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ON THE FUTURE OF WORK



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Work for a brighter future



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Executive summary

The future of work

New forces are transforming the world of work. The transitions involved call for decisive action.

Countless opportunities lie ahead to improve the quality of working lives, expand choice, close the gender gap, reverse the damages wreaked by global inequality, and much more. Yet none of this will happen by itself. Without decisive action we will be heading into a world that widens existing inequalities and uncertainties.

Technological advances – artificial intelligence, automation and robotics – will create new jobs, but those who lose their jobs in this transition may be the least equipped to seize the new opportunities. Today's skills will not match the jobs of tomorrow and newly acquired skills may quickly become obsolete. The greening of our economies will create millions of jobs as we adopt sustainable practices and clean technologies but other jobs will disappear as countries scale back their carbon- and resource-intensive industries. Changes in demographics are no less significant. Expanding youth populations in some parts of the world and ageing populations in others may place pressure on labour markets and social security systems, yet in these shifts lie new possibilities to afford care and inclusive, active societies.

We need to seize the opportunities presented by these transformative changes to create a brighter future and deliver economic security, equal opportunity and social justice – and ultimately reinforce the fabric of our societies.

Seizing the moment: Reinvigorating the social contract

Forging this new path requires committed action on the part of governments as well as employers' and workers' organizations. They need to reinvigorate the social contract that gives working people a just share of economic progress, respect for their rights and protection against risk in return for their continuing contribution to the economy. Social dialogue can play a key role in ensuring the relevance of this contract to managing the changes under way when all the actors in the world of work participate fully, including the many millions of workers who are currently excluded.

A human-centred agenda

We propose a **human-centred agenda for the future of work** that strengthens the social contract by placing people and the work they do at the centre of economic and social policy and business practice. This agenda consists of three pillars of action, which in combination would drive growth, equity and sustainability for present and future generations:

1. INCREASING INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE'S CAPABILITIES

In enabling people to thrive in a carbon-neutral, digital age, our approach goes beyond human capital to the broader dimensions of development and progress in living standards, including the rights and enabling environment that widen people's opportunities and improve their well-being.

- *A universal entitlement to lifelong learning that enables people to acquire skills and to reskill and upskill.* Lifelong learning encompasses formal and informal learning from early childhood and basic education through to adult learning. Governments, workers and employers, as well as educational institutions, have complementary responsibilities in building an effective and appropriately financed lifelong learning ecosystem.
- *Stepping up investments in the institutions, policies and strategies that will support people through future of work transitions.* Young people will need help in navigating the increasingly difficult school-to-work transition. Older workers will need expanded choices that enable them to remain economically active as long as they choose and that will create a lifelong active society. All workers will need support through the increasing number of labour market transitions over the course of their lives. Active labour market policies need to become proactive and public employment services to be expanded.
- *Implementing a transformative and measurable agenda for gender equality.* The world of work begins at home. From parental leave to investment in public care services, policies need to foster the sharing of unpaid care work in the home to create genuine equality of opportunity in the workplace. Strengthening women's voice and leadership, eliminating violence and harassment at work and implementing pay transparency policies are preconditions for gender equality. Specific measures are also needed to address gender equality in the technology-enabled jobs of tomorrow.

- *Providing universal social protection from birth to old age.* The future of work requires a strong and responsive social protection system based on the principles of solidarity and risk sharing, which supports people's needs over the life cycle. This calls for a social protection floor that affords a basic level of protection to everyone in need, complemented by contributory social insurance schemes that provide increased levels of protection.

2. INCREASING INVESTMENT IN THE INSTITUTIONS OF WORK

Our recommendations seek to strengthen and revitalize the institutions of work. From regulations and employment contracts to collective agreements and labour inspection systems, these institutions are the building blocks of just societies. They forge pathways to formalization, reduce working poverty and secure a future of work with dignity, economic security and equality.

- *Establishing a Universal Labour Guarantee.* All workers, regardless of their contractual arrangement or employment status, should enjoy fundamental workers' rights, an "adequate living wage" (ILO Constitution, 1919), maximum limits on working hours and protection of safety and health at work. Collective agreements or laws and regulations can raise this protection floor. This proposal also allows for safety and health at work to be recognized as a fundamental principle and right at work.
- *Expanding time sovereignty.* Workers need greater autonomy over their working time, while meeting enterprise needs. Harnessing technology to expand choice and achieve a balance between work and personal life can help them realize this goal and address the pressures that come with the blurring of boundaries between working time and private time. It will take continued efforts to implement maximum limits on working time alongside measures to improve productivity, as well as minimum hour guarantees to create real choices for flexibility and control over work schedules.
- *Ensuring collective representation of workers and employers through social dialogue as a public good, actively promoted through public policies.* All workers must enjoy freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, with the State as the guarantor of those rights. Workers' and employers' organizations must strengthen their representative legitimacy through innovative organizing techniques that reach those who are engaged in new business models, including through the use of technology. They must also use their convening power to bring diverse interests to the table.

- *Harnessing and managing technology for decent work.* This means workers and managers negotiating the design of work. It also means adopting a “human-in-command” approach to artificial intelligence that ensures that the final decisions affecting work are taken by human beings. An international governance system for digital labour platforms should be established to require platforms (and their clients) to respect certain minimum rights and protections. Technological advances also demand regulation of data use and algorithmic accountability in the world of work.

3. INCREASING INVESTMENT IN DECENT AND SUSTAINABLE WORK

We recommend transformative investments, in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- *Incentives to promote investments in key areas for decent and sustainable work.* Such investments will also advance gender equality and can create millions of jobs and new opportunities for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. The development of the rural economy, where the future of many the world’s workers lies, should become a priority. Directing investment to high-quality physical and digital infrastructure is necessary to close the divides and support high-value services.
- *Reshaping business incentive structures for longer-term investment approaches and exploring supplementary indicators of human development and well-being.* These actions can include fair fiscal policies, revised corporate accounting standards, enhanced stakeholder representation and changes in reporting practices. New measures of country progress also need to be developed to account for the distributional dimensions of growth, the value of unpaid work performed in the service of households and communities and the externalities of economic activity, such as environmental degradation.

Taking responsibility

We call on all stakeholders to take responsibility for building a just and equitable future of work. Urgent action to strengthen the social contract in each country requires increasing investment in people’s capabilities and the institutions of work and harnessing opportunities for decent and sustainable work. Countries need to establish national strategies on the future of work through social dialogue between governments and workers’ and employers’ organizations.

We recommend that all relevant multilateral institutions strengthen their joint work on this agenda. We recommend in particular the establishment of more systemic and substantive working relations between the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Bretton Woods institutions and the ILO. There are strong, complex and crucial links between trade, financial, economic and social policies. The success of the human-centred growth and development agenda we propose depends heavily on coherence across these policy areas.

The ILO has a unique role to play in supporting the delivery of this agenda, guided by its rights-based, normative mandate and in full respect of its tripartite character. The ILO can become a focal point in the international system for social dialogue, guidance and analysis of national future of work strategies as well as for examining how the application of technology can positively affect work design and worker well-being.

We further recommend that particular attention be given to the universality of the ILO mandate. This implies scaling up its activities to include those who have historically remained excluded from social justice and decent work, notably those working in the informal economy. It equally implies innovative action to address the growing diversity of situations in which work is performed, in particular the emerging phenomenon of digitally mediated work in the platform economy. We view a universal labour guarantee as an appropriate tool to deal with these challenges and recommend that the ILO give urgent attention to its implementation.

We see this report as the beginning of a journey. Because the ILO brings together the governments, employers and workers of the world, it is well suited to be a compass and guide for the journey ahead.

