



2025 HLPF Thematic Review of SDG 8

Technical Background Paper

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Note: The present paper provides in-depth analysis, facts and figures in support of the [Secretariat Background Note for the SDG8 Session at the HLPF 2025](#). An earlier version was prepared by ILO colleagues as input to the [UN Experts Group Meeting \(EGM\) on SDG 8 convened by DESA and ILO in New York from 6 to 7 February 2025](#), while the present, revised version also reflects the deliberations at this meeting ([Meeting Report](#)) and valuable contributions by colleagues across the UN system. Please note that the views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations, ILO, or their senior managements.

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Introduction

Overall progress on the twelve interconnected SDG8 targets has been slow and insufficient to meet the 2030 ambition/targets. Compared to the previous SDG 8 review (2019), significant gaps persist with no clear signs of narrowing. Progress has also been uneven across regions. Often, effective policies have not been implemented due to poor design, financial constraints and/or insufficient capacities of institutions. Amid these fragilities, growing concerns are emerging about the erosion of workers' rights, including fundamental principles and rights at work.

The present paper offers some insights on what is dragging progress, what the blind spots are, and outlines options for the way forward.

Progress and prospects

Global progress on SDG labour market indicators shows mixed results, with few positive trends overshadowed by persistent challenges that hinder the achievement of SDG targets. Working poverty has declined globally to 6.9 per cent in 2024, but nearly 244 million workers still live in extreme poverty, with significant regional disparities. Productivity growth has shown slight improvement, with rates of 1.2 and 1.9 per cent in 2023 and 2024. Nevertheless, it remains below pre-pandemic trends, reflecting ongoing challenges in achieving sustainable recovery. Inequality-related indicators also present a mixed picture. For instance, the labour income share in GDP has resumed its long-term decline, putting upward pressure on income inequality and delinking economic growth from rising standards of living for many workers. Gender parity in managerial positions has improved to some extent, with women holding 35.4 per cent of such roles in 2023. However, globally, the gender pay gap is still above 20 per cent, and achieving full gender pay parity would still take 55 years at the current rate of progress.

Employment challenges remain severe for women and youth. The global unemployment rate stayed at a historic low of 5.0 per cent in 2024, yet youth and women continue to face higher unemployment rates. And labour force participation rates of both groups continue to be low. The share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) has decreased in most countries yet remains unacceptably high in many, especially for young women in regions like Central and Southern Asia, the MENA region and many countries in Africa. Globally the NEET rate for young women stood at 28.1 in 2023, compared to 13.1 for young men. One in three (33 per cent) of the world's young people is currently living in a country that is "off track" in its target to reduce the NEET rate.¹ Furthermore, underemployment linked with a proliferation of insecure forms of employment (e.g., gig work, zero-hour contracts, involuntary part-time work) hinder economic growth in developed countries by reducing productivity, suppressing wages, and dampening consumer demand.

Meanwhile, additional key indicators show signs of deterioration or stagnation, especially regarding workers' rights. Compliance with fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW) remains problematic. This has often been exacerbated by the significant and continued deterioration in the respect and protection of the right of freedom of association and collective bargaining across the world – driven, alarmingly, by violations of fundamental civil liberties of workers, employers and their organizations.² Also progress in the fight to eradicate child labour has been moving in the wrong direction. The number of children in child labour rose to 160 million worldwide – an increase of 8.4 million children between 2016 and 2020. Forced labour also rose, particularly in the informal economy and among migrant workers and women and girls in domestic work. Fatal work-related accidents see a downward trend, but non-fatal injuries are rising in certain sectors while long-term occupational diseases (e.g. cancers and mental health) have become the dominant threat to safe and healthy working environments.

¹ ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Decent work, brighter futures.

² In 2023, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) noted with concern the increasing disparities among ILO Member States in relation to respect for civil liberties, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and the adverse impact on the effective application of FPRW. (Source: ILO, Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, ILC.111/III(A), 2023, 51.)

Informal employment that impacts the adequacy of earnings, occupational safety and health and working conditions remains pervasive. Today, two billion workers — representing 58 per cent of the world’s employed population — are in informal employment, a situation that stems from and reinforces social and economic transformations of developing economies. Rates remain especially high in least developed countries, with an average rate of 89 per cent.

The world’s prospects to achieve SDG 8 by 2030 are rapidly waning. Indicators representing economic performance and capacity show better prospects than those representing social inclusion and decent work. Indeed, among the social indicators, only the working poverty rate has seen good progress, yet the currently rising number of working poor in low-income countries makes the elimination of poverty everywhere by 2030 highly unlikely.

Global prospects for the other social indicators are also unsatisfactory or poor, particularly in areas such as social protection coverage, gender gaps in management, youth NEET rates and labour income shares as mentioned above, meaning that the world will remain far away from meeting the SDG targets. In the economy dimension, labour productivity growth and R&D expenditure, both of which are arguably related, also perform unsatisfactorily. The data indicates that a major acceleration of progress is required and that current policy approaches so far have largely failed to deliver.

Table 1: Prospects of achieving selected targets of SDG8 and related targets by 2030, World

Economy dimension		Social inclusion and decent work dimension	
Target	Prospect	Target	Prospect
8.1 GDP per capita	Good	1.1 Working poverty	good
8.2 Labour prod. growth	Unsatisfactory	1.3 Social protection	unsatisfactory
8.5 Unemployment	Good	5.5 Female managers	unsatisfactory
8.10 Financial account	Good	8.3 Informality	poor
9.5 R&D expenditure	Unsatisfactory	8.5 Gender income gap	poor
7.1 Electricity	Excellent	8.6 Youth NEET	unsatisfactory
		8.7 Child labour	unsatisfactory
		10.4 Labour income share	unsatisfactory

Note: The methodology to score prospects of achieving a target is based on chapter 1 of ILO (2023).³ The methodology takes existing achievements and speed of progress into account. For example, a country with already very high GDP per capita would score excellent, even if growth rates were low. SDG8 includes additional targets for which prospects could not yet be quantified.

What is hindering progress?

Member States' efforts have been commendable, as evidenced in the Voluntary National Review (VNR). By the end of 2025 HLPF, 404 VNRs will have been presented. 128 VNRs from 100 countries have covered SDG 8: 47 in 2019, 42 in 2021 and 39 in 2025. The 2019 and 2021 VNRs exercises and the 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Reports highlight a commitment by many countries to enhance employment opportunities and advance progress on SDG8. Voluntary National Reviews have offered opportunities for participatory monitoring. Incorporating labour rights indicators and tools like supply chain scorecards can help assess progress on decent work, foster transparency, and guide corrective action.

³ ILO. 2023. Transformative change and SDG8: The critical role of collective capabilities and societal learning. <https://doi.org/10.54394/HKDP3268>

However, progress is hindered by numerous interconnected socioeconomic and political challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and geopolitical tensions and uncertainties have magnified the socio-economic vulnerabilities of millions of people. Rising levels of national debt and limited fiscal space constrain governments' investment in gender-responsive social protection and employment policies. Low-income and lower-middle-income countries, already facing chronic financial stress, struggle to mobilize the resources needed for short-term and long-term development. For instance, debt service obligations of developing countries reached a record high in 2024, exceeding US\$400 billion, diverting resources from social spending and investment in job creation.⁶ Low-income countries dedicate an average of 14 per cent of their domestic revenue to interest payments, compared to only around 3.5 per cent in developed countries.⁷ Low-income and lower-middle-income countries face a US\$982 billion fiscal stimulus gap for economic and labour market recovery, including the under-investment in social protection.⁴ This gap hinders their ability to create the currently 400 million decent jobs needed globally.⁵

Unsupportive macroeconomic policy frameworks further constrain countries' ability to effectively respond to these challenges and undertake much-needed structural reforms. Resource mobilization at the domestic (tax reforms) and international levels (ODA, climate funds, debt swaps) as well as FfD and IFI reforms are of critical importance to overcome these challenges.

The global economy is yet to fully utilize the potential of creating decent jobs in new emerging sectors. While emerging sectors like the green, digital, and care economies have the potential to create millions of decent jobs, the reality falls short of expectations. This is primarily due to the lack of effective policies (including skills development, active labour market, and social protection policies) that can support transitions for workers and enterprises. In many cases, decent job creation is not integrated into industrial and sectoral policies and remains a secondary consideration. And in many cases, these sectors might provide jobs, but not necessarily high-quality, decent jobs.

Future of work drivers have a large impact on labour markets. Digitalization and AI continue to reshape labour markets across all regions, yet governance frameworks have not kept pace. Regulatory measures to ensure that platform work and AI technologies support, rather than undermine, decent work are rare. This includes enacting labour laws applicable to platform work, strengthening algorithmic accountability, embedding ethical safeguards, and expanding inclusive public digital infrastructure. These actions are critical to bridge digital divides, address emerging forms of precarity, and enable equitable participation in the digital economy.

Introduction of automation and digitalization often threatens jobs of men and women in different ways. Adaptation requires attention to gendered barriers such as less access to reskilling for women as result of disproportionate care responsibilities, digital gender divides and occupational segregation, including underrepresentation in STEM fields. Achieving gender equality requires the adoption of a suite of inclusive, transformative policies and actions, grounded in international labour standards.

⁴ Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions (2022). Financing Frameworks. See also ILO 2024, '[World Social Protection Report 2024-26: Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition](#)', 2024. To ensure at least a social protection floor, low- and middle-income countries require an additional US\$ 1.4 trillion or 3.3 per cent of their aggregate GDP (2024) per annum, composed by 2.0 per cent of GDP or US\$ 833 billion for essential health care and 1.3 per cent of GDP or US\$ 552 billion for five social protection cash benefits.

⁵ Cattaneo, U., Schwarzer, H., Razavi, S., Visentin, A. 2024. [Financing gap for universal social protection: Global, regional and national estimates and strategies for creating fiscal space](#), ILO Working Paper 113 (Geneva, ILO).

What are blind spots?

Economic pressures, coupled with rising political tensions, are eroding labour rights. Multiple and overlapping economic and political crises and geopolitical tensions have continued to constrain labour market recovery in the post-COVID period, with important consequences for FPRW advancement. Armed conflicts and situations of wider insecurity and fragility have grown in number across the world, with staggering economic costs and an associated “vicious cycle” of unemployment, informal (including non-contractual and unregistered work), other decent work deficits, and, ultimately, FPRW violations. At the same time, a deterioration in the rule of law and in respect for civil liberties and human rights at work, leading to a shrinking civic space and democratic deficits, have seriously undermined the realization of all FPRW in some countries.⁶ These developments come together with well-known longer-term structural trends in the world of work – including persistent informality, low levels of social protection coverage, the growing adverse impacts of climate change, and structural transformations in the organization of production and work.

Climate change threatens workers’ health and safety. As record-level heatwaves increase in prevalence across the globe, addressing the occupational safety and health of millions of persons exposed to outdoor work takes on urgency in the policy agendas of a growing number of afflicted countries. Climate change is reported to create serious health hazards for an estimated 2.4 billion workers who are exposed to excessive heat. As the heat crisis accelerates, improved safety and health measures to prevent injuries from excessive heat in the workplace could help to save up to US\$361 billion globally in lost income and medical treatment expenses.⁷ Climate change also brings the risk of destroying the livelihoods of millions of people.

Many workers remain excluded from growth and the benefits of structural transformation, with signs of declining job quality. Following substantial cuts during periods of high inflation, real wages are gradually recovering, with wage inequality declining in many countries. Yet, the persistent challenges of low pay cannot be ignored, as millions of workers – in the formal and the informal economy – across the world continue to earn very low wages and are still living in poverty or remain at risk of falling back into poverty. Globally the bottom 10 per cent of wage earners earn less than US\$250 PPP per month, and the bottom 20 per cent earn less than US\$450 PPP per month.⁸ Furthermore, as noted earlier, the labour income share has continued to decline since the pandemic. Although not a new phenomenon, there has also been a steady increase in the prevalence of temporary employment, part-time and on-call work, and work on or through digital platforms in recent years, while the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the rapid expansion of home-based work, including telework.⁹ While these various emerging forms of employment can offer new opportunities and bring benefits to workers and enterprises, they can also exacerbate decent work deficits and reduce economic security.

⁶ In 2023, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) noted with concern the increasing disparities among ILO Member States in relation to respect for civil liberties, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and the adverse impact on the effective application of FPRW. (Source: ILO, Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, ILC.111/III(A), 2023, 51.)

⁷ ILO, Heat at work: Implications for safety and health, 2024.

⁸ See Global Wage Report 2024-25, Is Wage Inequality Decreasing Globally, ILO, 2024

⁹ See, for example, analysis of global trends in ILO, [Leaving no one behind: Building inclusive labour protection in an evolving world of work](#), ILC.111/V(Rev.), 2023, part 1.2; and ILO and the World Health Organization (WHO), Healthy and Safe Telework – Technical Brief, 2021.

Therefore, protecting workers requires both labour protection and social protection. Together, they reduce inequalities and contribute to building more inclusive and resilient societies and ensure that no one is left behind. Labour protection ensures adequate and fair pay, a safe and healthy working environment, workplaces free from discrimination, violence and harassment, decent working hours, maternity protection and working time arrangements, and work and life balance, regardless of employment and contractual status. Adequate social protection provides access to health care, old age pensions and income security for those within and outside the labour market. National social protection systems provide financial support and access to services for individuals and families against a range of risks and contingencies, including unemployment, illness, injury, old age, and provides protection over the life course.¹⁰

Moreover, financing social protection cannot be delinked from decent employment, as workers' and employers' social security contributions are primary funding sources of social protection systems. The formalization of work supports government tax revenues, expanding the fiscal space for supporting employment programmes and also social protection benefits. In turn, a well-functioning social protection system contributes to increased productivity and employment, as risks are pooled and the economy is more resilient to crises as a result and as it creates demand of people who in unprotected situations would not be able to consume goods

The way forward: priorities for accelerated action

Being inclusive in setting and strengthening the institutional mechanisms for decent work-led sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth is a precondition for success. Given its breadth, making progress on Goal 8 necessitates the integrated planning of a broad array of actors including ministries of economy, environment and labour, local governments, trade unions, employers' organizations, and the private sector, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. A particular emphasis should be given to ensure that also the voices of disadvantaged groups are included in the decision-making processes. Social dialogue, particularly at the national and sectoral levels, is a vital governance mechanism for inclusive and effective policy developments. Evidence shows that integrating social dialogue into all stages of employment policymaking strengthens policy coherence across government actors by balancing economic growth with social progress, ultimately advancing the goal of decent work for all.¹¹ By broadening participation in decision making, social dialogue enhances the legitimacy, ownership and effectiveness of policies, fostering stronger commitment to their implementation. This, in turn, increases the adaptability, agility and resilience of economies.

Macroeconomic policies provide the enabling environment for inclusive growth. Gender-responsive, pro-employment macroeconomic policies can drive a virtuous cycle of inclusive and sustainable growth supporting just transitions. A virtuous dynamic of higher GDP per capita, full and productive employment and universal social protection should be promoted, inclusive of transition constraints and opportunities. Country-specific macroeconomic policy choices include budget reallocations, fiscal reform and improved public finance management, channelled to greater social and infrastructure investment that provide high social and economic returns. It also includes debt management, ODA and bridging financing gaps. All these mean that decent jobs should be at the centre of economic and financial policies and hence everyone's business within the government.

Economic diversification and a targeted sectoral approach can be highly effective in boosting decent job creation and reducing informal and precarious employment. Both quantitative and

¹⁰ ILO. 2024. 'World Social Protection Report 2024-26: Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition', op. cit.

¹¹ ILO, [Social Dialogue Report 2024](#), ILO

qualitative employment goals should be explicitly elaborated and pursued within sectoral policy development and implementation processes. Growth models need to look beyond GDP and aim at full employment and structural transformation. Differentiated policy mixes will need to be tailored to specific national circumstance. At the sectoral level, international normative instruments are bolstered by a wide array of sector-specific tools and guidelines to inform and support gender-responsive, pro-employment sectoral policymaking.

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, trade, investment flows and global supply chains play a pivotal role in shaping employment outcomes and labour conditions. Yet, without effective governance, these mechanisms can perpetuate labour rights violations and decent work deficits. It is essential that trade and investment policies, bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, and supply chain governance frameworks be aligned with international labour standards and promote the realization of decent work for all.

Heighten engagement of the private sector, and especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) need to become a driver of productivity, inclusive economic growth and decent job creation. Although MSMEs play a crucial role in creating decent jobs, their potential remains underutilized due to productivity gaps and a lack of policy coherence and integration between employment and MSME policies. Policies should be strengthened to ensure productivity gains translate into more and better jobs.¹² In this regard, an integrated and holistic “productivity ecosystem” approach can be considered, where policies and institutions across multiple domains align, complemented by effective social dialogue among governments, enterprises (including MSMEs), workers, and other stakeholders. This approach fosters collaboration and strengthens the positive cycle between productivity growth and decent job creation.

Investment in people’s skills is key for successful and inclusive structural transformation policies, and skilling, re-skilling and upskilling people should happen throughout their life courses. However, such investments need to happen in parallel to the creation of decent jobs, as overeducation can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. In addition, institutions need to be capacitated to ensure that they can implement policies that bring demand and supply together.

Social protection needs to be part of an integrated solution to tackle the many structural inequalities and constraints that hamper inclusive and sustainable development, including inclusive and just transitions, and restore trust in the state, thereby repairing the social contract. Integrated policy solutions include, for example, formalizing informal employment arrangements and enterprises, bolstering public investment in the care economy and fostering decent work. The latter can be achieved by providing unemployed workers with income security through employment retention, public employment or unemployment support schemes, and training opportunities to enable them to reskill or enhance their existing skills that just transitions will demand. Social protection can also be better integrated with family-friendly policies, for example on childcare and parental leave, to guarantee family income security and well-being, facilitate women’s opportunities to seize employment opportunities while also creating decent jobs in the care sector. Investment in the care economy is a high-impact employment strategy, particularly for women. It must be embedded in gender-responsive macroeconomic and employment planning. Policy frameworks for just transitions should be participatory and forward-looking, supporting workers through anticipatory skills development, income security and other forms of social

¹² [Job Creation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Recommendation, 1998 \(No. 189\)](#)

protection, and inclusive governance. This is essential to ensure no one is left behind in transitions toward green, digital, and care economies.

Boosting wages and tackling wage inequalities through strengthened wage policies and institutions need to become a common goal. Wages and other labour incomes are essential drivers of consumption and investment, contributing to a strong and sustainable economy. Strong and effective labour market institutions, minimum wage setting mechanisms, social dialogue and collective bargaining are essential to ensure that productivity growth translates into wage growth, particularly for workers at the lower end of the spectrum. In recent years, there has been growing interest in living wages, which enable workers and their families to maintain a decent standard of living while considering national circumstances, including both workers' needs and economic factors.

Targeted policies driven by international labour standards and fundamental principles and rights at work are needed to ensure a successful implementation of SDG 8. Policies must address the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, older persons, migrants, displaced people, and persons with disabilities. Intergenerational approaches to employment, supported by inclusive labour market policies, are vital to leave no one behind. Ending child labour and forced labour requires integrated, community-based approaches that link education, livelihoods, and social protection. Youth engagement, cross-sector coordination and mandatory due diligence by businesses are key pillars of a renewed strategy.

Implementation strategies to actively expand the fiscal space for employment and social protection to close the financing gap are key. Innovative financing tools—such as green and social bonds, global funds for employment, sustainable public procurement, and results-based financing—can help scale up investments in decent work, social protection, and just transitions. Integrated financing strategies should combine domestic resource mobilization, including progressive taxation on income and property, social security contributions, SDG-aligned private investment and ODA. It is essential to support employment frameworks under which investment activities of both private and public sectors can find their optimal fit as well as generate better multipliers. To accelerate progress and create the political will to expand the fiscal space for social protection, the ILO and USP2030 have launched a call to action on extending social protection coverage with a specific quantitative target to increase social protection coverage in every country by at least 2 percentage points per year.¹³ The [Global Accelerator for Jobs and Just Transitions](#) supports countries to identify concrete actions to close the financing gap in social protection and employment, including enhancing fiscal space and promoting investments with social impact.

Achieving the objectives of SDG 8 goals requires reforms of the multilateral system and global financial architecture to better respond to the development needs of all countries, particularly the most vulnerable. Current global financial governance structures must be reformed to enhance representation, equity, and voice of developing countries. Strengthening international cooperation and coherence among the Bretton Woods institutions, multilateral development banks, and United Nations system is critical. Furthermore, an enabling international environment should include fairer debt restructuring mechanisms, enhanced access to concessional finance, and increased liquidity support in times of crisis. The global community must deliver on long-standing commitments to Official Development Assistance and climate finance, while ensuring that global tax reforms and measures to tackle illicit financial flows help build more robust and sovereign fiscal spaces in

¹³ The call to action applies only to country that have not yet reached universal or near universal coverage.

developing countries. Only through a reformed multilateral system can structural inequalities be addressed and the ambition of the 2030 Agenda realized.

Strengthened and innovative partnerships are needed, including public–private–partnerships, grounded in inclusive social dialogue, that can drive innovation and accountability in decent work strategies. South–South and triangular cooperation offer peer-driven solutions and knowledge exchange to localize the SDGs. In addition, public procurement can be a powerful tool to promote decent work, gender equality and sustainability.

Addressing data and knowledge gaps is key to improving policy and implementation. Robust, disaggregated and policy-relevant data are essential to guide interventions, monitor progress and ensure accountability. Strengthening statistical systems - including labour force surveys, administrative data, and innovative sources such as satellite data and AI-based analytics - is critical to capture emerging forms of work and job quality. Particular attention is needed to develop new indicators on work insecurity, social dialogue, and employment transitions, and to ensure data are disaggregated by gender, age, disability and migration status. Ethical and participatory data systems can support rights-based policymaking and enhance coherence across employment and social policies.

SDG 8 should serve as a transformative lever across the 2030 Agenda through comprehensive approaches. Comprehensiveness is needed across sectors and ministries during implementation through whole-of-government approaches. Comprehensive approaches are also needed across SDGs linking goals on poverty eradication, gender equality, education, social protection, climate action, and sustainable consumption and production. This can ensure to unlock synergies and avoid fragmentation.