Recommendation No. 202 leaves to national discretion. While recognizing that there is no single path to expanding coverage, it points to the advantages of particular benefit designs and strategies. This is followed by a call for trade unions to assume leadership roles in expanding social protection, as envisioned in Recommendation No. 202. The paper identifies both the challenges of doing so and the substantial benefits to be gained.

Why social protection is important for the new social contract

Social contracts constitute implicit promises to share economic risks and resources in a manner society regards as fair. Because market forces alone cannot be relied on to achieve fair distributions, virtually all societies have created public systems of social protection. These systems aim to replace lost earnings for those who cannot work, to ensure basic income for families with children and to provide universal access to basic healthcare.

The central role of social protection in social contracts is laid out in two United Nations (UN) documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UN n.d.), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (OHCHR n.d. a, n.d. b). Social protection is also a key policy tool for achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most notably the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on social protection (target 1.3) and universal health coverage (target 3.8).

However, the model of social protection that is prevalent in the world today falls far short of achieving the principles that these international agreements establish. That model consists of contributory social insurance schemes for those in formal employment and non-contributory programmes targeted at the poorest members of society, often implemented on a discretionary basis. Globally, most of those who work in informal employment are excluded from both schemes. That is, their earnings are not covered by social insurance, and stringent means tests and income tests render them ineligible for social assistance.

In developing countries, this "missing middle" group is often the majority of workers, and their exclusion is fuelling disillusionment with governments and public institutions. Despite State commitments to reach out to the excluded, and some noteworthy success cases (Alliance 8.7 2023), progress on the whole has been limited. In the 2020s, public trust has been further eroded by the back-to-back crises of COVID-19 and global warming that left millions without help.

Thus, the current discourse on a new social contract presents a kind of "benefit of crisis" – a new opportunity to address a long-standing problem. A good step to rebuild trust is to make social protection the cornerstone of the new social contract. ILO standards for social protection and social dialogue, and in particular Recommendation No. 202, provide a roadmap for such an effort, including options for achieving sustainable financing. This latter aspect – finding "fiscal space" by which to fund universal social protection – is a prerequisite for long-term success.

A new social contract with strong social protection guarantees could be a game changer in rebuilding trust, increasing social cohesion and signalling that every member of the nation State is valued (Development Pathways 2020).

Charting the path to universal coverage under a new social contract

Blueprint for social protection guarantees in a new social contract

Recommendation No. 202, adopted in 2012, provides a blueprint for a social protection floor to form the core of a new social contract. It calls for four social protection guarantees:

1. Essential healthcare, including for maternity and childbirth;
2. Basic income security for children, adequate to ensure their access to nutrition, education and care
3. A basic income for people of working age who cannot find work or earn enough to satisfy their needs, especially in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability
4. Basic income security for older persons.

Recommendation No. 202 lays out a strategy for establishing these guarantees incrementally. It calls for the progressive building of floors, relying on a combination of contributory social insurance and non-contributory programmes (universal payments, conditional payments and means-tested benefits). Schemes must adhere to the basic social security principles laid out in ILO minimum standards: i.e. benefits must be guaranteed in law and financed collectively, and governments must take responsibility for their delivery and sound administration. Beyond this, the Recommendation leaves national governments broad discretion. However, their policy choices must be grounded in evidence-based research and developed via inclusive social dialogue.

Each component of this approach rests on a solid justification rooted in ILO social security standards and international experience.

- *Progressive, incremental action*: Achieving universal coverage is a major challenge for all countries, even those with developed social insurance systems. While investments in social protection have been shown to produce high yields in a short time, the upfront costs of expanded coverage still have to be covered. This will require creating fiscal space in national budgets that have already been stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate emergencies.[1] Incrementalism is also warranted because overly ambitious, complex scheme designs can get bogged down. Chances of success are enhanced when governments start with simple and manageable coverage extensions, make them work well, learn from the effort and expand step by step.
- *Terms defined in law*: To ensure that a social protection floor is solid and endures over time, the benefit package must be defined in law, along with all parties' rights and responsibilities.

[1] In fact, the additional spending required to ensure at least minimal social protection for all has increased by approximately 30% since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *Evidence-based decision-making*: Successful extension of coverage depends on understanding all dimensions of the challenge, including the size of specific target groups, their needs and priorities for social protection, their ability to pay contributions and the cost of covering those who cannot pay contributions through non-contributory schemes.
- *Adherence to minimum standards*: While Recommendation No. 202 envisions nationally defined social protection floors, it also calls on governments to observe minimum standards. These are embodied in the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102). Recommendation No. 202 and Convention are complementary in that the Recommendation calls on ILO Member States to ratify the Convention No. 102 as soon as possible. It also urges that, in building floors, governments aim for the level and range of benefits set out in the Convention. These minimum standards are well known, having served as a benchmark for planning, developing and evaluating social protection for 70 years (ILO 1952).
- *State responsibility*: Under both ILO instruments, governments must assume responsibility for the proper administration of social protection and the due provision of benefits. While they are free to subcontract for particular functions or services, the ultimate responsibility to honour benefit promises to workers, and to deliver benefits in an efficient manner, is the government's alone – these duties cannot be delegated. At the same time, effective scheme administration requires wide collaboration, both across government and with scheme constituents. Workers' organizations are of particular importance. To ensure that capable, representative and independent workers' organizations are available, governments must recognize and ensure all workers' fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.
- *Inclusive social dialogue*: System stability is enhanced when constituent groups feel broad ownership. This feeling arises and grows when constituents are directly involved in scheme design, governance and oversight. Importantly, representative organizations of workers and employers must participate and be engaged, while other relevant and representative organizations of concerned persons must be consulted, including those without union membership. Workers' organizations that take on the role of assisting and representing non-members can not only provide them with valuable help but they can also increase their own influence and membership. The section "Key recommendations for workers' organizations" provides recommendations for workers' organizations seeking to play the leading role in extending the coverage envisioned in Recommendation No. 202 and Convention No. 102.

Government discretion and promising approaches

Within the parameters just described, Recommendation No. 202 gives governments considerable discretion to design social protection floors based on national needs, values and experiences. This discretion extends to each of the following:

1. The mix between contributory and non-contributory schemes
2. Choice of financing mechanisms
3. Setting priorities for progressive extension of protection
4. Scheme administration.

Recent experience with all four of these parameters points to promising practices.

1. Usefulness of social insurance affirmed: Recommendation No. 202 reflects a shift in international policy advice on establishing universal social protection. In the decades prior to its approval, social insurance was often considered the optimal initial step in developing social protection. Even though rates of formal employment in developing countries were tiny, it was expected that, with the passage of time, economic development would bring in new members and eventually the entire workforce, or nearly all, would be covered.

The failure of this scenario to occur created, understandably, some disillusion with social insurance as a development tool. Policy interest shifted to other forms of social protection, such as social assistance – cash transfers, conditional or unconditional – and universal benefits.

Recent experience, however, provides a reminder that social insurance schemes have strengths in extending protection that justify giving them a central, though not exclusive, role. Their advantages include, first, that they exist. Most countries have at least one scheme, and it is usually easier to build on or adapt what exists than to start from scratch. Social insurance also demonstrated high adaptability during the pandemic: Governments were able to scale up these schemes rapidly by liberalizing eligibility requirements and increasing the amount and/or duration of benefits. Because social insurance is funded by worker and employer contributions, workers earn benefits as a right. This promotes “ownership” by scheme constituents, which gives social insurance relatively high political stability. Importantly, because social insurance is earnings-related, it reinforces incentives to work. If benefit formulas are progressive, such schemes can create an attractive incentive for informal workers to declare their earnings and participate, thus helping to formalize employment. Finally, social insurance schemes are especially beneficial for women, who can earn rights independent of marital status, including maternity protection.

Just as the advantages of social insurance have been appreciated anew in recent years, so have the disadvantages of social assistance. Namely, means-testing stigmatizes applicants and beneficiaries, who must present evidence of their poverty and deprivation.

Targeting of benefits, whether directly or by proxies (e.g. lack of a vehicle, dirt floor in a home), has been shown to result in high error rates of exclusion, especially in the "missing middle" – informal workers who are covered by neither social insurance nor social assistance. Moreover, means-tested programmes require staff time and resources to perform detailed assessments of eligibility. And because they are not popular with either participants or the general public, social assistance schemes invariably have insecure financing and, as a consequence, inadequate benefits. As the saying goes: "Programmes for the poor are poor programmes".

A far preferable alternative is universal benefits. Rather than stigmatizing programme participants, universal schemes provide needed protection without requiring detailed personal and financial information. They also avoid the high level of exclusion errors associated with means tests, and they are far simpler for governments to administer.

Universal benefits can form the base upon which contributory social insurance is built, creating an integrated multi-tier system. As an alternative, universal benefits can be insurance-tested, that is, available to everyone except those covered by social insurance. There can be significant cost savings to the latter approach but also reasons for caution, depending on the national context (see box 1).

Box 1. Universal versus insurance-tested benefits

Advantages of insurance-tested benefits:

- cost savings compared to universal scheme
- administration simpler than means-testing, only requires information on the person's insured status.

Reasons for caution:

- would not work well if national social insurance benefits are inadequate, making those who are ineligible for the universal payment worse off than recipients and, as a consequence, creating disincentives for them to work and report income
- for governments lacking budgetary and/or human resources for administration, even comparatively simple insurance-testing may result in exclusion errors.

Source: ILO (2021a).

Clearly, a key criterion for deciding the type of benefits that should be available alongside a national social insurance scheme is that their combination should not discourage work in the formal economy or evasion of taxes or contributions.

2. Broad choice of financing mechanisms: It is sometimes argued that social protection is not affordable for low-income countries, or that government expenditure cuts are inevitable during adjustment periods. But recent experience shows that there are viable financing alternatives for pursuing an incremental approach to universal coverage, even in the poorest countries or hardest times. If social protection programmes address important needs and are well managed, the broad public will support them; and there are many options for finding the needed fiscal space (see box 2).

Box 2. Finding fiscal space for expanding social protection coverage

- Expanding social security coverage and contributory revenues
- Increasing tax revenues
- Eliminating illicit financial flows
- Improving efficiency and reallocating public expenditure from lower priority areas
- Tapping into fiscal and foreign exchange reserves
- Borrowing or restructuring debt
- Adopting a more accommodative macroeconomic framework
- Increasing aid and transfers

Source: ILO (2015).

Each country is unique, not only in the design and implementation of social protection systems but in its optimal means of financing non-contributory benefits. Each approach has potential risks and trade-offs that need to be weighed in a national social dialogue.

Recognizing the enormity of current social protection coverage gaps, the UN, together with the ILO, launched in September 2021 the Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions. This global project is supporting countries to create at least 400 million jobs, focusing on the green, digital and care economies. It also aims to extend social protection to the 4 billion people currently excluded. This UN-system-wide initiative seeks to achieve these bold objectives through integrated national strategies and policies, integrated domestic and international financing and enhanced multilateral cooperation (ILO n.d.).

3. Useful initial steps: Because there is no single correct way to extend coverage, Recommendation No. 202 defers to national priorities and preferences for charting a path. Two initial strategies are worthy of governments' close consideration: for social insurance, targeting of those sectors with the greatest capacity to pay contributions; and for non-contributory benefits, early initiatives to cover children.

- **Social insurance:** Informal workers differ significantly in their ability to pay contributions, as well as in the extent to which their work situations are organized to enable cost-effective collection of contributions. Thus, the probability of early success is enhanced by targeting groups that have the greatest capacity to contribute, that recognize their need for a particular type of protection (e.g. basic healthcare, employment injury), and that are organized so that the contribution requirement can be enforced cost-effectively, either directly or through intermediaries such as workers' organizations. For example, a government may target certain professions within the broad category of self-employed persons as a first step, or it may target urban self-employed persons, whose earnings are generally higher, deferring rural self-employed persons for later action. This easy-cases-first strategy can give the new social contract high visibility and momentum, making subsequent steps to extend coverage easier to accomplish.
- **Non-contributory benefits:** Historically, children have often been the last group to be covered by social protection. Yet recent experience points to strong advantages of starting a coverage initiative with child benefits. Globally, children are twice as likely to live in poverty as adults (ILO and UNICEF 2023), and are far less well protected than other groups.[2] As such schemes do not require building up a large reserve, they can be up and running relatively quickly, scoring an early win in the effort to rebuild trust in government. Making eligibility contingent on a family registering its earnings can promote formalization of employment.

Moreover, a robust body of research shows that universal or near-universal child benefits are affordable, even for developing countries. Phasing in a child benefit by starting with the youngest children would require fiscal space of less than half a percentage point of gross domestic product (GDP). A child benefit costing just 1 per cent of GDP has been estimated to reduce poverty of the entire population by 20% (UNICEF and ODI 2020).

In recent years, many countries have recognized children's enormous unmet need for social protection and the high cost of failing to address it. While universal cash benefits for children are concentrated in high-income countries, some middle-income countries – including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mongolia and South Africa – have expanded child benefits in ways that approach universal coverage (ILO and UNICEF 2019). Other countries – including Fiji, Ghana, India, New Zealand and the Philippines – have also taken important steps to expand social protection for children (ILO and UNICEF 2019). These initiatives also show that significant progress in combating child poverty and deprivation is possible right across the economic development spectrum.

4. Partnerships in administration: It is a truism that government agencies cannot work efficiently or effectively in isolation. Many forms of administration can work well or poorly depending on the existence, and effectiveness, of linkages with other agencies. From this vantage point, there are strong advantages to developing early and strong

[2] Today only one in four children (26.4%) receive a social protection benefit and only 45% of women with newborns receive a cash maternity benefit (International Labour Office 2021).

partnerships in extending social protection. Of special importance are cooperation between the social protection agency and the State employment agency charged with implementing active labour market policies, the national healthcare agency and the public finance agency.

Coordination with the employment agency can ensure that social protection for the able-bodied is a benefit of last resort, available only when employment options are scarce or fail to provide a basic minimum income. Coordination with the health agency can prevent work disincentives that arise if earnings cause loss of medical coverage. Coordination with the public finance agency is needed to identify fiscal space and appropriate (progressive) national resources for financing non-contributory benefits. The two agencies can also jointly develop and pursue reforms of public finance that improve tax policy and collections, simplify collection and reporting procedures for contribution-payers, adapt them to particular groups and ensure transparency through regular reporting to the public.

Approached as a joint effort, a new social contract can serve as an engine for strengthening not only the social protection agency, but also its partners.

Key recommendations for workers' organizations

Calling for a new social contract with universal social protection as a key component is very much in line with workers' organizations' social activism over the decades. Recent history is replete with examples. Unions were among the first to demand that abusive child labour be outlawed; to protest against hazardous working conditions in factories and mines; and to lobby for minimum wages, shorter work-weeks and compensation for overtime, in this way achieving greater income equality within societies. Unions also worked persistently for laws guaranteeing work benefits such as health insurance, pensions and paid family leave. In many countries, comprehensive social protection schemes are the result of a long struggle and social dialogue in which workers' organizations played a leading role (Bonilla Garcia 2000).

The current crises, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming and other unfavourable trends, provide unions with another opportunity to seek greater security for all, while affirming their relevance in addressing today's problems. There are several potential axes of action that workers' organizations can pursue.

Effectively representing all workers and forming alliances

Workers' organizations operate today in contexts characterized by declining jobs in manufacturing, the rise of non-standard forms of work, including work in the platform economy, and the persistence and growth of the informal economy, in particular in developing countries. As a result, they represent a declining portion of the national workforce in most countries. More than 60 per cent of the global workforce, 2 billion men and women, are in informal employment, and in Europe and the United States, some 20–30 per cent of the working-age population (some 162 million people) are engaged in some kind of independent work. These workers are typically excluded from formal tripartite and bipartite negotiations.

Consequently, workers' organizations structured around the traditional employer-employee relationship need to reorganize and/or refocus in order to engage with, and give voice to, non-members. In many countries, this process has already begun. For example, in Argentina, the Association of Digital Platform Economy Personnel (APP), the first platform workers' union in the region, is organizing digital platform workers into a new trade union affiliated to the main Argentine trade union federations. APP is fighting for the rights of delivery workers, including for the normalisation of their employment relationships. In Denmark, the trade union 3F that aims to secure better wage and working conditions for its members, signed in April 2018 the first collective agreement with a digital work platform, covering issues such as the transition from freelance to employee status, insurance coverage, and dispute resolution. 3F has also been active in protecting food delivery riders and signed in 2021 with the Danish Chamber of Commerce (Dansk Erhverv) a nationwide collective agreement for food delivery riders in Denmark. Forming alliances with other organizations, such as self-employed, domestic workers, or seasonal agricultural workers, can also extend trade unions' reach and influence (Ryder 2006). Unions can develop innovative strategies and forms of support, e.g. advisory services, legal representation or accounting services, to attract, retain and represent all workers, including through partnerships with organizations of non-traditional workers.[3] Most recently, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) launched a nation-wide awareness campaign in support of 10,000 self-employed and informally employed market vendors, who were eligible for financial support as compensation for the lockdown, aimed at expanding their services to hard-to-organize workers and recruiting new members (ILO 2021).

Building broad coalitions that advocate for universal social protection can be a win-win situation: it will not only advance income security and access to healthcare for all workers, but also contribute to their formalization. This in turn will strengthen the capacity of governments to increase public revenues and hence to finance sustainable social security systems through taxes and contributions (OECD 2020). Last but not least, it will help workers' organizations to increase their representative capacity.

Effectively participating in the design and implementation of universal social protection as a key element of the new social contract

An understanding of target populations' priorities, needs and financial capacity is vital in extending social protection successfully. Worker organizations are well placed to provide these informational inputs. However, to serve as trusted and credible

[3] In this regard, the ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204) (para. 33) expressly encourages workers' organizations to extend membership and services to workers and economic units in the informal economy.

partners in extending coverage, workers' organizations must move beyond advocacy for preservation of their own hard-earned entitlements (McClanahan and Barrantes 2021). In line with their tradition of defending those without a voice, they must engage actively in national debates on resource mobilization for financing non-contributory social protection schemes through, for example, progressive taxation policies. Their involvement is also vital to ensure that the social protection needs of workers affected by climate change are well reflected in national policies.

Workers' organizations that reach out to informal economy workers and those in non-standard forms of employment can be instrumental in identifying those with contributory capacity, to be progressively included in social insurance. They are also in a good position to facilitate the registration of these workers and to help them cope with reporting requirements. Many good practices already exist. For example, the Confederación Autónoma de Sindicatos Clasistas (C.A.S.C.) in the Dominican Republic, through their Mutual Association of Solidarity Services (AMUSSOL), provides access to the Dominican social security system (SDSS) to its affiliates. As the Dominican State does not guarantee access to social protection for those active in the informal economy, AMUSSOL acts as a "virtual employer to support the registration of workers to the social security system" (ILO 2022). The affiliates pay their monthly contribution to AMUSSOL, which channels it to the national treasury. Then, the affiliates become members of the SDSS and enjoy the family health and workplace accidents insurances while having access to a pension fund (Source: Amussol: informal workers have access to social security in the Dominican Republic, WSM Thematic Report Latin America, No. 2, 2016). In India, tripartite worker welfare boards, established through the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act, offer a range of social protection benefits to workers and their families through worker welfare funds (WWFs). In some states, such as Tamil Nadu, success of the WWFs is related to the strong involvement of trade unions. For example, the Construction Workers Panchayat Union counts a total of 520,000 workers, of whom 60 per cent work in the informal economy and about 20 per cent are women workers. The Union has actively engaged with the WWFs to realise the right to social security of informal workers (ILO 2021b).

Raising awareness among workers about their social protection rights and obligations

Successful extension of social protection depends on widespread availability of information about the advantages of the new scheme and its rules and regulations. Conversely, limited access to information can be a key constraint on efforts to cover more workers. Information campaigns should thus be an integral component of implementing new social protection laws and schemes.

Workers' organizations have much to contribute to such campaigns: they can help ensure that both content and messaging are well geared to target groups. They can partner with the government in offering informational meetings and seminars, and they can help to disseminate promotional materials, directly and electronically. For example, an information and awareness-campaign targeting self-employed workers in Cabo Verde collaborated with different workers' organizations to effectively channel information to self-employed workers. The campaign also included working with children and youth to make future contributors aware of the benefits of social protection and with the perspective that they might also encourage their parents to register. During workshops, direct information on social insurance was passed on to the self-employed workers (ILO 2021b).

Participating in the governance and enforcement of social protection schemes

Convention No. 102 calls for social protection schemes to be administered on a tripartite basis, with regular actuarial valuations to ensure adequate and sustainable financing. Workers' organizations have key roles to play in both these functions. Workers' representatives on tripartite boards of directors of administering institutions should fulfil their mandate to represent not only their own organization, but all insured persons. They, together with the other board members, are "trustees" for all workers and must exercise a reasonable standard of care on their behalf, acting in accordance with the rules and laws governing the scheme and taking into account the interests of all categories of workers (ILO 2010).

The participation of workers' organizations in monitoring and evaluation is key in achieving transparency, accountability and worker confidence. It is particularly important that worker representatives be involved in formulating the economic assumptions used in actuarial valuations of the scheme's future financial position. Only if worker representatives understand these assumptions and accept them as reasonable can unions be expected to place confidence in actuarial findings. In the context of the extension of coverage, regular monitoring is essential to track progress and provide a solid evidence base for future policy decisions. Direct worker engagement in monitoring can help to ensure accuracy (e.g. the representativeness of sampling strategies) and to increase the credibility of findings.

Ensuring that commitments made at the international level are transformed into concrete policies and financial commitments at the country level

The ILO's tripartite structure gives workers' organizations a major role in the development and adoption of Conventions and Recommendations, as well as in the supervision of their application at national level. Once a government ratifies a Convention, it is legally bound by its provisions. This helps to ensure that rights to social protection laid down in national law are stable and enduring. By actively promoting the ratification, implementation and monitoring of ILO Conventions and Recommendations, particularly Convention No. 102, workers' organizations can help ensure that the government fulfils its social security promises, to both current and future workers.

Furthermore, UN processes on sustainable development offer workers' organizations additional space and impetus to engage in multilateral democratic decision-making. Trade unionists can use these forums to advance discourse on the need for universal coverage. By participating actively in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development process, they can demonstrate the important role of social dialogue and social partnership for national development, especially in the field of social protection.

Workers' organizations should actively contribute to the Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, especially the current debate on new international financing mechanisms, such as the establishment of a global social protection fund. This implies making concrete proposals for investments to achieve universal social protection, advising on integrated policy approaches to provide universal social protection while using social protection as an instrument to tackle informality.

Conclusions

The back-to-back calamities of the COVID-19 pandemic and global warming, occurring in contexts where other social and employment conditions were already deteriorating, confirm the need for universal social protection. While these calamities caused great suffering, they also open new possibilities for achieving the long-discussed goal of reaching the excluded. The returns on such investments are high, both in fiscal terms and in terms of rebuilding trust in public institutions. However, a major risk is that governments will react to these developments with a return to "fiscal restraint", in a vain effort to put their fiscal houses in order. ILO Recommendation No. 202 provides a road map for "taking the high road", and recent experiences in implementing it reveal many good practices.

The experiences highlighted here also provide a reminder that, while social protection is a key part of decent work, it cannot replace it. Campaigns for universal social protection must be part of a larger strategy designed to support formalization. Sustainability also depends on managing the macroeconomic environment to promote productivity, growth and full employment, so as to provide fiscal space to finance the system.

Against this backdrop, workers' organizations confront major challenges in reasserting their relevance in the rapidly changing world of work. Today's high level of political and economic uncertainty makes their ability to change and innovate crucial to their survival and future growth. But unions also have transcendent roles and responsibilities. Their advocacy can tip the balance in favour of current efforts to extend social protection. By working towards universal social protection as a key element of the new social contract, they can take the lead in rebuilding societies that prioritize the welfare of all their members, while continuing to defend hard-won membership rights.

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