

Third annual meeting of the Social Protection, Freedom and Justice for Workers Network Geneva, 27 November 2019

Meeting notes and conclusions

BACKGROUND

From 25 to 28 November 2019, the ILO organized the *Global Social Protection Week on “Achieving SDG 1.3 and Universal Social Protection (USP2030) in the Context of the Future of Work,”* which mobilized 600 policy makers, workers, employers, development partners and technical experts to discuss the current situation of social protection and shape the vision for its future to achieve universal social protection for all.



Workers’ organizations played an active role throughout the event, meaningfully contributing to the various sessions of the High-Level and Technical segments. Discussions called for immediate action to guarantee universal, comprehensive, adapted and sustainable social protection systems that provide adequate levels of benefits for all. Please click [here](#) to access the outcome document of the event.

In collaboration with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the ILO also convened a dedicated meeting for workers’ representatives to exchange their experiences in the promotion and defence of social protection. During the *Third annual meeting of the Social Protection, Freedom and Justice for Workers Network*, on 27 November, workers from around the globe came together to discuss regional and national perspectives on challenges and opportunities for achieving SDG 1.3 in the context of transformations in the world of work. The agenda of this meeting is available [here](#).¹

MEETING NOTES

Opening remarks

Valérie Schmitt, Deputy Director and Officer in Charge, Social Protection Department, ILO

- The Social Protection, Freedom and Justice for Workers Network (hereinafter referred to as Workers Network) was initiated by the ILO, in collaboration with the ITUC, in 2017. This Workers Network has two main goals: promoting the extension of social protection, with a view towards closing the huge coverage gap that currently leaves 4 billion people excluded from enjoying their human right to social security; and defending workers’ right to social protection including fighting austerity measures and inadequate social security reforms which contribute to increasing coverage gaps and reducing the adequacy and predictability of benefits.
- The Workers Network has an online [knowledge-sharing platform](#), where various useful policy, research and training materials can be found. Going ahead, the ILO is going to document further the fundamental work of workers’ organizations in the field of social protection so as to disseminate lessons learnt and good practices through and beyond the Workers Network.

Maria Helena André, Director, Bureau for Workers’ Activities ACTRAV, ILO

- The current social protection coverage gap is dramatic and much more needs to be done to tackle poverty and inequality in order to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030.

¹ The ILO and the ITUC wish to acknowledge with gratitude the sponsorship provided by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) to three participants of the Workers Network to attend the Global Social Protection Week.

- The transformations affecting the world of work, such as demographic changes, climate change, technological innovations, and globalization, require workers' organizations to define their strategies and transform challenges arising from those changes into opportunities.
- Social protection develops human capital across the life course and fosters adaptability, increasing individual resilience for navigating life transitions. In order to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030, social protection has to be universal and has to be seen as an investment, not as a cost. Workers' organizations have a key role in promoting the agenda of social protection.
- The [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019](#) calls upon members to work individually and collectively on the basis of tripartism and social dialogue to further develop the human-centred agenda in the context of the future of work. It is fundamental that workers' and employers' organizations are part of the design, development, implementation, and monitoring of social protection systems. ACTRAV has recently launched an issue of its International Journal of Labour Research titled [The Future of Work: Trade Unions in Transformation](#). This publication emphasizes that unions have to be open to embracing a transformative agenda to address emerging challenges and opportunities with a renewable look, including regarding social protection and non-standards forms of employment.
- The Workers Network has a clear importance and role to play to exchange knowledge and experiences and integrate workers' concerns into the work of the ILO.

Raquel González, Director, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Geneva Office

- Social protection is a human right recognized in international human rights bodies and in international labour standards and it plays a key role in social and economic development. Despite the recognition of the benefits of social protection, many challenges remain to make it a reality for all. Only 29 per cent of the world's population enjoys comprehensive social protection, and 55 per cent has no access to social protection at all.
- Unions play a crucial role in the development of social protection by campaigning for the establishment of social protection systems, defending systems when they are under attack, negotiating social security reforms in tripartite committees and monitoring their implementation and, in some cases, also participating in the administration of social protection benefits and services.
- Greater policy coherence within the multilateral system is needed. This is particularly important as international financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are promoting an agenda on "social security" through policies that actually clash with the rights-based approach promoted by the ILO (e.g. the promotion of safety nets, which go against the universality of social security). It is crucial that the ILO and the union movement remain vigilant regarding recommendations of the IFIs in countries to avoid them jeopardizing national social protection systems.
- ITUC fully supports the efforts of its affiliates in campaigning for the ratification and implementation of international social security instruments, notably the [Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention, 1952 \(No. 102\)](#) and the [Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 \(No. 202\)](#). ITUC has also been working on identifying possibilities for financing social protection. A global conference on this topic was organized last year, and several research reports and briefs have been produced to provide the economic argument for wage increases to assist workers' organizations in campaigning efforts. Support has also been provided to affiliates in their consultations and negotiations at the national level.
- In the area of social protection, the ILO's Workers Group advocates for the vertical and horizontal extension of social security, the effective implementation of the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), and the promotion of the ratification and implementation of the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), which remain fundamental social security instruments. Based on the ILO's body of social security standards, the work for the ILO in social protection for the next biennium will be driven mainly by one of the eight outcomes of the [ILO Programme and Budget 2020-21](#), namely on "Comprehensive and sustainable social protection for all".

Moderated discussion

Moderator: **Evelyn Astor**, Economic and Social Policy Advisor, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

Question: In Europe, social protection coverage levels are among the highest in the world. However, the adequacy and coverage of social protection has been compromised in many countries in recent years, especially due to the 2008-9 financial crisis and the austerity that has taken place, but also due to challenges around demographic ageing and emergence of non-standards and precarious forms of work. The European Union (EU) is trying to address some of these issues, having recently come up with a recommendation on the access to social protection for workers and the self-employed. Could you please tell us about that? What are the positions of the European trade unions on these developments and this recommendation?

Marina Monaco, Advisor, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

- During the 2008-2009 crisis, fiscal sustainability issues were put at the top of the agenda of the EU. Austerity measures were implemented as a way to re-establish the trust between member states sharing the same currency (the Euro), as they had to be accountable in terms of deficits and debts. Social protection was the first element of the budget to suffer from cuts. As a consequence, various services and benefits have been reduced. Other cuts followed, including on workers' remunerations, health care and long term care. New forms of work with limited social security guarantees have been developed.
- To counterbalance this austere economic governance, EU member states and institutions have adopted the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) in 2017. This framework, which includes a chapter on social protection (old-age protection, minimum income, child care, protections against poverty, inclusion of people with disabilities, etc.) requires every member state and institution to guarantee that the provisions included in the pillar are enjoyed by all citizens and residents. Member states now have to implement this pillar.
- Building on this, the EU recently adopted a proposal for a [Council Recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed](#). This recommendation provides concrete indications for operationalizing the pillar, and it states that social protection rights, entitlements and benefits must be available almost universally to all workers and the self-employed. As per the recommendation, social protection coverage is expected to not only be legal, but to be effective; salaries' levels have to be sufficient for workers to contribute to social security, and jobs have to provide access to adequate social protection. Both these frameworks represent tools for rebalancing austerity and fiscal policy trends imposed by the European economic governance.
- European trade unions have been using these tools to monitor progress and trends in access to social protection, but policy convergence amongst EU member states is still to come. Unions have been raising awareness amongst governments and social and economic institutions on the importance of social protection as a key element for ensuring sustainable development and life in dignity to all.
- The ETUC supports its affiliates by helping them to develop policy arguments and advocate for social protection before their governments with a view to push for greater investments, greater coverage, better level of minimum standards, and for rights-based social protection policies. Click [here](#) to access relevant resources at the ETUC web page.



Question: Kenya has recently introduced a reform that would extend pensions and health coverage to informal economy workers who were previously excluded. Could you please explain this reform in more detail and how social partners were involved in the development of this new law?

Damaris Muhika, Programme Officer, Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU-K), Trustee of the Kenyan National Social Security Fund (NSSF)

- Kenya has experienced various significant reforms in its legislation and policy framework, especially to include those who were previously excluded from the social protection system. The country has experienced a significant growth of the informal economy, which stands at 84 per cent of the workforce, or 19 million workers. Specific professional categories that were previously excluded from social protection include domestic workers, workers in non-standard forms of employment (outsourced workers, workers on short-term contracts, part-time workers, workers in the GIG economy, etc.), rural economy workers, and workers with disability (previous attempts to cover persons with disabilities only included those with severe disability). Across the life cycle, children and the elderly were also previously excluded. At 81 per cent, the national dependency ratio of people is very high, meaning that a significant share of the population depend mostly on those working in the informal sector.
- The acknowledgement of social protection as a right in the constitution in 2010 has been the most significant achievement in the context of Kenya’s legal reforms. Furthermore, the main labour laws have been reviewed to include issues like employment injury, maternity protection and guarantees of basic income security. Regarding contributory social protection schemes, significant reviews were done to ensure that informal economy workers are included, particularly in the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF). This is enabling workers in the informal sector to contribute through a voluntary scheme.
- The advocacy by Unions for the empowerment of women and youth and the inclusion of persons with disability has contributed to the development of affirmative action policies that create quotas for these groups in the public and the private sectors.
- Social partners have also advocated for social protection policies to ensure better coordination of social protection programs to avoid overlapping and multiple dipping.
- Trade unions have significant visibility, influence and representation in policy-making and the governance of national social protection institutions. No legislation that is relevant to workers can pass without the participation of trade unions. The National Social Security Fund (NSSF) has a provision that stipulates that no board can assemble and take decisions without the representation of workers, increasing accountability and good governance in social protection institutions.



- COTU-K also emphasizes the importance of involving trade unions and workers representatives when developing country development initiatives, including the Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP).
- Currently, a priority area is the promotion for the ratification and full implementation of the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), as well as the implementation of the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) and the [Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 \(No. 204\)](#).

Question: Argentina has historically had one of the highest levels of social protection coverage in Latin America and one of the most developed systems. However, the country has undertaken a number of reforms, both parametric and structural, in the context of austerity. Could you please explain some of the reforms that took place in Argentina over the last few years, elaborating on the role of international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF, with which your country has recently signed a new agreement? How is CGT responding to this?

Guillermo Zuccotti, Social Protection Specialist, General Confederation of Labor of the Argentine Republic (CGT-RA)

- A recently published article by Joseph Stiglitz “The end of neoliberalism and the rebirth of history,” discusses austerity politics and macroeconomic adjustments, highlighting something that strongly resonates with the crisis in Argentina. Democracy is at stake because citizens are told that they can democratically “elect” the policies they would like to have, such as adequate social protection, good salaries, progressive taxation and regulated financial systems. However, neoliberal views warn that if countries pursue those policies, they will lose competitiveness and will be at risk of a macroeconomic crisis.
- Policy coherence is critically lacking when it comes to social protection. On the one hand, the economic order says that fiscal adjustments and austerity measures need to be implemented; on the other hand, all social partners agree that social protection stimulates aggregate demand, alleviates poverty and reduces gaps amongst citizens.
- Evidence shows that increased public expenditure in social protection leads to reduced poverty levels and SDG 1. Similarly an increase in expenditure on social protection helps to tackle inequality (and SDG 10) and improve the quality of life of the population. While IFIs admit that they made a mistake in the past and now acknowledge the importance of social protection and social spending for inclusive growth, they continue to promote fiscal adjustments in countries leading to cuts on social protection spending with long lasting negative impacts on the economy and society. Citizens stand in the middle of this schizophrenia of discourses, with populations suffering great need. The current situation in Latin America illustrates very well this phenomenon, such as the recent social and political upheavals in Ecuador, Chile, Colombia and Bolivia. These crises are not coincidences, but an outcome of the paradox of austerity and the end result of repeated fiscal austerity policies that fail to acknowledge social protection as an investment rather than a cost.
- Workers’ organizations have a strategic capacity to contribute to overcome this paradox and convince all constituents that social protection is not solely a concern of workers, but of all constituents. The conditions to enable economies to grow need to be created, fiscal space needs to be created in order to expand social protection coverage and adequacy of benefits, and to move societies ahead and avoid social deterioration.

Question: Nepal has recently implemented a new social security law. What kinds of protections are included in this law, which was developed with a high degree of involvement of unions and workers? Could you please tell us about the consultations and negotiations that took place, and how this consultative process shaped the final version of the law that was adopted?

Ramesh Badal, Vice President (Foreign Affairs), General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT)

- Following the introduction of a new Constitution in 2015 in Nepal, the Social Security Act was adopted, covering contributory-based universal social security for all citizens. Various social protection provisions are stipulated, including universal old-age pension for persons aged 70+, maternity benefits for mothers of children born in hospitals as a measure for tackling infant mortality, assistance for single women aged 60+, grants for persons with disability, benefits to cover workplace and non-workplace related accidents and occupational illness, assistance for victims of the armed conflict and dependency benefits for children. GEFONT fully supports the new law.
- Nepal has also adopted a Universal Health Coverage act, and families can enrol by contributing approximately 25 US dollars per year.
- These two laws are the result of many years of union struggle. Workers initiated a dialogue with the government and employers in 2000. It has taken around 17 years for this process to complete. Despite being

faced with uncertainties and occasional disagreements, workers' efforts were continuous. Another important highlight is the fact that the newly adopted Social Security Act prescribes that all workers are entitled to get contribution-based social security benefits irrespective of their employment status.

- When workers in Nepal have raised concerns regarding the new pension scheme stipulated in the Law, GEFONT has raised awareness to answer their concerns.
- Contributions started to be collected in July 2019, and GEFONT has been campaigning for bringing more workers into the system. So far, 115,000 workers have been included.

Question: The large majority of workers in India are in the informal sector. SEWA has been doing amazing work in organizing informal workers and also providing services to them, but you have also very much engaged with the reforms at national level. Could you please tell us what SEWA is doing to promote social protection coverage to workers in the informal economy?

Reema Nanavaty, Head of Economic and Rural Development, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

- SEWA organizes informal sector workers. For SEWA, poverty is the worst form of violence. To be poor is to be vulnerable, and poverty makes one become a chronic victim of forces beyond one's control. With every misfortune, problems compound, leaving one increasingly powerless and setting in motion a spiral descending to starker poverty. Social protection instruments are needed to protect informal economy workers from this vicious circle of debt and poverty.
- The work of SEWA in the field of social protection for informal economy workers started three and a half decades ago, serving as an example for the government. It first started with its own savings linked insurance program and now SEWA has a full-fledged insurance cooperative. SEWA also provides workers with life insurance, accident insurance, health insurance, as well as family insurance packages and a pension program. The national government learned a lot from SEWA's model and is now rolling it out nationally.
- Almost 70 per cent of SEWA's membership are workers in rural areas. Rural workers face particular challenges. They have to rely on multiple jobs for their survival, and most often lack any employer-employee relationship. Several questions arise: What kind of social protection is needed for protecting rural workers and who should pay for it? Should it be the workers and the government? What kind of instruments are needed? SEWA's experience calls for a social protection approach that is holistic and integrated, that takes care of needs throughout the life-cycle. It calls for insurance against sickness, accident, occupational health hazards, credit risks, climate risks and market risks. Given the small assets that workers in the informal economy own, especially rural workers, insuring their assets is a challenge. These considerations need to be taken into account for shaping a holistic, life-cycle approach to social protection that is adapted to the needs of informal sector workers, especially rural workers. To respond to this need, SEWA is now piloting an agricultural livelihood recovery fund.



Contributions from the open discussion

Baba Aye, Health and Social Sector Officer, Public Services International (PSI)

- PSI believes that unions should take a firm stand against austerity. The evidence shows that the argument that social protection is not affordable is not tenable. It is an issue of prioritization of resources. Social protection is affordable and the fiscal space can be made available. Several options are available, such as reallocating public expenditures, increasing tax revenues, expanding social security coverage and contributory revenues, eliminating illicit financial flows, using fiscal and foreign exchange reserves, among others. It is almost impossible to win the argument that social protection is affordable if the labour movement itself subscribes to the logic of private financing for social protection. For PSI, this contributes to

advancing the same neoliberal paradigm of development that led to a global crisis and austerity. Ten years after the crisis, IFIs keep preaching that the remedy is more of the medication that has led to the world's current state of social illness. Unions should be bold in arguing that private financing for social protection is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Its objective is to expand the scope for profit and interest through social protection financing mechanisms. Unions should insist that public social protection systems are paramount.

Gijs Justaert, Coordinator, We Social Movements (WSM)

- The WSM and the Thematic Network on the Right to Social Protection appreciate their participation in Workers Network. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, WSM is promoting a strategy for joining forces of trade unions, social movements and social organizations, reaching out to workers who are not yet affiliated to a trade union, as well as working with organizations that are working on realizing the right to social protection. WSM is keen to share with the Workers Network some of good examples of joint collaboration which have resulted in real policy changes in the national level.

Marcelina Bautista, Secretary General, National Union of Workers and Domestic Workers (SINACTRAHO), Mexico

- Domestic workers have built an important space through the International Domestic Workers Confederation, and the [Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 \(No. 189\)](#) has further united this category at the global level. However, only 25 countries have ratified the convention so far, 15 of them from Latin America. It is important that trade unions in other countries promote the ratification of this Convention. 60 million of the world's 67 million domestic workers still do not have access to any kind of social security coverage. Domestic workers are neglected by laws, which put them under "special" status that are discriminatory as domestic workers do not enjoy the same rights as other workers. Unions not only have to call for investment for expanding social security coverage, but also for making the right to social protection a reality for all, including for domestic workers. After 19 years of struggle, domestic workers managed to change the law in Mexico, which now provides the same rights to this category as everyone else.

Francisca Altagracia Jiménez, Vice President of the Autonomous Confederation of the Working Class (CASC), Dominican Republic, and Vice President of the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA/CSA)

- The initiatives of trade unions have been providing government with experiences, especially when it comes to extending the right to social protection to workers in the informal economy who are currently excluded. Rather than a cost, social protection is an investment. This argument can help prompt governments to take steps towards changing the system and extending social protection coverage to workers in the informal economy as well. There are many different fronts where the labour movement efforts are needed. While there is an ILO Convention on domestic workers, much needs to be done to encourage countries to ratify it.
- The global Workers Network is very important, but national networks are also key for achieving social change. As a trade union, CASC participates in a national network in the Dominican Republic together with universities, NGOs, ministries, civil society organizations, etc., to advocate for social protection.



CONCLUSIONS

Cicero Pereira da Silva, Secretary of Social Policy, Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA/CSA)

Workers' organizations participating in the Third Annual Meeting of the Social Protection, Freedom and Justice for Workers Network acknowledged that ensuring social protection coverage for all is a human right and that the health and lives of workers are not a commodity.

Workers' organizations have demonstrated their commitment to a number of actions to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs on social protection:

- Defend social security and occupational safety and health as human rights and strategic elements of decent work;
- Defend comprehensive, solidarity-based, redistributive and universal social security system under the overall responsibility of the State, rejecting any privatization;
- Defend tripartism in the design, monitoring, and management of social protection systems;
- Defend maternity protection and the urgent recognition of care as a right, and care work as a component of social protection;
- Defend international legal standards that guarantee the right to social security for migrants in regional integration processes;
- Strengthening clauses on comprehensive occupational health within labour agreements, and gender equality clauses within collective bargaining agreements;
- Continue promoting the ratification and implementation of the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202);
- Call for the strengthening of social protection for all workers – formal and informal, independent of contract type, gender or migration status;
- Demand coherence between agreed commitments at international level to extend social protection and actions taken at the national level;
- Support workers in the informal economy to access comprehensive social protection while at the same time fostering transition from the informal to formal economy.

The Workers Network will convene another annual meeting at the end of 2020. More information to follow in due course. Make sure you subscribe to our newsletter in our [web page](#).

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