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International Labour Conference – 109th Session, 2021

Resolution concerning skills and lifelong learning

(11 December 2021)

The General Conference of the International Labour Organization, meeting at its 109th Session, 2021,

Having undertaken a general discussion on the basis of Report VI, *Shaping skills and lifelong learning for the future of work*,

1. Adopts the following conclusions; and
2. Invites the Governing Body of the International Labour Office to request the Director-General to develop a strategy and action plan on skills and lifelong learning to strengthen the ILO's work in that area, and to promote and support its implementation, with clear follow-up mechanisms indicating short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives, including through the allocation of resources within the existing and forthcoming programmes and budgets and mobilization of extrabudgetary resources.

Conclusions concerning the general discussion on skills and lifelong learning

I. Skills and lifelong learning in a changing world of work, further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019, and the ILO Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, 2021, have all highlighted the renewed importance of skills development and lifelong learning as key enablers of human development, full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work, productivity improvement and sustainable development.
2. Increased investment in skills development and lifelong learning is not a cost but an investment in the future. It is key to facilitating a human-centred approach that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, and a just transition to a future of work that contributes to sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental dimensions. Education, training, lifelong learning and guidance enable individuals to acquire skills, capabilities and qualifications to become active members of labour markets and society, including those skills

as identified in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.7. They drive inclusive social and economic growth, enable technological advancement for sustainable enterprises and enhance the abilities of workers and their capacity to make use of the opportunities available for jobs and decent work. They facilitate successful and equitable labour market transitions and contribute to reducing skills mismatches, including skills gaps and shortages. Taken together, this can reduce inequalities between and within countries.

3. Technological changes (including digitalization), demographic shifts, globalization, environmental and climate change, and other global drivers are transforming societies and the world of work. While this transformation can benefit both workers and enterprises, it can also be disruptive, leading to increasing unemployment, underemployment, skills mismatches and labour market inequalities and inefficiencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities in the world of work.
4. Skills development and lifelong learning systems in many countries are constrained by insufficient financial allocations, and low investments in infrastructure and human resources. Stronger links with the world of work would help to access decent work and improve productivity, employability and social inclusion.
5. Structural barriers for people, including language barriers, and systemic discrimination affect skills and lifelong learning and are a key cause of exclusion and increasing inequality within and between societies. These barriers should be addressed to help ensure effective and equitable access to skills, training and lifelong learning for all. Special attention should be paid to women; young people, especially those who are not in education, employment or training; older people; persons with disabilities; informal workers; migrant workers; refugees; people in rural areas; low-skilled workers; indigenous and tribal peoples; and other persons in fragile and vulnerable situations or belonging to disadvantaged groups.
6. Providing children with universal access to free, compulsory, quality basic education, as well as early childhood education, where applicable, along with opportunities and possibilities for knowledge and skills development is critical to ending child labour and is a prerequisite for lifelong learning.
7. Providing equitable access to quality education for adults, including basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills and requisite language skills, which is particularly crucial for skills development and lifelong learning.
8. These challenges call for the strengthening and transformation of skills development and lifelong learning systems so that they can become more relevant, inclusive, resilient and responsive to the changes of the world of work. Such transformation requires the ILO to enhance actions that assist Members in strengthening skills development and lifelong learning systems through social dialogue, including collective bargaining and tripartite cooperation, as a key element of recovery strategies from COVID-19 and other crisis situations, including those described in the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205).

II. Guiding principles for inclusive, responsive and resilient skills and lifelong learning systems

9. Recognizing the opportunities and challenges presented by the future of work and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on labour markets and societies, the International Labour Conference calls upon the ILO to assist its Members in developing, strengthening and implementing inclusive, responsive and resilient skills development and

lifelong learning systems, through social dialogue, including collective bargaining and tripartite cooperation.

10. In support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and especially in relation to SDGs 4 and 8, governments should, in consultation with the social partners, prioritize skills development and lifelong learning. Adequately resourced policies and strategies should realize inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, accelerate sustainable development, drive technological advancement and innovation, and promote industrial and structural transformation that adds value in growth sectors, supports micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and promotes a just transition.
11. For the realization of those concrete objectives, effective policy frameworks should be developed for skills development and lifelong learning systems. Taking into account national circumstances, these frameworks should be aligned with and anchored on the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019, and the ILO Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, 2021, and take into account relevant international labour standards and related instruments, including the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138); the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182); the Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142); the Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (No. 195); the Paid Educational Leave Convention, 1974 (No. 140); and the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers, 1966.
12. While fully aligned with employment policy frameworks and underpinned by a joint commitment to increased investment, skills development and lifelong learning policies should aim to enable the acquisition of relevant competencies, capabilities and qualifications, should be drawn up in consultation with the social partners, and should include the following, while taking into account national circumstances:
 - (a) comprehensive and coordinated national and, where appropriate, subnational policies and strategies that expand opportunities and possibilities for learning and facilitate more effective partnerships across education and training sectors to encourage a culture of lifelong learning;
 - (b) a whole-of-government approach to effective governance that facilitates and benefits from social dialogue, coordination between governmental bodies and enhanced cooperation between all relevant stakeholders, especially training providers and social partners, at the national, sectoral, regional and local levels;
 - (c) more equitable and effective access to skills and lifelong learning for all, including through apprenticeships and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), that reduces skills mismatches, such as skills gaps and skills shortages, and facilitates labour market transitions for all, including school-to-work transitions, transitions to the formal economy and transitions to re-enter labour markets. All these transitions to decent work should mitigate gender inequality in the labour market;
 - (d) innovative, transparent, equitable and sustainable financing mechanisms, developed through social dialogue, with shared and differentiated responsibilities, as appropriate, between governments, employers and workers, that enable and incentivize participation in skills development, promote employability, strengthen workers' capacity to benefit from decent work opportunities and support sustainable enterprises;
 - (e) a coordinated system for the identification and anticipation of skills and learning needs that utilizes the full range of tools and latest technologies for the collection, analysis and

- dissemination of labour market information, which is used to improve skills development and lifelong learning policies, strategies, programmes and service delivery;
- (f) inclusive, gender-responsive, flexible and innovative learning options, including high-quality digital, mobile and blended informal, non-formal and formal learning, that increase access for all, including groups with low levels of participation in lifelong learning. Such options should be based on a concrete strategy for the universal acquisition of basic and necessary digital skills and include ways to overcome the digital divide;
 - (g) quality technical and vocational education and training, apprenticeships and work-based learning, in close cooperation with the public and private sectors, that support lifelong learning, enable labour market transitions, promote sustainable enterprises and facilitate work–life balance by providing on-the-job training for those in work and tailored programmes for those currently out of work. They should facilitate effective partnerships between governments, workers, employers and training providers and deliver training arrangements that provide for social protection, as appropriate, and decent working conditions, including occupational safety and health;
 - (h) renewed emphasis on the development of core skills, including social and emotional skills, cognitive skills, basic digital skills and relevant skills related to environmentally sustainable economies, as well as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, in education and training, including TVET, to promote innovation and entrepreneurship, and enhance adaptability to changing life, work and societal needs for a sustainable future;
 - (i) a dynamic approach that involves tripartite constituents through social dialogue, including collective bargaining and tripartite cooperation, in the development and revision of skills standards, qualifications and curricula that combine core skills and a broad variety of competencies and provide flexible learning pathways in national and, where appropriate, subnational qualification frameworks that support the portability of skills;
 - (j) strong and effective public and private education and training institutions, including those delivering TVET, along with robust institutions for social dialogue, that enable connections to the world of work and aim to ensure full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all;
 - (k) robust systems for the validation of skills and competencies, and the recognition of partial and full qualifications (including micro-credentials) acquired through all forms of prior learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, which are supported by qualified teachers, trainers and assessors and which create lifelong learning pathways to enable and enhance the portability of skills and facilitate labour, social and geographical mobility;
 - (l) effective national and, where appropriate, subnational quality assurance systems that accredit education and training organizations, recognize the importance of qualified teachers and trainers, and safeguard high-quality delivery, assessment and certification of skills;
 - (m) targeted analysis and anticipation of skills needs at the national, where appropriate subnational, and sectoral levels based on social dialogue, including collective bargaining and tripartite cooperation, and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Such coordinated action

- should identify and respond to sector-specific skills needs, including those related to care, digital and environmentally sustainable economies;
- (n) outreach activities, community training and guidance to improve access to and participation in skills development and lifelong learning for individuals in the informal economy, in rural communities and in remote locations, especially when structural and digital divides exist;
 - (o) targeted skills development and lifelong learning strategies for the informal economy, including the assessment, validation and recognition of skills and capabilities acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning, that improve learning options and pathways for informal workers. Such strategies should support the transition to the formal economy, taking into account the specific needs of different economic units, including the self-employed, and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in both public and private spheres;
 - (p) effective access to skills and lifelong learning for all workers in insecure forms of work by including them in targeted strategies that aim to ensure that they benefit fully from decent work;
 - (q) effective workforce development and decent work opportunities for personnel in skills development and lifelong learning systems, particularly for teachers and trainers, to ensure quality training and enable the effective functioning of education and training institutions through appropriate funding;
 - (r) coordinated lifelong career counselling, vocational guidance and post-training support involving public and private employment services and other institutions that supports people of all ages through the provision of appropriate information, advice and guidance to access learning and decent work opportunities;
 - (s) comprehensive digitalization strategies that support and strengthen national and, where appropriate, subnational skills development and lifelong learning systems through innovative technologies; investment in environmentally sustainable and affordable infrastructure; affordable access to enhanced internet connectivity, equipment, devices and tools, including through public-private partnerships, as appropriate; capacity-building support for teachers, trainers and education support personnel; and access to digital learning content and materials, as well as other measures to reduce the digital divide and digital gender gap;
 - (t) the integration of skills development with social protection, including for the unemployed and those with reduced working capacity in case of sickness and disability, so that opportunities for formal, non-formal and informal lifelong learning are accessible to all;
 - (u) the integration of education and training strategies with active labour market policies to facilitate skilling, reskilling and upskilling to enhance employability and adaptability and ensure successful and equitable labour market transitions and access to decent work; and
 - (v) the provision of assistance to strengthen the capacity of social partners at national, where appropriate subnational, and regional levels to contribute effectively to the skills development and lifelong learning systems, including for the identification and anticipation of skills needed in the labour market.

III. Measures to promote inclusive, responsive and resilient skills and lifelong learning systems

13. Recognizing that education is a right for all, recalling that the Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (No. 195), states that Members should recognize that education and training are a right for all, and taking into account national circumstances, governments should work in cooperation with the social partners towards ensuring access for all to lifelong learning. Governments, with the support of the ILO, should:
- (a) promote the acquisition of skills, competencies and qualifications for all workers throughout their working lives as a joint responsibility of governments and social partners;
 - (b) ensure access to quality lifelong learning opportunities for all;
 - (c) integrate relevant skills development and lifelong learning systems into employment policies to support the creation of full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all and ensure equitable and inclusive labour markets;
 - (d) coordinate education and training policies with other public policies and strategies, including fiscal, industrial, trade, investment, environment and climate change policies;
 - (e) involve the social partners and cooperate with other relevant stakeholders, where appropriate, in the design, implementation (including consultation on resource allocation), monitoring and evaluation of skills development and lifelong learning policies, systems and programmes;
 - (f) according to national circumstances and practices, introduce and implement diverse, equitable and sustainable financing models, including incentive schemes for learners and enterprises and, where appropriate, well-designed and transparent contributions-based training funds;
 - (g) support workers, in particular those groups mentioned in point 5 above, in choosing, accessing and participating in career guidance, training and support services and strengthen targeted policies and, where applicable, tailored financial support as needed throughout their lives to facilitate successful and equitable labour market transitions;
 - (h) support and strengthen all enterprises, in particular micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to facilitate on-the-job training and improve the development of technical and core skills through work-based learning, including quality apprenticeships;
 - (i) facilitate sectoral collaboration, by involving all relevant stakeholders to pool expertise, resources and funding towards concrete up- and reskilling actions, as well as cross-sectoral cooperation;
 - (j) support employers' and workers' organizations in taking an active role as providers of training and, where appropriate, career guidance services and career counselling that directly meet the needs of workers and employers; and
 - (k) integrate skills development and lifelong learning as key elements in recovery strategies, including from the COVID-19 pandemic, identify possible gaps and overlaps to strengthen the coherence and efficiency of lifelong learning systems, ensure evidence-based policymaking and facilitate inclusive and gender-responsive lifelong learning that promotes access to education and training for disadvantaged groups and communities in fragile and vulnerable situations.

IV. Recommendations for future ILO action

14. The International Labour Organization should give full effect to this resolution and assist Members in building and improving skills and lifelong learning systems. The Organization should:
- (a) develop a coherent, inclusive and gender-responsive ILO strategy on skills and lifelong learning for 2022–30, in line with the SDGs and especially SDGs 4, 5 and 8, that, in collaboration with relevant UN agencies, strengthens the ILO's global leadership on skills and lifelong learning, provides enhanced support to constituents in skills development and lifelong learning systems and contributes to the promotion of full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all. The strategy should be backed by research, take into account the diverse needs of constituents around the world and include innovative measures to address all elements of the policy framework for inclusive, responsive and resilient skills and lifelong learning systems detailed in point 12 above. The strategy, along with an estimate of the resources required to implement it, should be presented by the Director-General to the Governing Body for approval at its 346th Session and should include details of:
 - (i) measures that ensure and promote equitable access to skills development and lifelong learning for all that are responsive to individual needs and identified labour market needs, including those in the informal economy. Such measures should promote an enabling environment and openness to learning and identify and address discriminatory, time, cost and motivational barriers, among others;
 - (ii) initiatives to strengthen the capacity of the governments and the social partners and to promote social dialogue, including collective bargaining and tripartite cooperation, on skills development and lifelong learning;
 - (iii) initiatives to assist governments who, in cooperation with social partners, develop and implement inclusive, responsive and resilient skills and lifelong learning systems;
 - (iv) measures to assist governments, in close collaboration with the social partners, in achieving the relevant targets of the SDGs, in particular SDGs 4, 5 and 8;
 - (v) measures to assist governments in developing skills systems that are responsive to climate change and assist in a just transition;
 - (vi) the respective roles and responsibilities that governments, the social partners and the Office will have in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy; and
 - (vii) provisions for a mid-term review and evaluation of the outcomes and impact of the strategy;
 - (b) intensify its effort to increase and share knowledge on good practices, including through South–South and triangular cooperation, to address the challenges constituents face in the areas of skills development and lifelong learning. This includes up-to-date research, policy evaluations, innovative means of data collection and analysis, peer learning, and knowledge creation, sharing and dissemination, including the forecasting of skills needs;
 - (c) promote the ratification and application of international labour standards relevant to skills development and lifelong learning through targeted measures, including a ratification campaign for the Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142).

The Office should identify possible obstacles to the ratification and implementation of the Paid Educational Leave Convention, 1974 (No. 140), and provide technical assistance to overcome them. In this context, the Conference welcomes the placement of a standard-setting item on apprenticeships on the agenda of its 110th Session (2022);

- (d) extend its current portfolio of development cooperation programmes and projects to assist its Members in developing and strengthening their skills development and lifelong learning systems, with a particular focus on addressing the challenges faced by women and young people and all groups listed in point 5 above and the needs of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as facilitating the transition to the formal economy;
- (e) strengthen efforts to provide advisory services on national, where appropriate subnational, and regional skills development and lifelong learning policies and systems;
- (f) expand capacity-building activities for and with Members, drawing on support from the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC-ILO), the Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training (ILO-CINTERFOR) and other relevant capacity-building institutions;
- (g) focus on skills development and lifelong learning at the country level in Decent Work Country Programmes, in collaboration with the United Nations resident coordinator system;
- (h) undertake research, mobilize external resources and build comprehensive partnerships with international organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), development partners, academia and other key actors to avoid duplication, promote policy coherence and build synergies for joint actions that support skills development, lifelong learning and decent work for sustainable development;
- (i) research by the Office to highlight pathways for workers in the informal economy, the self-employed and workers in forms of work such as part-time work, fixed-term contracts and working through private employment agencies to effectively access skills development and lifelong learning;
- (j) provide coherent advice around the importance of tripartite cooperation regarding the technology used to build skills systems, especially the use of artificial intelligence, while paying attention to data protection and management;
- (k) engage with the international financial institutions, including for resource mobilization and allocation, in line with each organization's mandate, to extend the fiscal space for education and training and engage with all relevant institutions for a more coherent international policy with regard to education and training, in line with the ILO strategy.