1. Introduction

This EGM reviewed the progress, challenges and opportunities for Sustainable Development Goal 8 which aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. The Expert Group Meeting contained three segments: where do we stand currently with the SDGs being achieved, especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic; SDG interlinkages and data aspects; and finally challenges, policy opportunities and the acceleration of the SDGs. The segments were introduced by expert presentations followed by questions, comments and inputs by participating experts on SDG 8. The EGM closed with a summary and key points from each presenter.

2. Stocktaking and challenges

Speakers indicated that the world was already not on track to achieving the SDGs prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Much of the progress that had been made for SDG 8 and the different indicators prior to the pandemic had been slowed or reversed. Regional differences on SDG 8 progress were evident, with more progress being made in high-income countries. There was a unique opportunity to advance decision making and to forge global solidarity and multilateral collaboration for progressing on SDG 8 in COVID-19 recovery.

Some examples of these trends included the following:

Unemployment was one of the central indicators for SDG 8. Globally, unemployment rates had been falling between 2015 and 2019, primarily due to reduction in unemployment in high-income countries. In upper middle-income countries, by contrast, unemployment rates had increased already prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Global unemployment in the context of the pandemic rose by some 33 million and the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs had been lost. These working-hour losses were reflected in higher levels of unemployment and inactivity and translated into substantial losses in labour income – reinforcing the pre-existing trend a declining labour income share of GDP. The ILO estimates a global decline in labour income of 8.3 per cent in 2020. The prospects for 2021 pointed to persistent decent work deficits. Importantly, the economic impact of COVID-19 was not gender neutral: women and youth were affected disproportionately to men.

Informality continued to remain a concern under SDG 8. Globally, about 2 billion people worked in the informal economy. Prior to the pandemic, the informal employment share was already at 60.2% of global employment. There are significant regional variations, however. The situation was particularly worrisome in least developed countries, where the share of informal employment in total employment was 88.7% (2019).

On the sustainable economic development aspect of SDG 8, MSMEs, which accounted for two-thirds of jobs worldwide, were particularly in danger: they represented around 70 per cent of global employment in retail trade and almost 60 per cent in the accommodation and food services sector. MSMEs owned by women were also 27 per cent more likely to not survive the pandemic. Economic growth and an enabling environment in this regard were critical to generate employment and addressing informality.

The level of national compliance with labour rights, freedom of association and collective bargaining was another key indicator. There was some progress under this indicator prior to the pandemic and many countries were carrying out important changes in their labour legislations to ensure freedom of
association and collective bargaining. However, at the same time there remained serious violations of workers’ and employers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively.

Gender equality had made some progress, but women continued to be underrepresented in managerial positions as measured under SDG 8-connected SDG target 5.5.2. Women still earned significantly less than men throughout the world and mostly in low-income countries. They were more likely to become inactive and there was therefore a much bigger gap in labour force participation rate between women and men. It was suggested that most women’s equality advances had gone back decades with the pandemic. In this context it was important to continue the push to recognize domestic and unpaid work.

Target SDG 8.6.1, which focuses on youth and the NEET rate (not in education, employment or training), was off track in some regions even prior to the pandemic. Globally, the share of young NEET had remained stable between 2015 and 2019. This reflected a combined effect of falls in Europe and the Americas and an increase in Africa and most markedly Arab States. Young females were more than twice as likely as men to be NEET - in 2019 rates were 31.1% for young women and 14% for young men. In lower middle-income countries almost75% of NEETs are female. The NEET rate was likely to rise due to COVID-19.

SDG target 8.b.1 calls for developed and operationalized national strategies for youth employment as a distinct category as part of a national employment strategy. It therefore looked at governments’ commitment to addressing the national youth employment challenge. One third of countries did have a strategy in place, some had strategies but there was no implementation yet, and the remainder were in the process of formulating a strategy. Most of these focussed on skills development and very few had a component of job creation for young people. As a result, there were a number of young people who were well educated but who continued to not find jobs. Furthermore, it was important to also apply a sectoral approach as most young people tended to concentrate in certain sectors including tourism, services and SMEs. This was particularly valid in low-income countries, and notably in Latin America. At the same time, some labour shortages existed such as sexual, reproductive, maternal, new-born and adolescent health (SRMNAH) workers and notably midwives.

The EGM also considered interlinkages of SDG 8 with other SDGs and data issues in particular against the background of the findings of the IAE-SDG contained in their reports in interlinkages of 2018 and 2020. The United Nations Statistical Commission had created an Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which in turn established a working group on interlinkages between SDG indicators to examine the possibilities for interlinkages for the statistics underlying the global SDG indicator framework.

The discussion focussed on examples of data-based integrated analysis and visualization tools. It was recognized that such analysis showed significant regional differentiation which could inform policy making. Strategies to explore and use these interlinkages were required. This would allow statistical systems to support bridging policy fields and more integrated analysis of economic, social and environmental developments. Some of the major issues discussed in relation to SDG data and visualisation were around disaggregation, data stewardship, integration of geographical information systems and statistics, the use of administrative records, and capturing the impacts of COVID-19.

It was also noted that the ILO report Time to Act for SDG 8 (2019) explored interlinkages and argued for a synergistic and integrated approach to achieve the 2030 Agenda with SDG 8 at its heart.

3. COVID-19 crisis impacts and recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic had pushed the world away from the SDG 8 targets and other related goals (especially SDGs 1, 2, 5 and 10), with more inequality occurring for vulnerable groups like women, youth, individuals in the informal sector and MSMEs - we did leave more people behind during the pandemic.
Additional observations in the discussion included the need to address entrepreneurship as a key topic to achieve SDG 8 and other Goals and to invest in social enterprises, including cooperatives. The importance of resilient companies was underlined, in particular small and medium sized companies, and their ability to survive crises like COVID-19. If SMEs faltered, they were no longer there to create employment, which was central to achieve SDG 8. In this connection, it was noted that productivity and other drivers of growth were challenged in the pandemic. In addition, specific sectors, such as sustainable tourism, were also badly affected.

The meeting agreed that there were a number of dimensions to vulnerability which needed to be addressed. There was significant impact of the pandemic on those going from school to work in the 15-17 year old age group specifically in the agro-food system. In general, there was a need to focus on populations in rural areas and to address the key issue of forced labour and child labour in that context. The group most impacted by COVID-19 was unskilled workers. The risk for individuals with disabilities of not being able to secure jobs and of being underrepresented in the labour force had only increased with COVID-19.

The pandemic had also brought to the forefront the digital divide among countries, within societies and within the labour force. COVID-19 had highlighted a new inequality, which was connectedness, also beyond economic connectivity. New inequalities had been created, for example for workers who could not work remotely, in particular in the service and health sector. While many were able to maintain salaries and increase savings by staying at home, others could not do so because of the nature of their jobs. This meant ensuring safety and health at work within the overall health policy would help address the lack of progress for SDG 8 especially for vulnerable groups like women, youth, individuals in the informal sector and SMEs. Healthcare needed to go back to basics, for example with COVID testing available to all workers and vaccine accessibility and no discrimination for those who did not have access to vaccination.

From the technology perspective, however, COVID-19 had also demonstrated how the world of work could change with the accelerated take up of technology such as virtual meeting software.

In process terms, it was noted that the crisis induced by COVID-19 was less violent and impacts could be better mitigated where there was good tripartite social dialogue among government, workers’ and employers’ organizations.

4. Policies and actions to maximize synergies, mitigate trade-offs and drive transformation

The EGM acknowledged that SDG 8 had a focus on both decent work and employment and on economic growth. They were two sides of the same coin and need to be addressed in a parallel and synergistic manner. Additionally, there was a need to address the informal sector, by considering why people chose to operate there and think about what conceptual framework was required to address informality.

Specific sectoral issues required consideration. New forms of employment such as gig economy workers needed to be addressed with the aim of establishing a clear employer-employee relationship. Women, youth and people living in rural areas would need to be enabled to use basic digital skills, especially when they were in the informal economy. For example, those who did not have a bank account, but used a mobile phone.

Despite some progress, there was still action needed to address child labour, also in the food system, as a significant amount of child labour takes place in this context. Similarly, there was a need to address target 8.7 more broadly which looks at the elimination of modern forms of trafficking and slavery and forced labour. This was also important aspect of SDG 8 action, because it was connected
to social and ethnic groups being discriminated, in particular those who were traditionally put into castes and forced in forms of bonded labour and slavery.

Trade unions requested policy action in three areas: decent job creation based on rights and on ILO standards with decent hours and wages as well as health and safety; climate friendly jobs in the green economy and investment in sustainability; and acknowledging the contribution of social partners and social dialogue.

Turning to trade-offs, the EGM noted that progress towards SDG 8 as such would not contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda if it allowed for environmental degradation and social exclusion. Similarly, actual implementation was key. For example non-discriminatory legislation for people with disabilities had gaps in implementation and enforcement that could undermine the effectiveness of legislation. States needed to take steps to make sure legislation was implemented to have a real impact.

Further, the EGM suggested to also critically consider the overall development paradigm. If socio-economic models with environmental aspects and labour were put at the centre, synergistic effects would be possible. Labour was the productive factor and could generate equality that stemmed from decent work opportunities. In the same vein, additional perspectives should be considered, for example the nexus between inclusivity and growth. Lack of access to services and poverty were often connected.

On integrated policies for SDG 8, it was proposed that job-rich and accelerated recovery must include: (i) demand-side measures with investment in strategic sectors defined by job creation potential and social demand (e.g. health care, digital, green and rural economy). These need to be accompanied with measures for skills development and social protection. (ii) Macroeconomic policy environments with “accommodative” fiscal policies and clear focus on jobs and sectoral and industrial policies for strategic investments. Similarly, employment should be at the centre of monetary policies. The UN Financing for Development process was critical in this respect. (iii) Targeted approaches are required for hard-hit groups, such as youth, women, informal workers, as well as SMEs. Employment impact assessments (qualitative and quantitative) should inform public investments.

5. Means of implementation: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

The pandemic had exacerbated troubling trends in the form of rising poverty and increasing inequalities, displayed by growing disparities between rural and urban settings, and for women and youth across societies, large job losses and enhanced vulnerabilities for large segments of the population around the world that lack social protection.

Accelerated progress on SDG 8 required an approach based on tripartite social dialogue and rights, as well as a recognition of the need for partnerships across the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda.

It was also important to recognize the need for partnerships for sustainable economic growth in addition to employment-centred policies. Sustained and sustainable economic growth was an integral part of SDG 8.

Most importantly, accelerated action for SDG 8 required commitment and political will for integrated policy action and financing from member States. In this context, the EGM also considered the current positive momentum towards a networked multilateral system in support of achieving the 2030 Agenda and to address wider matters of global security and development.