



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM  
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2025



## 2025 HLPF Thematic Review

### Summary of the Expert Group Meeting on SDG8

*SDG8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*

Organized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and partners<sup>1</sup>

ILO Office for the UN, New York, USA, 6-7 February 2025

---

<sup>1</sup> The recommendations expressed in this report are a summary of the contributions made by experts in the meeting and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Secretariat, the ILO, or their staff.

## **Contents**

1.	Introduction .....	3
2.	Overall stocktaking and challenges .....	4
3.	Issues, trends, analysis, and considerations for the future.....	7
a.	The digital transformation and structural shifts in employment .....	8
b.	Persistent informality and the challenge of transitioning to formal work .....	8
c.	Decent work in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.....	8
d.	Fundamental rights and the erosion of labor protections .....	9
e.	Eliminating child labour: urgency, scale, and integration.....	9
f.	Social protection as a foundation for resilient labor markets.....	9
g.	Science, technology and knowledge equity .....	9
h.	Financing SDG 8: systemic reform beyond access.....	10
i.	Governing global supply chains and trade with justice .....	10
j.	Bridging generations and promoting lifelong inclusion .....	10
4.	Policies and actions to drive transformation, maximize synergies, and mitigate trade-offs .....	11
a.	Reposition full employment and decent work as a central macroeconomic objective .....	11
b.	Expand and universalize social protection as a human right and economic enabler.....	11
c.	Promote formalization through inclusive, rights-based approaches .....	11
d.	Guarantee fundamental rights at work and strengthen labor institutions .....	12
e.	Eliminate child labour through integrated, community-led solutions.....	12
f.	Ensure inclusive and just transitions in the digital and green economies .....	12
g.	Reform trade, investment, and global supply chains to align with decent work goals .....	12
h.	Bridge generations through life-course approaches to employment and skills development ..	12
i.	Strengthen monitoring and statistical capacity for policy coherence and accountability .....	13
j.	Mobilize sustainable and innovative financing for decent work and inclusive growth.....	13
k.	Plan for coherence of policies and actions across SDGs and sectors .....	13
5.	Means of implementation: mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress.....	14
a.	Partnerships .....	14
b.	Global rights, norms, and standards .....	15
c.	Accountability .....	15
d.	Science and technology .....	16
e.	Financing .....	16
6.	Conclusion.....	17

## 1. Introduction

The Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on Sustainable Development Goal 8 (*“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”*) was convened in New York on 6 and 7 February 2025, in advance of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2025. The meeting was co-organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and other UN partners. It brought together a diverse group of 65 experts and practitioners from across sectors, institutions, and regions to undertake a forward-looking stocktaking of progress toward SDG 8, identify obstacles and policy failures, and formulate actionable, evidence-based recommendations to accelerate implementation in the years leading up to—and beyond—2030. In addition, experts from UN system, academia, civil society, and the private sector provided 73 written contributions.

The EGM took place at a critical juncture. As the 2030 Agenda marks its tenth anniversary, only five years remain to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet SDG 8 is among the furthest off track. While some targets have registered modest gains, particularly in access to financial services, many others - such as those on youth unemployment, informality, labor rights, and child labour - have stagnated or regressed. Global progress is further constrained by persistent macroeconomic volatility, entrenched inequalities, environmental stress, geopolitical fragmentation, and rapid technological change. These intersecting pressures have underscored both the urgency and the complexity of aligning economic development with decent work, social justice, and ecological sustainability.

In light of these dynamics, the EGM was designed not only to assess existing progress but also to catalyze fresh thinking. The meeting aimed to explore how SDG 8 can serve as a transformative lever across the 2030 Agenda, linking goals on poverty eradication, gender equality, education, social protection, climate action, and sustainable consumption and production. The deliberations were structured around twelve thematic sessions reflecting the targets of SDG 8 and cross-cutting issues such as informality, youth employment, digital and green transitions, and the evolving global architecture of finance, trade, and science and technology cooperation.

Drawing on the outcomes of earlier SDG 8 reviews at HLPF 2019 and 2021, as well as lessons from the COVID-19 recovery period, the EGM sought to address five interrelated objectives: (a) to provide a data-informed assessment of progress across SDG 8 targets; (b) to identify systemic barriers and persistent inequalities; (c) to highlight promising solutions, partnerships, and innovations; (d) to examine emerging risks and structural shifts, including climate change and digital transformation; and (e) to formulate strategic recommendations for policy, financing, and global cooperation toward 2030 and beyond.

The meeting was framed by a broad understanding of SDG 8 as encompassing not only the quantity of jobs created but also the quality of employment, the inclusiveness of growth, and the governance of labor markets in a changing world. Particular attention was paid to vulnerable and historically excluded populations, including youth, women, informal workers, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, and older workers. Across the discussions, there was broad consensus that SDG 8 must be pursued as a foundation of the wider 2030 Agenda, with decent work recognized as both a means and an end of sustainable development.

To ground the discussions in empirical evidence and current realities, the EGM was informed by recent ILO and UN system reports, including the 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report, the ILO’s World

Employment and Social Outlook, and global indicator data. Sessions were organized around guiding questions and enriched by written contributions from participants. Key issues addressed included macroeconomic and structural drivers of employment, the challenges of informal and precarious work, access to finance, labor rights and protections, child and forced labour, youth unemployment, digitalization and automation, science and technology capacity, trade and investment governance, and intergenerational inclusion.

The meeting also situated SDG 8 within broader intergovernmental and multilateral processes, including the Summit of the Future and its Pact for the Future, the Conference of Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC and its work on just transition, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), and the Second World Summit for Social Development. These linkages were explored with the aim of informing a more coherent, synergistic, and forward-looking approach to implementation, particularly as countries face accelerating environmental and technological transitions alongside growing social pressures.

Ultimately, the Expert Group Meeting offered a timely opportunity to re-energize commitment to SDG 8. It called for bold, rights-based, and inclusive policy responses to ensure that economic development meaningfully improves the lives of people, respects planetary boundaries, and promotes resilience and equity in the face of disruption. The findings and recommendations of the EGM are intended to inform the thematic review of SDG 8 at the HLPF 2025 and to contribute to a renewed and ambitious pathway for achieving decent work and inclusive growth for all. Please note that the recommendations expressed in this report are a summary of the contributions made by experts in the meeting and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Secretariat, the ILO, or their staff.

## 2. Overall stocktaking and challenges

The Expert Group Meeting took place against the backdrop of mounting evidence that Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8)—to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all—is significantly off track. Among the twelve targets under SDG 8, only one—on access to financial services—is currently on a positive trajectory. Other targets have either stagnated or regressed, particularly those related to labor productivity, youth employment, informality, labor rights, and child labour (see box).<sup>2</sup> This sobering state of affairs was a consistent thread across the opening and early sessions of the meeting.

Macroeconomic trends reveal a persistent disconnect between aggregate economic growth and improvements in the quality of employment. While headline indicators such as GDP growth and official unemployment rates offer an indication of progress, they conceal deep structural weaknesses in labor markets. Precarious employment, informality, and underemployment remain pervasive—especially in low- and middle-income countries. Informal employment affects over 2 billion workers globally and exceeds 89% in least developed countries. Women and youth are disproportionately represented in these vulnerable segments, and the number of youths not in education, employment, or training (NEET) remains alarmingly high at an estimated 269 million globally, with pronounced gender disparities. Furthermore, globally, wages continue to lag behind labour productivity.

---

<sup>2</sup> All data on SDG8 progress reported in this section are based on Sustainable Development Goals Report and ILO's World Employment and Social Outlook.

This decoupling between growth and decent work reflects deeper structural challenges in the global economy. The concentration of wealth in intangible assets and monopolistic platforms has shifted the locus of economic activity away from productive employment generation. This dynamic has weakened labor's share of income, undermined job security, and eroded the enabling role of labor institutions and collective bargaining. Moreover, the return of fiscal austerity, compounded by debt distress and constrained policy space in many countries, has further limited the capacity of states to invest in employment creation, social protection, and labor rights enforcement.

Technological transformation, while offering new opportunities, has introduced a complex set of risks. The acceleration of digitalization and the convergence of artificial intelligence, robotics, and platform work are reshaping labor markets across all regions. However, these changes are not unfolding evenly. While digital sectors have created new forms of self-employment and entrepreneurship—especially for women and youth—access to these opportunities is limited by digital divides, weak infrastructure, and inequitable access to skills and devices. Moreover, digital labor platforms often operate under regulatory vacuums, facilitating new forms of exploitation, algorithmic bias, and exclusion from social protections.

In parallel, ecological constraints pose additional headwinds. The current trajectory of economic development is failing to decouple growth from environmental degradation. Accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion are increasingly disrupting livelihoods, particularly in agriculture and other climate-sensitive sectors. The impact of climate-related disasters on labor markets—including productivity losses due to heat stress and supply chain disruptions—has become more acute, exposing the vulnerabilities of both formal and informal workers.

Measurement and data systems remain inadequate to fully capture these dynamics. Despite advances in labor statistics, major gaps persist—particularly regarding informal work, job quality, and labor rights. For instance, although labor force surveys have expanded in scope, many countries still lack the capacity to regularly collect and analyze employment data disaggregated by gender, age, migration status, and disability. In addition, emerging forms of work—especially platform-based and non-standard employment—are not well captured by existing frameworks, making policy responses less precise and effective.

The deterioration in labor rights indicators is particularly troubling. Global compliance with fundamental labor rights has declined in recent years, with growing restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, increased incidence of child and forced labor, and persistent discrimination in employment. Between 2015 and 2022, labor rights compliance declined in one-third of ILO member states. Occupational safety and health remain under-addressed, and the formal recognition of a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental right has not yet translated into widespread implementation.

Recovery and growth have also been uneven. Certain sectors—such as tourism, especially in small island developing states—continue to struggle to recover back to the pre-pandemic level. While digital financial services have expanded, especially via mobile platforms, their use remains heavily skewed toward basic transactions, with limited access to affordable credit and investment capital for small enterprises and informal workers. The growth of fintech and digital lending also raises concerns regarding privacy, algorithmic discrimination, and financial precarity.

These challenges are compounded by a shifting geopolitical landscape characterized by fragmentation, erosion of multilateralism, and weakening of global cooperation. Rising inequality between and within

countries, along with growing strains on democratic institutions in some contexts, has further undermined labor rights and civic space for workers' organizations and advocacy groups. Multilateral institutions and normative frameworks have struggled to adapt to these new conditions, leading to a gap between international commitments and domestic realities.

In sum, the stocktaking exercise confirmed that SDG 8 is at a crossroads. The global economy is undergoing profound structural changes, yet institutions, policies, and measurement systems have not kept pace. Progress is uneven, often narrow, and in some areas actively regressing. The window for corrective action is closing rapidly. The next five years must be marked by bold, rights-based, and systemically coherent interventions to redirect the trajectory of economic development toward decent work, equity, and sustainability. Without such a shift, the goal of ensuring that all people have access to full and productive employment and decent work will remain out of reach.

#### **Box: Uneven progress across SDG8 targets**

As of early 2025, SDG 8 remains significantly off track. Analysis of the latest global indicators (UN Statistics Division and ILO) reveals stagnation or regression across the majority of SDG 8 targets. These challenges are embedded in broader macroeconomic, structural, technological, and geopolitical shifts that continue to reshape labor markets and development trajectories worldwide.

While the global economy has recovered from the pandemic, the quality, inclusiveness, and sustainability of that recovery are highly uneven. Many of the SDG 8 indicators now reflect not only slow progress but active regression—especially in areas fundamental to long-term human development, such as labor rights, productivity, and the eradication of child labor. Only one target under SDG 8—**access to financial services (Target 8.10)**—is currently considered on track. Digital financial inclusion has expanded steadily since 2015, particularly through mobile platforms, enabling a growing share of the global adult population to hold formal financial accounts. As of the latest data, 74% of adults worldwide now have an account with a bank, mobile money provider, or financial institution. However, account ownership has not translated into widespread access to credit or financial resilience: 41% of adults globally still report being unable to access emergency funds when needed. The global density of ATMs and bank branches has slightly declined, reflecting the shift toward digital banking and cost-reduction strategies.

Progress on other targets is far more limited based on the latest figures from the Sustainable Development Goals Report:

- **Target 8.1: Per capita economic growth**, especially in least developed countries (LDCs), remains below the 7% target. While there was a modest rebound in global GDP per capita in 2021 post-pandemic, growth slowed again in 2022, with projections for 2024 and 2025 at 1.8% and 1.5%, respectively. LDCs are expected to reach only 5.5% growth in 2024, falling short of the 7% benchmark.
- **Target 8.2: Economic productivity**, measured as growth in real GDP per employed person, has stagnated. After growing at an average annual rate of 1.5% from 2015 to 2019, productivity growth has fallen below 0.5% since 2020. This deceleration poses risks to development, as productivity gains are a key driver of sustainable wage growth and economic competitiveness.
- **Target 8.3: Employment in the informal economy** remains pervasive. In 2023, 58% of the global workforce—approximately 2 billion people—was engaged in informal employment. Informality is highest in LDCs, where it affects over 89% of workers. Women continue to bear the brunt of informality, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia,

where over 90% of women workers are in informal jobs, typically characterized by low pay, no social protection, and poor working conditions.

- **Target 8.5: Unemployment**, while declining globally, masks deeper structural issues. The global unemployment rate reached a historic low of 5% in 2023. However, this aggregate figure conceals high levels of underemployment and job precarity, particularly in the Global South. Women and youth remain disproportionately affected: youth unemployment is more than three times higher than adult rates, with the largest gender disparities observed in Northern Africa and Western Asia.
- **Target 8.6: Youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET)** remains alarmingly high. As of 2023, the global NEET rate stood at 21.7%, a modest improvement from 23.8% in 2020. However, around 269 million young people remain disengaged from both education and the labor market. Gender gaps persist, with young women more than twice as likely as young men to be NEET in several regions, particularly Central and Southern Asia. The continued absence of national youth employment strategies in many countries compounds the challenge.
- **Target 8.7: Child labour** remains a pressing global concern. As of 2020, an estimated 160 million children—63 million girls and 97 million boys—were engaged in child labour, an increase of 8.4 million since 2016. Nearly half of these children are involved in hazardous work, posing significant risks to their health, safety, and development. Progress toward eradicating child labour has stalled or reversed in many regions, particularly in agriculture and informal sectors.
- **Target 8.8: Labour rights and workplace safety** are under increasing threat. Global compliance with fundamental labor rights declined by 7% between 2015 and 2022. One-third of ILO member states have seen worsening scores since 2020, reflecting rising restrictions on freedom of association, collective bargaining, and civil liberties. The formal recognition of a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental right is yet to be operationalized in practice across many countries.
- **Target 8.9: Sustainable tourism**, though recovering, remains well below pre-pandemic levels in many regions. In 2022, international tourism reached 82% of 2019 levels, contributing 3.1% to global GDP. However, tourism-dependent economies—such as small island developing states (SIDS) and countries in Oceania—have not recovered at the same pace, with performance at just 43% and 68% of pre-pandemic levels, respectively. Inflation, geopolitical instability, and climate change continue to constrain the sector’s rebound and sustainability.
- **Target 8.b: Youth employment strategies** remain underdeveloped in most countries. Despite the urgency of addressing the youth employment crisis, national action plans are often lacking or inadequately resourced.

### 3. Issues, trends, analysis, and considerations for the future

The global trajectory of SDG 8—promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all—reveals a complex and evolving landscape. Drawing on the expert deliberations across Sessions 4 to 13, several interlinked trends, structural dynamics, and policy priorities emerge that are shaping the future of decent work.



### **a. The digital transformation and structural shifts in employment**

Digitalization continues to be a major force reshaping the nature of work, entrepreneurship, and economic growth. Technological innovation—ranging from platform economies and AI to digital financial services—is opening new employment pathways, especially for youth, women, and small enterprises in developing countries. However, access to these opportunities remains profoundly uneven, with digital infrastructure gaps, investment disparities, and skills mismatches limiting uptake in many low-income contexts.

The rise of platform work illustrates the double-edged nature of digital economies. While platforms can facilitate labor market access, especially for those excluded from formal employment, they also propagate new forms of precarity. Earnings are often low and unstable, work conditions opaque, and access to social protection limited. Without governance frameworks that promote formalization, algorithmic accountability, and labor rights, digital economies risk amplifying rather than bridging inequality.

A key consideration for the future is the integration of digital transformation into national employment, education, and social protection strategies. Embedding digital skills in curricula, expanding broadband access, and regulating platform work are essential to realizing the full developmental potential of digitalization.

### **b. Persistent informality and the challenge of transitioning to formal work**

Informality remains the dominant employment reality in much of the Global South. The failure of economic growth to meaningfully reduce informal employment—particularly in agrifood systems, care work, and small-scale services—reflects deep structural challenges. The elasticity of informality to growth has weakened, underscoring the need for proactive, multidimensional formalization strategies.

The discussions emphasized that formalization should not be viewed as a binary shift, but as a continuum of improvements in working conditions, social security, and voice. Key levers include expanding portable social protection schemes, improving legal recognition of informal and platform/gig workers, and investing in inclusive infrastructure and public services. Gender-responsive and rural-focused approaches are especially critical given the overrepresentation of women and rural workers in informal employment.

Technological tools such as mobile tax systems and e-registration platforms offer promise, but their efficacy depends on supportive ecosystems that include regulatory reform, digital literacy, and participatory policy design.

### **c. Decent work in fragile and crisis-affected contexts**

Fragile and conflict-affected settings face compounded barriers to decent work. In these contexts, labor markets are disrupted by displacement, weak institutions, climate shocks, and fiscal constraints. Yet, they also offer unique opportunities for transformation. Recovery processes can be leveraged to integrate employment goals into peacebuilding and resilience frameworks.

Short-term employment generation through public works and SME support must be complemented by long-term investments in vocational training, social protection, and economic diversification. Promoting labor market inclusion for displaced populations and host communities alike requires legal recognition, mobile skills certification, and flexible education models. Climate adaptation policies must be labor-inclusive including to address productivity losses from heat stress and extreme weather.



Ensuring decent work in fragile contexts is ultimately a governance challenge—requiring inclusive institutions, cross-sector coordination, and rights-based policymaking.

#### **d. Fundamental rights and the erosion of labor protections**

Progress on fundamental principles and rights at work is under significant strain. Forced labor and child labor are rising globally, especially in informal and rural economies. Discrimination persists across gender, migration status, and disability. At the same time, freedoms of association and collective bargaining are increasingly restricted, undermining worker voice and bargaining power.

These trends threaten not only SDG 8.7 and 8.8, but also the broader integrity of the Decent Work Agenda. Legal ratification of relevant Conventions must be accompanied by effective implementation and enforcement, and due diligence frameworks must be designed to avoid excluding small producers and workers in the informal sector.

Policy coherence between labor rights, trade, and environmental governance is essential. Governments and companies must embed human rights due diligence into procurement, investment, and compliance mechanisms, ensuring costs are not offloaded onto the most vulnerable.

#### **e. Eliminating child labour: urgency, scale, and integration**

The reversal of progress on child labour—particularly in agriculture and among younger children—represents a critical failure in achieving SDG 8.7. The session emphasized that child labour is not merely a labor issue, but a systemic development failure driven by poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, and weak institutions.

Successful strategies combine social protection (e.g. conditional cash transfers), quality education, women’s economic empowerment, and localized monitoring systems. However, scale and coordination remain insufficient. Many interventions are still project-based, underfunded, or disconnected from national planning.

To reverse current trends, child labour elimination must be embedded in broader rural development, trade, and social protection policies, with stronger international cooperation and investment.

#### **f. Social protection as a foundation for resilient labor markets**

Social protection systems are both an enabler and a reflection of progress toward SDG 8. When universal, inclusive, and rights-based, they facilitate formalization, gender equality, and crisis resilience. Yet, nearly half the world’s population remains without any form of coverage.

The session highlighted the inadequacy of ad hoc, reactive safety nets and called for lifecycle-oriented systems that combine universal social protection floors with contributory social insurance. Financing remains a major constraint—demanding fiscal innovation, debt reform, and more equitable global financial governance.

Informal and non-standard workers require tailored, portable, and subsidized models of inclusion. Digital tools can improve coverage and transparency but must be embedded in participatory governance frameworks that protect data rights and build institutional trust.

#### **g. Science, technology and knowledge equity**

The geography of global research is shifting, with low- and middle-income countries increasingly driving scientific output—especially on SDG-related themes. This opens opportunities for more locally grounded innovation, employment creation, and inclusive industrial strategies.

However, concerns remain around research quality, financing sustainability, and equitable access to technologies. South-South cooperation and capacity building in data governance, intellectual property, and scientific infrastructure are critical to democratizing innovation systems and linking them to decent work agendas.

#### **h. Financing SDG 8: systemic reform beyond access**

While financial inclusion has improved (e.g., via mobile banking), access to credit, insurance, and productive finance remains limited, especially for small enterprises and informal workers. The rise of digital microfinance has often introduced new risks—such as surveillance and over-indebtedness—without enhancing resilience or opportunity.

Development finance must be redirected toward productive, inclusive, and transformative ends. Reforming global financial architecture, tackling illicit flows, and mobilizing progressive taxation are essential to reclaiming fiscal space. Public procurement and thematic financing mechanisms were identified as powerful tools to align finance with decent work and SDG 8 outcomes.

#### **i. Governing global supply chains and trade with justice**

Global supply chains continue to reflect deep asymmetries in power, risk, and value distribution. While new due diligence regulations signal progress, they risk excluding smallholders and informal workers unless accompanied by capacity-building and equity-based compliance models.

Participants called for binding corporate accountability, redistribution of value through living wages and fair prices, and inclusive supply chain governance. Trade policies must align with labor rights, climate goals, and employment strategies, moving beyond liberalization to inclusive industrial development.

Efforts must also address the growing concentration of market power and financialization of trade, which distort incentives and marginalize labor.

#### **j. Bridging generations and promoting lifelong inclusion**

Both youth and older workers face distinct forms of exclusion, from high unemployment and skills mismatch to age discrimination and digital exclusion. The discussions underscored the need for lifelong learning systems, social protection across the life course, and policies that support flexible work, reskilling, and recognition of diverse work trajectories.

The care economy was highlighted as a cross-generational opportunity for decent work creation, particularly when paired with investments in childcare, eldercare, and gender-responsive labor policies. Intergenerational dialogue and *solidarity* were emphasized as pathways to rebuild trust and social cohesion in rapidly changing labor markets.

This synthesis reveals that delivering on SDG 8 requires integrated, rights-based, and forward-looking approaches. Structural inequality, climate risk, digital transformation, and geopolitical fragmentation must be addressed simultaneously. The coming years are critical for recalibrating policies, partnerships, and global systems to ensure that economic growth translates into decent, inclusive, and sustainable livelihoods for all

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

Accelerating progress on SDG 8—on inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all—requires urgent, coordinated, and systemic policy shifts. SDG 8 remains foundational to the 2030 Agenda but is among the most off-track goals. Incrementalism will not suffice. The following ten interlinked policy priorities outline a cohesive roadmap for delivering transformation over the remainder of the Decade of Action and beyond.

### **a. Reposition full employment and decent work as a central macroeconomic objective**

Employment generation and decent work should not be treated as passive outcomes of growth, but rather as explicit objectives of macroeconomic, fiscal, trade and industrial strategies. Current growth patterns remain insufficiently inclusive and often decoupled from job creation, especially in the Global South. Future macroeconomic frameworks must be designed to enhance labor absorption, reduce informality, and improve job quality. Employment-rich structural transformation should be embedded in national development strategies, supported by public investment, robust labor market institutions, and industrial policy with a strong social dimension.

Global economic governance must be aligned with these objectives. Trade, financial, and technology regimes must support—rather than constrain—domestic policy space for inclusive development. Multilateral institutions should assess economic performance with explicit reference to labor market indicators, including underemployment, informality, and job quality.

### **b. Expand and universalize social protection as a human right and economic enabler**

Universal, lifecycle-based social protection systems must be guaranteed as both a human right and a driver of inclusive growth, resilience, and decent work. These systems must be accessible to all workers, including those in informal, non-standard, and digital employment. Social protection floors should be established universally, while contributory systems must be extended through flexible and portable mechanisms that reflect diverse work trajectories. Expanding coverage requires bridging financing gaps through domestic resource mobilization, international solidarity, and reform of the global financial system. Annual expansion of coverage by at least two percentage points, in line with the USP2030 benchmark, should serve as a minimum target. Systems must be gender-responsive, care-sensitive, and closely linked to policies on health, education, food security and nutrition, and climate resilience.

### **c. Promote formalization through inclusive, rights-based approaches**

Formalization strategies must reflect the heterogeneity of informal economies. Legal and institutional frameworks should recognize informal workers and enterprises, streamline administrative processes, and provide incentives for registration and compliance. Access to social protection, finance, skills development, and collective representation must be extended to all. Policies should prioritize women, who are disproportionately concentrated in the most precarious informal work. Investments in care infrastructure, gender-sensitive employment programs, and inclusive training must be scaled up. Formalization should not be reduced to enforcement; it must expand access to rights, protections, and opportunity.

#### **d. Guarantee fundamental rights at work and strengthen labor institutions**

Labor rights—including freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, elimination of forced and child labor, non-discrimination, and occupational safety and health—must be upheld and enforced across all sectors. Strengthening legal enforcement, labor inspection, and institutional capacity is essential to reverse the regression in labor rights compliance. Governments and employers must fully comply with international labor standards, promote collective bargaining, and ensure that worker organizations play a central role in shaping workplace policies and national labor market governance. Worker voice must be institutionalized through social dialogue, collective bargaining, and participatory governance. Trade unions, informal worker organizations, and grassroots networks should be empowered to contribute to policy and monitor compliance. Corporate responsibility frameworks must mandate respect for labor standards in global supply chains and throughout digital platforms.

#### **e. Eliminate child labour through integrated, community-led solutions**

The global resurgence of child labor, especially in agriculture and informal sectors, must be addressed through integrated, multisectoral strategies that tackle the structural roots of exploitation including poverty and informality. Support for quality education, social protection, capacity-building, compliance, and inclusive procurement practices must accompany regulatory efforts. Community-driven approaches and area-based development models should be scaled up. Due diligence laws must be designed to support, not exclude, smallholder producers. Support for compliance, capacity-building, and inclusive procurement practices must accompany regulatory efforts. Strengthening youth engagement, cross-border cooperation, and data systems is essential to address child trafficking, hazardous work, and online exploitation.

#### **f. Ensure inclusive and just transitions in the digital and green economies**

Digital and environmental transitions must be governed to promote inclusion, decent work, and economic security. Urgent regulation of platform work is required, including through the application of labor laws, collective bargaining, and access to social protection. National strategies must ensure widespread investment in digital infrastructure, connectivity, digital literacy, and context-specific training. Digital innovation should be directed toward productive uses in agriculture, health, and education. Green transitions must be accompanied by just transition policies—including anticipatory training, social protection, and participatory planning—to ensure no one is left behind as economies shift toward sustainability.

#### **g. Reform trade, investment, and global supply chains to align with decent work goals**

Trade and investment policies must be aligned with decent work, labor rights, and environmental sustainability. All agreements should include enforceable labor and environmental clauses. Supply chain governance must shift from voluntary standards to binding accountability mechanisms for lead firms, including value redistribution, living wages, and recognition of worker organizations. Due diligence laws must support small producers and informal workers through compliance support, shared responsibility, and fair pricing. Public procurement should be leveraged to reward enterprises that uphold labor standards. ESG frameworks must fully integrate the “social” dimension, including standardized indicators on wages, worker voice, and working conditions.

#### **h. Bridge generations through life-course approaches to employment and skills development**

Labor market strategies must address the exclusion of both young and older workers through inclusive, life-course-oriented approaches. Education, training, and employment systems must be designed to

support lifelong learning and flexible career trajectories. National policies should invest in personal learning accounts, recognition of prior learning, digital skills training, and school-to-work and mid-career transitions. Intergenerational solidarity can be strengthened through mentorship programs, care economy job creation, and community-based work models that value the contributions of all age groups.

**i. Strengthen monitoring and statistical capacity for policy coherence and accountability**

Robust, disaggregated, and policy-relevant data systems are essential to monitor labor market dynamics, guide interventions, and ensure accountability. Investments must be directed toward labor force surveys, administrative records, and innovative sources such as satellite data, AI analytics, and citizen-generated information. New indicators are needed to measure job precarity, work insecurity, access to social dialogue, and transitions across employment statuses. Data systems must be ethical, participatory, and designed to support rights-based policymaking.

**j. Mobilize sustainable and innovative financing for decent work and inclusive growth**

Adequate and equitable financing is a prerequisite for achieving SDG 8. Domestic resource mobilization should be enhanced through progressive taxation, digital public finance, and closing of illicit financial flows. At the global level, development cooperation must be expanded and made more predictable. Debt relief frameworks must be established to release fiscal space for social investment. New financing mechanisms—including global social protection funds, employment-focused green and social bonds, and results-based funding—must be created or scaled, embedded within inclusive governance structures and aligned with national priorities. Financial systems must serve people and real economies—not speculative accumulation.

**k. Plan for coherence of policies and actions across SDGs and sectors**

Achieving SDG 8 requires an integrated approach that recognizes and manages the complex interlinkages between economic growth, labor markets, environmental sustainability, gender equality, education, and social protection. Policy coherence must be strengthened not only within the employment agenda, but across all sectors and SDGs to identify synergies and avoid unintended consequences.

*Policy integration across SDGs* must become standard practice. Employment policies should be designed to contribute simultaneously to climate goals (SDG 13), gender equality (SDG 5), poverty reduction (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), education (SDG 4), and health (SDG 3). For example, scaling up investments in the care economy creates decent jobs while advancing gender equality and improving health and education outcomes. Similarly, green industrial strategies can deliver climate resilience, employment, and productivity gains if designed with social dialogue and just transition principles.

*Just transition frameworks* must be mainstreamed into environmental and industrial policies to ensure that climate and digital transitions create, rather than destroy, decent work. This includes anticipating job displacement, targeting upskilling and income support to affected communities, and ensuring participatory planning processes that include workers, local governments, and social partners. Without such safeguards, transitions risk deepening inequalities and resistance to change.

*Public procurement and investment* should be used strategically to align economic activity with decent work, environmental protection, and social inclusion. Governments can drive change by linking contracts and subsidies to employment, training, and equity outcomes. This approach has strong

multiplier effects—stimulating demand, supporting small enterprises, and reinforcing compliance with labor and environmental standards.

*Cross-sectoral governance mechanisms* must be strengthened to align policies across ministries and levels of government. National SDG coordination bodies, economic planning agencies, and labor ministries should collaborate systematically with those responsible for climate, education, infrastructure, and finance to identify joint priorities and manage trade-offs. This includes embedding labor and decent work objectives into nationally determined contributions (NDCs), biodiversity strategies, and education sector plans.

*Gender-responsive policy design* must address the systemic undervaluation of unpaid care work, the gender segmentation of labor markets, and unequal access to education and finance. A coordinated approach to care, education, and employment can generate high-impact synergies, particularly when underpinned by universal social protection and inclusive data systems.

*Mitigating trade-offs* requires anticipating policy externalities. For example, digital financial inclusion programs must include safeguards to prevent indebtedness and algorithmic exclusion. Supply chain regulation must be accompanied by support for smallholder integration to avoid economic dislocation. Climate mitigation measures must include job creation and social protection components to ensure equity and political feasibility.

*Integrated planning and budgeting* tools—such as employment impact assessments, gender budgeting, and SDG-aligned public investment strategies—should be deployed to institutionalize a culture of policy coherence. Governments and development partners should prioritize interventions that deliver multiple benefits across SDGs, with clear metrics for monitoring trade-offs and distributional impacts.

In sum, maximizing synergies and mitigating trade-offs is not a technical exercise but a governance imperative. It requires deliberate institutional design, inclusive policymaking, and a commitment to delivering co-benefits that advance the 2030 Agenda in a holistic and equitable way.

## **5. Means of implementation: mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress**

Achieving SDG 8 within the remaining years of the 2030 Agenda requires more than policy commitment—it demands systemic support through robust means of implementation. This includes transformative partnerships, globally upheld rights and standards, effective accountability frameworks, the responsible application of science and technology, and inclusive, sustainable financing. These enabling mechanisms are not ancillary but foundational to progress.

### **a. Partnerships**

Strategic, inclusive, and multi-level partnerships are essential to delivering the SDG 8 agenda. Implementation must be anchored in collaborative action across governments, employers' and workers' organizations, civil society, international institutions, and the private sector.

- Public–private–people partnerships (PPPPs) should be scaled to foster decent work outcomes, particularly in digital and green sectors.



- Partnerships between national governments and international financial institutions must align macroeconomic strategies with employment and social protection goals, ensuring fiscal frameworks enable—not constrain—social investment.
- South-South and triangular cooperation should be expanded, recognizing the increasing capacity of low- and middle-income countries to contribute technical assistance and locally-driven innovations, especially in areas such as informal sector transitions, social protection digitalization, and climate-resilient employment.

The role of social dialogue must be central in all partnerships, reinforcing collective bargaining and enabling the voice and agency of workers, particularly those in informal or non-standard forms of employment.

#### **b. Global rights, norms, and standards**

The international normative framework—anchored in ILO conventions and the UN human rights system—provides the legal and moral foundation for SDG 8 implementation.

- Universal ratification and enforcement of *fundamental principles and rights at work*—including freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the elimination of child and forced labour—must be prioritized.
- Labor and social standards should be embedded in *trade agreements, investment treaties, and corporate due diligence laws*, with enforceable compliance mechanisms and protections for small-scale producers and informal workers.
- *Social clauses in procurement*, investment screening, and export credit guarantees should be leveraged to incentivize decent work throughout global value chains.
- Implementation of the *ILO Convention No. 190* on violence and harassment in the world of work should be accelerated, with accompanying national legislation, complaint mechanisms, and workplace policies.

Normative coherence must also extend to climate, digital governance, and tax cooperation frameworks, ensuring alignment with labor rights and social justice principles.

#### **c. Accountability**

Effective accountability mechanisms are critical to track commitments, assess impact, and ensure transparency.

- Countries should embed SDG 8 targets within national development plans and report progress through *integrated monitoring systems* that link employment, social protection, and environmental indicators.
- *Labor rights indicators* must be strengthened, including through disaggregated reporting on compliance, inspection coverage, union rights, and wage equity.
- International accountability processes—such as Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), the Financing for Development Forum, and the High-Level Political Forum—should elevate SDG 8 commitments and identify policy coherence gaps.
- At the enterprise level, *worker-led monitoring, participatory auditing, and community scorecards* should complement traditional compliance tools, especially in complex supply chains.



Accountability must be grounded in democratic governance and inclusive participation, ensuring that workers, informal actors, youth, and marginalized groups have a voice in shaping the policies that affect them.

#### d. Science and technology

Technological progress must be governed and leveraged to support decent work, inclusive development, and productive transformation.

- National strategies should promote *inclusive digital economies* through investments in infrastructure, open-source technologies, public research, and digital public goods.
- Regulatory frameworks are needed to *govern platform work*, ensure *algorithmic transparency*, and safeguard digital labor rights, particularly in the platform/gig economy.
- *South-led scientific capacity* must be strengthened through long-term investments in R&D systems, cross-border knowledge exchange, and support for locally relevant innovation. The exponential rise in scientific output from LMICs presents an opportunity to embed SDG 8 in regional and thematic research agendas.
- The development and use of *AI, robotics, and frontier technologies* should be subject to public oversight, ethical safeguards, and employment impact assessments, with mechanisms to mitigate displacement and support just transitions.

Science and technology cooperation must be guided by equity, participatory governance, and public purpose—not market capture or proprietary control.

#### e. Financing

Financing SDG 8 demands not only increased volume but a realignment of financial architecture toward inclusive, rights-based development.

- *Progressive domestic resource mobilization* is fundamental, including tax reforms that reduce reliance on regressive consumption taxes and instead target wealth, corporate profits, and capital gains.
- International financing mechanisms must be *scaled, reformed, and aligned* with decent work objectives. Priorities include:
  - A global social protection fund;
  - Thematic funds for job creation, climate adaptation, and care infrastructure;
  - Debt relief frameworks and sovereign debt restructuring mechanisms to release fiscal space for employment investments;
  - Strategic use of *public procurement and development banks* to drive structural transformation.
- *Innovative financing* tools—such as green and social bonds, digital public finance platforms, and results-based funding—must be embedded within *inclusive governance structures* that are transparent, participatory, and accountable.
- Financial institutions should adopt and report on *labor-related ESG metrics*, ensuring that lending, investment, and insurance decisions support job quality, social inclusion, and human rights.

Without structural reform of global financial systems and debt regimes, the fiscal space required for SDG 8 implementation will remain out of reach for many countries.

## 6. Conclusion

The Expert Group Meeting reaffirmed that SDG 8 is not simply a statistical target but a transformative agenda for inclusive, rights-based, and sustainable development. Delivering on its promise requires deliberate action on structural inequalities, sustained investment in people and institutions, and bold leadership at all levels. The next five years represent a critical window to shift from fragmented efforts to systemic change. Governments, international organizations, businesses, employers' and workers' organizations, and civil society must mobilize around a renewed social contract—grounded in decent work, economic dignity, and global solidarity. The 2030 Agenda can still be achieved—but only through collective action that focuses on people.

-----