



International
Labour
Organization

The New Social Contract: Towards the Second Summit for Social Development





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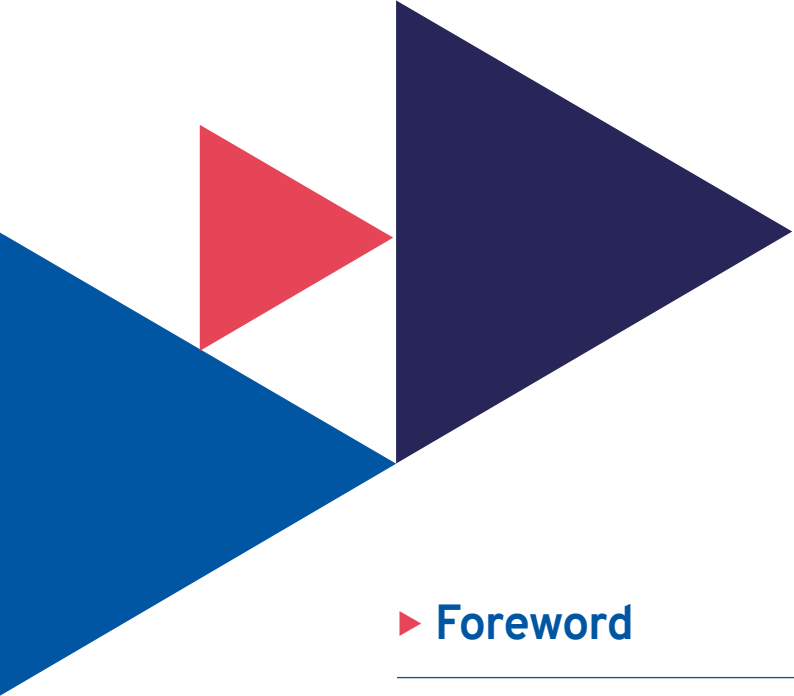
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► Foreword

For more than a year, ACTRAV has convened a global process of reflection and dialogue on the renewal of the social contract from a trade union perspective. Through a series of regional conferences held across Africa, the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and Central Asia, workers' organisations came together to assess the state of social justice in their regions and to articulate common priorities for a fairer and more inclusive world of work. These conferences also brought into dialogue representatives of governments, employers, and experts from the academic community, fostering mutual understanding and collective exploration of policy solutions.

Thirty years after the first World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, and in light of the forthcoming second summit in Doha, trade unions have taken stock of the progress and setbacks on the commitments made in 1995: to eradicate poverty, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, and advance inclusive social development. While undeniable progress has been made, the world remains far from these goals. Nearly 700 million people still live in extreme poverty, informality and exclusion continue to dominate labour markets, and inequalities, both within and between countries, are widening.

The current global poly-crisis, driven by technological disruptions, climate change, demographic shifts, geopolitical tensions, and weakening multilateralism, has further exposed the fragility of our social and economic systems. Decent work deficits persist, democratic space is shrinking, and too often employment is treated as a by-product of growth rather than as its driving force. Workers' organisations therefore reaffirm that what is needed today is not merely reform, but renewal, a renewed social contract anchored in rights, grounded in justice, and centred on people.

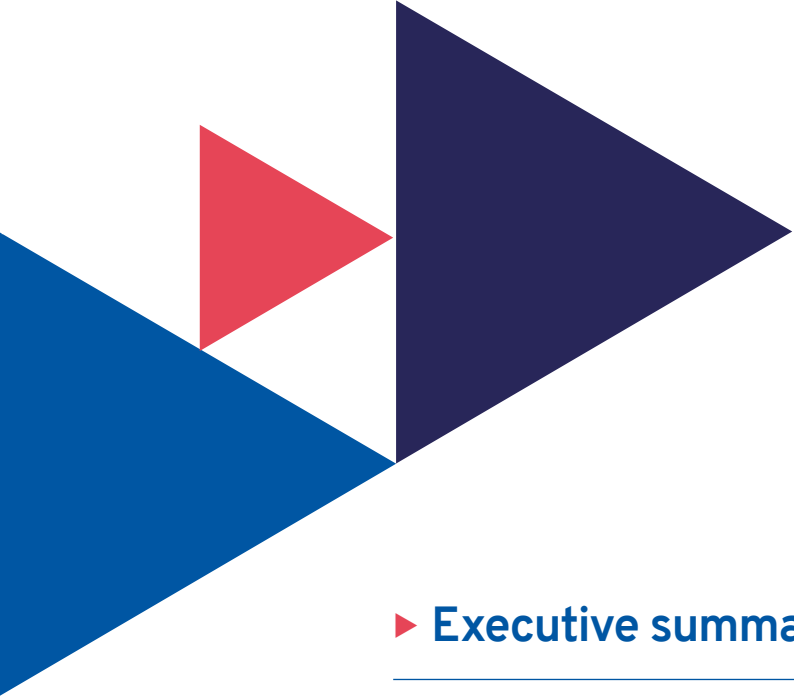
This report captures and synthesises the perspectives, priorities, and policy messages that emerged from these regional dialogues. It represents the collective voice of trade unions worldwide as they prepare to contribute to the Second World Summit for Social Development, to be held in Doha, Qatar, on 4–6 November 2025. It aims to convey workers' voices, experiences, and solutions as a contribution to shaping the Summit's outcomes and the development agenda beyond 2030.

Across all regions, participants agreed that renewing the social contract requires a decisive rebalancing of economic, social, and environmental priorities. This means placing full and productive employment and decent work at the heart of economic policy; treating social protection, education, and health as investments in resilience and equality; and defending freedom of association, collective bargaining, and civic space as foundations of equity, democracy, and inclusive development. It also means strengthening the enforcement of international labour standards, institutionalising social dialogue, including with international financial institutions, and expanding collective bargaining coverage to ensure a fairer sharing of prosperity.

Trade unions are ready to play their part. They are organising workers in new and informal sectors, promoting gender equality, addressing the concerns of young and migrant workers, and building coalitions for social and climate justice. They also recognise the need to strengthen their economic and policy capacity, to engage effectively in dialogue not only with governments and employers, but also with international financial institutions and multilateral partners.

This report is therefore both a reflection and a call to action. It underscores that renewing the social contract is essential to rebuild trust, reduce inequality, and deliver on the promise of decent work and social justice for all. ACTRAV remains committed to supporting the trade union movement in this effort, before, during, and after the Summit, so that tripartite engagement continues to guide global development strategies in the years ahead.

Maria Helena Andre,
Director, ILO Bureau
for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)



► Executive summary

The world of work is at a crossroads. Global transformations, economic, social, technological and environmental, are reshaping the world of work, deepening inequalities and testing the resilience of social and economic systems across the globe. Persistent deficits in decent work, insecure employment, widening pay gaps and the erosion of labour rights are compounded by climate change, rapid technological transformation, demographic shifts and weakening multilateral cooperation. Consequently, the current social contracts in place in many countries are increasingly falling short in protecting workers or delivering social justice to their people.

This report presents the perspectives, experiences and solutions of trade unions worldwide, as expressed at a series of regional and global conferences convened by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) throughout 2024 and 2025 in preparation for the Second World Summit for Social Development (Doha, 2025). The report provides a comprehensive call by workers' representatives to renew the social contract, placing decent work, rights and inclusion at its centre, while ensuring the agility needed to navigate rapid and complex societal transformations.

Key messages

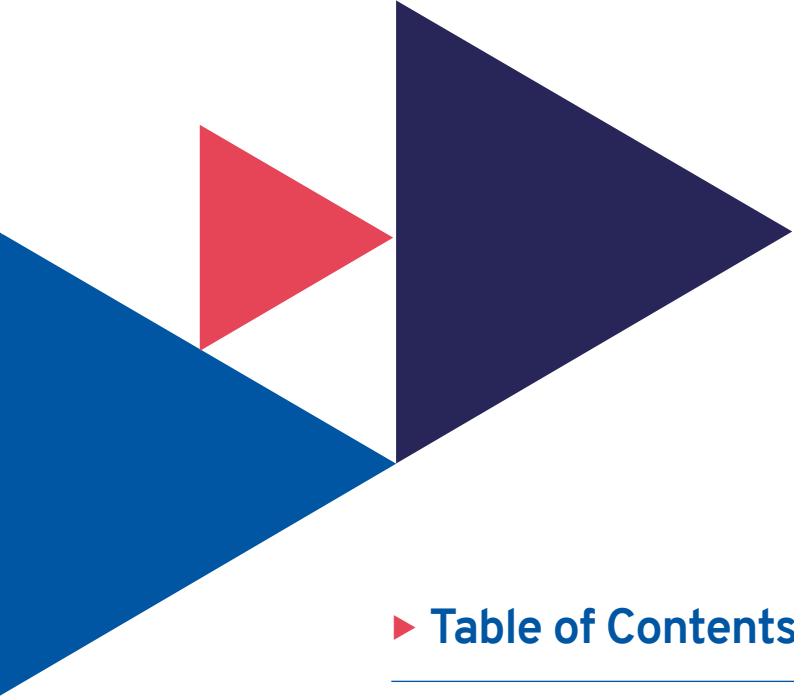
- **Decent work and labour rights are foundational.** Freedom of association, collective bargaining and protection against discrimination, child labour and forced labour are non-negotiable pillars of social justice. Weak enforcement and legislative gaps must be addressed to safeguard workers globally.
- **Economic governance must serve people.** Current economic policies often treat employment as a by-product of economic growth. Trade unions call for a shift towards pro-employment macroeconomic frameworks, coherent trade policies, responsible international financial interventions and development cooperation that aligns with the ILO Decent Work Agenda. Furthermore, social protection, fair taxation and corporate accountability are essential to financing sustainable social investment.
- **Technological and climate transitions require just and inclusive strategies.** Rapid digitalisation, artificial intelligence and climate change pose both risks and opportunities. Trade unions stress that transitions must be human-centred, combining reskilling, social protection and worker participation to ensure that no one is left behind, and that vulnerable communities, particularly women, youth, migrant workers and those in the informal economy, benefit from these transitions.
- **Local realities require tailored solutions.** Child labour, informal work, precarious employment, wage insecurity, gender discrimination and systemic exclusion remain widespread. Regional examples, from Africa to Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, the Arab States and Europe, illustrate that context-specific solutions such as sectoral agreements, minimum and living wages, and formalisation of informal work can protect workers and promote social cohesion.

- **Trade unions are transforming to remain relevant.** By prioritising inclusion, building economic expertise, forging alliances and embracing digital tools, unions can better shape policies, protect rights and drive social progress across borders.

A vision for the future

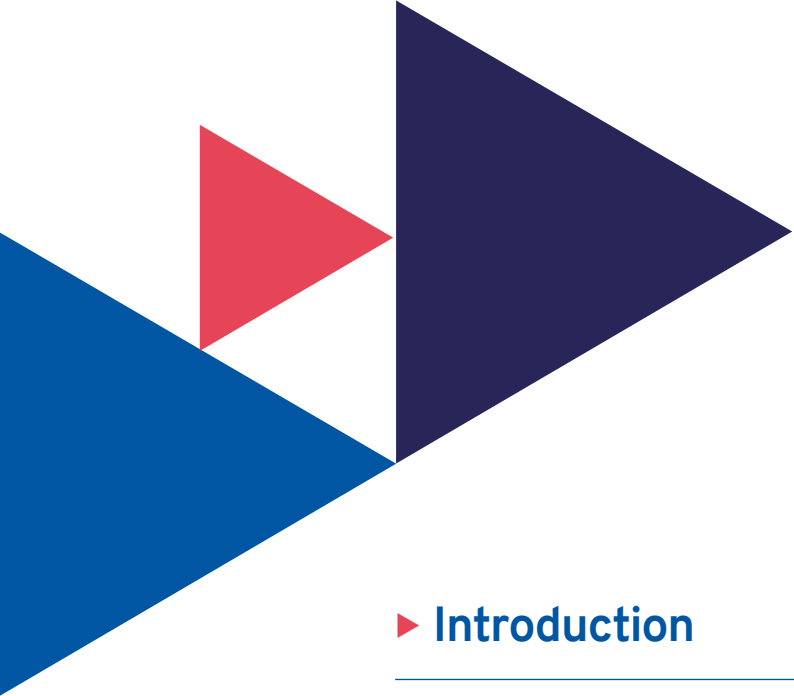
Renewing the social contract is not merely a reformist endeavour; it requires putting decent work and labour rights at the forefront of economic and social policies and ensuring that those policies reach all in society through strengthening institutions capable of navigating an era of complex global transitions. Trade unions are indispensable actors in this process, advocating for a human-centred, just and resilient world of work.

Trade unions are indispensable partners in shaping a human-centred, just and resilient future of work. This report offers practical guidance for policymakers, employers and international partners to turn commitments into tangible results, so that every worker can enjoy dignity, rights and opportunity in the twenty-first century.



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► Introduction

After the Second World War, many nations formed a social contract in which “citizens contributed to the common good, whether economically, socially, or culturally, on the assumption that the State would ensure a minimum standard of living, provision of essential social services and infrastructure, and the protection of their basic rights.” Stable and full employment was central to this post-war balance, anchoring social cohesion and economic progress (ILO 2023).

In the 21st century, profound changes in the world of work have strained this model. Global workers’ insecurity remains high: in 2024, the world faced a persistent deficit of 402.4 million jobs, with 58.2 per cent of workers in informal employment and rising working poverty (ILO 2025). Social protection systems remain limited, covering only 47 per cent of the global population, with large disparities in both scope and adequacy, leaving over four billion people without any form of coverage (ILO 2024a).

Although income gaps between countries have decreased, inequality within countries remains high, affecting social stability and basic needs. Millions of workers, including salaried employees, remain excluded from wage protections and collective bargaining, struggling to secure adequate pay and decent working conditions.

Climate change, technological transformation, demographic shifts and trade disruptions are reshaping economies and labour markets. These transitions pose major challenges but also create new opportunities, including for the creation of green and digital jobs, even in developing regions. However, seizing these opportunities requires policies that cushion the negative externalities typically associated with such transitions by protecting workers’ rights, promoting social inclusion and ensuring truly just transitions.

Recognising these challenges, the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have called for a renewed social contract grounded in social justice. As ILO Director-General Gilbert F. Houngbo has emphasised, “If there is no longer sufficient trust in national and international institutions of governance, whether public or private, what will happen to the pursuit of shared prosperity, lasting peace, social justice and environmental sustainability?” (Houngbo 2024)¹.

This was also one of the prominent themes at several regional conferences held by the ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ACTRAV) between June 2024 and July 2025, which provided a platform for workers’ organisations to come together and debate what the transformational changes of today should demand of a renewed social contract. It was apparent across all regions that trade union organisations see this as a pivotal moment to advance workers’ rights and global social progress through the renewal of the social contract. Restoring trust in institutions and the economy depends on creating

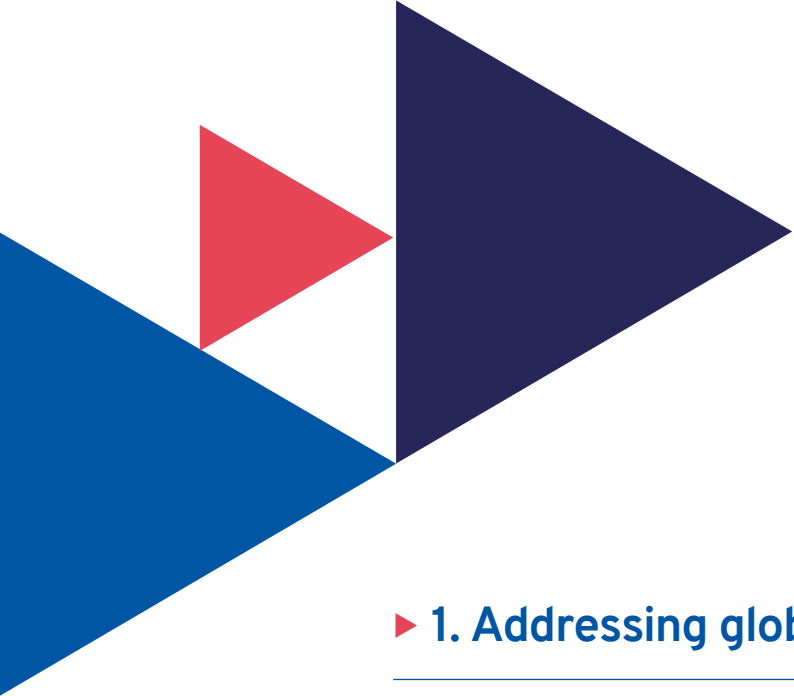
¹. International Labour Organization. Report of the Director-General to the 112th International Labour Conference, 2024.

stable, well-paid jobs, including living wages. The new social contract must also support productive transformation across economic, technological, demographic and climate transitions, reinforced by strong public investment in education, skills and health.

Trade union involvement at both company and macroeconomic levels is vital for democracy and social justice. International financial institutions should better consider trade unions' input. The ILO's tripartite model demonstrates the value of dialogue, participation, and shared responsibility in shaping effective and sustainable policies.

Trade unions wish to strengthen their influence on decision-making also by organising the most vulnerable workers and demanding or negotiating decent working conditions, including living wages. Strengthened social dialogue has to be a foundation for any new social contract.

This is the moment to reaffirm the trade union call to action for social justice and decent work, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of development and dignity for all. This report highlights several critical issues to be addressed in the context of the Second World Summit for Social Development, to be held on 4–6 November in Doha, Qatar.



► 1. Addressing global challenges

In today's global economy, workers face a convergence of transformational challenges that are reshaping societies and labour markets across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Persistent decent work deficits, the lingering effects of long-term inflation, slow or jobless growth, and widening inequalities coexist with mounting geopolitical tensions and the fragmentation of multilateral cooperation. Technological change, particularly artificial intelligence and digitalisation, is transforming production and governance systems, while demographic shifts, with ageing populations in some regions and youth bulges in others, are straining labour markets and social protection systems. At the same time, the escalating climate crisis is driving resource scarcity, displacement, and urgent calls for just transitions.

Trade union leaders across all ACTRAV regional conferences emphasised that these overlapping crises expose and deepen the fragility of the existing social contract, which has too often failed to protect workers or deliver social justice. They stressed that these crises are not isolated phenomena but rather the consequence of policy choices that prioritise economic growth and financial stability without taking their potential social and distributional consequences into account. Renewing the social contract therefore requires rethinking global economic governance, starting with strengthening institutions that safeguard human and labour rights, focusing on pro-employment macroeconomic policies and international finance, multilateralism and the management of technological and climate transitions.

A. Upholding human and labour rights: the foundation of a renewed social contract

A consistent message emerging from all ACTRAV regional dialogues is that no renewal of the social contract is possible without the full respect, protection, and enforcement of human and labour rights. Workers' representatives stressed that respecting the fundamental principles and rights at work is a non-negotiable prerequisite for social justice—particularly freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

Many trade unionists voiced deep concern that legislative gaps, weak enforcement, and the erosion of democratic space are undermining these rights. In several regions, participants noted the widening gap between laws on paper and their implementation in practice. As one representative from the Asia-Pacific region put it:

“We have good legislation, but it is not enforced. Without real enforcement, rights are only promises.”

In the Arab States and parts of Africa, restrictions on organising and the absence of effective social dialogue mechanisms have left workers with few avenues to fight for their rights. In Europe and Latin America, trade unions warned against the spread of anti-union practices, including union-busting and attacks on the right to strike.

Reaffirming and enforcing labour rights must therefore be the starting point of any discussion on renewing the social contract. Legislation must evolve to address the realities of platform work, telework, and fragmented employment relationships, while governments must ensure effective labour inspection systems, judicial recourse, and the protection of union leaders.

Across all regional conferences, trade union participants converged on a clear message: labour rights are the backbone of democracy. When workers cannot organise freely, society as a whole becomes weaker.

B. Global economic governance, multilateralism, and development cooperation

Trade unions in all regions identified global economic governance as one of the most critical arenas where the social contract has failed to protect workers. They argued that in most countries current economic policies, focused on deregulation, and the primacy of financial markets, have treated employment as a by-product of growth rather than as its main driver.

Across the conferences, union leaders emphasised the need for a paradigm shift towards more pro-employment macroeconomic frameworks, greater policy coherence across international institutions, and a renewed model of multilateralism grounded in social justice.

It was further highlighted that trade rules and global supply chains have a direct impact on labour standards and bargaining power. Unions urged that trade policy be coherent with social objectives, enforcing corporate accountability, improving labour standards in global supply chains, and supporting regional cooperation that generates quality jobs. As one participant from Africa put it:

“We do not reject globalisation; we reject a globalisation that excludes workers and erodes their rights. The new social contract must make decent work the compass of global governance.”

Another major area of consensus across regions was the need to reframe the role of international financial institutions (IFIs) and other donor agencies. While IFIs have been instrumental in supporting economic development, their policies often impose socially regressive conditions. Trade union leaders from the regional dialogues shared similar concerns:

- ▶ In the Arab States, it was pointed out that IFI loans often overlook labour rights and social dialogue.
- ▶ In Africa, the legacy of structural adjustment continues to weigh heavily on wages, employment, and social protection.
- ▶ In Asia-Pacific, austerity measures undermine investments in health, education, and climate resilience.
- ▶ In Latin America and the Caribbean, unions denounced IFIs for fuelling labour flexibilization and precarious work.

Trade unions call for coherence between IFI interventions and the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, demanding that decent employment creation, the financing of universal social protection, and the respect of labour rights be treated as integral macroeconomic objectives.

They also insist on a more institutionalised consultation with social partners throughout the design and implementation of economic and financial policies.

A related dimension of consensus concerned development cooperation for social justice. International development assistance has declined in real terms, creating international funding gaps needed for investments in infrastructure, health, and education.

Participants across regions emphasised that development cooperation must align with ILO standards and treat trade unions as full partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of programmes related to labour. A good example comes from Southern Africa, where the subregional organisation Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATTUC), with ILO support, promotes coordination against child labour and strengthens national labour legislation, illustrating how development cooperation can work when grounded in tripartism and rights-based priorities.

Likewise, a representative from the Confederación Sindical de las Américas (CSA) summed up the workers' position:

"What we need is coherence—coherence between what is promised internationally and what is delivered, between the rhetoric of social justice and the reality of policy."

However, trade unions from all regions insisted that aid alone cannot build fair societies. In all regions, progressive taxation, corporate accountability and action against tax evasion and illicit financial flows are indispensable to strengthening fiscal capacity for investment in social development. Corruption and illicit financial flows were flagged as major drains on public resources, undermining social protection and redistributive capacity. Strengthening regulatory and anti-corruption bodies is therefore integral to promoting social investment.

Finally, participants in all regional conferences emphasised the importance of reinvigorating tripartism and democratic governance, both as part of reforming global economic governance and at the national level. Tripartism and social dialogue, cornerstones of the ILO model, remain vital for rebuilding trust in governance and achieving sustainable development. During the COVID-19 crisis, tripartite cooperation proved effective in implementing protective measures while safeguarding jobs and incomes as much as possible.

As a trade union leader from Costa Rica noted:

"Our tripartite bodies, on wages, health, and social dialogue, are the backbone of social peace and progress. Strengthening them is the first step towards a new social contract."

Unions called for institutionalised participation in fiscal and industrial policy discussions, capacity building for social partners, and the extension of dialogue beyond labour ministries to include finance, planning, trade, and environmental portfolios.

C. Technological change, artificial intelligence, and climate transitions

Climate change and technological advancement are among the most transformative forces reshaping economies and labour markets over the past few decades. While they pose existential risks, the political momentum to mitigate their harmful impacts presents an opportunity to craft a renewed social contract attentive to complex socio-economic realities.

Rapid technological adoption without adequate assessment of its potential negative externalities—such as impacts on labour rights, the effects of autonomous decision-making including algorithmic management in the workplace, or the misclassification of new and emerging forms of work, such as those in digital labour platforms—raises important questions about how current governance structures protect all members of society.

At the same time, prolonged droughts and hunger in many parts of the world, destructive floods disrupting livelihoods and infrastructure, and the existential risks posed by rising sea levels are threatening entire communities with displacement, particularly in small island developing States. Poorly designed regulations and policies that fail to keep pace with these rapid changes can shift the costs of transition onto vulnerable workers and communities.

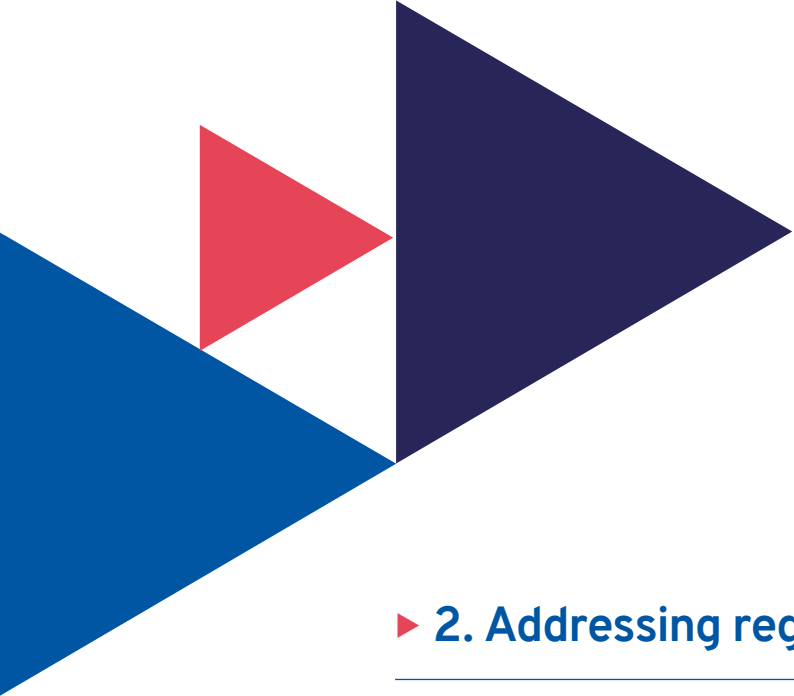
Trade-union priorities for a managed transition:

- **Skills and social protection:** Scale up education lifelong learning strategies through tripartite skills partnerships; pair decarbonisation with job-creation programmes, reskilling funds, wage insurance, and social protection measures that maintain living standards during transitions.
- **Legal protection and regulation:** Technological innovation should not increase informal or precarious work. The misclassification of platform workers, and adverse effects of algorithmic management must be addressed, reaffirming the importance of a formal employment relationship. Platform workers need stable, well-paid jobs, the right to organise freely, and to negotiate collectively.

Laws regulating telework and platform work should ensure safeguards for algorithmic management, surveillance technologies, and autonomy over data collected at the workplace.

- ▶ **Social dialogue on technology and climate policy:** Require meaningful consultation with workers on technology deployment and national climate strategies; embed just-transition clauses into sectoral plans and investment pipelines. Freedom of association is critical to ensure that workers' voices are heard on urgent workplace issues, and collectively bargained solutions can provide the most relevant outcomes. Public authorities, in coordination with unions, must assess the employment and skills impacts of new technologies while safeguarding against data privacy violations. Outsourcing should not fragment the workforce; enterprises must establish mechanisms to gather worker input on violations throughout supply chains and analyse them jointly with workers' representatives.
- ▶ **Digital policy and inclusion:** The digital divide was mentioned throughout all regional conferences as a major challenge for an inclusive digital transition. Increasing the access to the internet is vital for job creation and improving public services, including telemedicine. Bridging the digital divide is essential to include rural and marginalised groups. Promoting green industrial strategies is equally crucial to ensure equitable transitions. Both public and private actors must ensure that innovation advances inclusion rather than exclusion.

A good example of a social-dialogue outcome that could be replicated elsewhere is the 2022 European Agreement between the European Public Service Union (EPSU) and local government employers. It provides stronger protections for the rights to telework, disconnect, training, health and safety, personal data protection, and a "human-in-command" approach to artificial intelligence, illustrating how collective agreements can guide fair and forward-looking transitions.



► 2. Addressing regional and local challenges

The regional discussions on a new social contract made it clear that workers worldwide are facing increasingly interconnected and global challenges. At the same time, many workers' representatives also highlighted region-specific issues that are particularly acute in their respective countries or territories. Some countries continue to contend with complex post-colonial legacies and the resulting fragility of the social contract, driven by economic challenges, political instability, high levels of inequality, and, in some cases, inter-ethnic conflict. Other regions are grappling with persistent poverty, social exclusion, and, in certain cases, democratic fragility, which in turn fuel decent work deficits and the rise in child and forced labour.

A. Decent work deficits

Child labour

Nearly 138 million children, 59 million girls and 78 million boys, are in child labour worldwide, representing almost 8 per cent of all children. Of these, 54 million are engaged in hazardous work likely to harm their health, safety, or morals. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly affected, with 21.5 per cent of children aged 5–17 in child labour (ILO 2024b). Youth unemployment remains high, often three times the adult rate (ILO 2025). About 3.8 billion people lack any social safety net, including 1.8 billion children (ILO 2024a).

Child labour is primarily a consequence of poverty, as children are often expected to contribute to household income, which severely limits their future prospects and access to education.

During the regional conference for Africa, this was identified as a particularly pressing issue. Trade union representatives emphasised that child labour is closely linked to informality, as children frequently work in unregulated sectors where labour laws are weakly enforced, leaving them vulnerable to hazardous forms of work. Addressing child labour therefore requires context-specific solutions informed by both labour and child rights expertise. Weak enforcement and compliance mechanisms, particularly inadequate labour inspection systems and limited exit pathways from child labour, underscore a failure of the social contract in many countries to protect children effectively.

Opportunities for improvement identified by the unions:

- Promoting freedom of association for children of legal working age and addressing occupational hazards.
- Trade union initiatives to organise informal sector workers.

- ▶ Promoting sector-specific solutions through collective labour agreements, including technical and vocational training.

Development cooperation programmes targeting hazardous child labour in artisanal mining, textiles, and agriculture, including systematic retraining and redeployment to safe environments and/or schools.

One example shared by participants in the African conference is SATUCC's participation in SADC's Labour Market Observatory, coordinating trade unions to harmonise regional data and identify regulatory challenges. With ILO support, it helps align national laws of SADC member States with international labour standards.

Tackling precarity and promoting collective bargaining rights for decent work

Employment remains insecure and informal for many, with 60 per cent of workers engaged in the informal economy. Closely related to this, income inequality is rising to levels not seen in decades, widening social gaps and disproportionately affecting women, youth, rural, migrant, and informal workers. Young people in particular face heightened vulnerability, as they are often employed in precarious conditions or are not in education, employment or training (NEET). According to ILO estimates, in 2024 one in four young people worldwide will be NEET, with rates in low-income countries being even higher (ILO 2024c).

To mitigate these issues, coherent public policies are needed that prioritise economic diversification through industrial policies, job creation, and the protection of workers' rights. Remuneration and respect for workers' rights are key elements in the fight for decent work.

Key issues include:

- ▶ **Informality:** High levels of informal employment, seen for example in many sub-Saharan African and South and South-East Asian countries, are often the most visible sign of a breakdown in the social contract. Informality is characterised by the exclusion of workers from rights and public services, such as minimum wages, collective bargaining coverage and social protection. Trade union participants unanimously recommended that macroeconomic policies prioritise the formalisation of the informal economy to ensure broader access to safety nets and worker protections.
- ▶ **Sustainable enterprises:** Employment creation, including through the establishment of an enabling environment for sustainable enterprises, should be purposefully integrated into macroeconomic planning. Several African trade unionists emphasised that decent job creation cannot rely solely on supply-side measures such as promoting entrepreneurship and innovation within sectors or enterprises. Governments must actively create and invest in quality employment opportunities through pro-employment macroeconomic frameworks that foster structural transformation towards more productive and labour-intensive sectors.
- ▶ **Supply chains:** Many workers' representatives, particularly from Asia and the Pacific, highlighted that transnational supply chains can lead to multiple forms of labour exploitation, particularly when value added does not adequately reach lower tiers of production. Both host and home countries of multinational enterprises should support the ILO strategy by ratifying and implementing international labour standards, ensuring access to justice, and protecting freedom of association and collective bargaining. Global supply chains too often rely on low labour costs in developing countries, contributing to a "race to the bottom" that results in rights violations, including instances of forced labour. Free economic zones must therefore respect fundamental workers' rights and ensure decent working and living conditions.

Examples shared by participants include:

- ▶ In Nigeria, a trade union organisation established the Anti-Casualisation Committee to coordinate with lawyers and release workers from forced labour conditions.
- ▶ In Rwanda, the ILO supported training for trade union leaders on platform workers' interests and online risk management.

- The proposed ‘Magna Carta for Workers in the Informal Economy’² in the Philippines seeks to recognise and protect informal workers, such as street vendors and tricycle drivers, simplifying registration, providing social protection, and ensuring workplace safety and fair wages.

B. Wages and living wages

Wages were a central theme in all regional ACTRAV conferences on the renewed social contract. Episodic or structural inflation often weakens the effectiveness of minimum wage legislation, particularly when wage rates are not adjusted regularly to reflect changes in the cost of living. According to ILO estimates, around 266 million workers earn below the applicable hourly minimum wage, either because they are not covered by the legislation or as a result of non-compliance with existing regulations (ILO 2020). As a consequence, for millions of workers, existing minimum wages fail to meet their basic needs.

Many trade unionists stressed the need to move beyond outdated minimum wage systems towards the concept of a living wage, ensuring access to adequate housing, nutrition, health care, education and other essential needs. In Europe, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has launched a campaign to defend workers’ purchasing power.

Equal pay for migrant workers is a critical concern in contexts where minimum wages or collective agreements do not exist, as pay gaps can foster xenophobia and racism—an issue highlighted by workers’ representatives in Europe and Central Asia. Collective bargaining enables solutions adapted to the economic context of each company, sector or country. For instance, productivity gains arising from technological innovation should benefit workers and not lead to a decline in the labour income share.

Examples include:

- Singapore’s **Progressive Wage Model** establishes minimum wage levels and skill requirements for certain occupations, with incremental increases as workers acquire new skills, supported by government financial assistance.
- Namibia introduced a minimum wage in June 2024, effective 1 January 2025, covering all sectors except domestic and agricultural workers, whose wages will rise gradually over three years.

C. Inequality, poverty, and systemic exclusions

Concentration of wealth versus poverty eradication

Thirty years after the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration, progress in poverty reduction, education, health and social services is evident, but major challenges remain. Income inequalities are rising within most countries, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few perpetuates widespread poverty despite increased labour productivity. Around 700 million people still live in extreme poverty, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (World Bank 2024). Technological change, climate change and geopolitical tensions risk widening inequality further without targeted policy action.

Regional conferences emphasised that combating poverty requires the creation of quality jobs and fair redistribution through progressive taxation, the provision of social services for vulnerable groups and responsible finance tailored to national contexts. A trade unionist from the Caribbean subregion noted:

“Decent work is not just a consequence of economic growth. Profit should lead to redistribution.”

Workers’ representatives, particularly in Africa, highlighted that many developing countries rely heavily on the export of primary commodities for economic growth, which does not automatically benefit local communities. Resource wealth must first benefit domestic and local populations, be managed sustainably and finance education, social protection and employment. Local and Indigenous communities should have access to training and jobs linked to resource utilisation. Resource-rich

² Senate of the Philippines. Legislative documents. Available at: <https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lisdata/33311301461.pdf>.

countries should promote domestic processing industries through industrial policies to foster structural transformation, productive employment and decent work, while foreign investors must respect labour rights and contribute to local social and environmental development.

Stronger international solidarity is also essential. Wealthy nations should stop cutting aid and support industrialisation, debt relief, and efforts to tackle hunger, disease, and forced labour. “No one left behind” entails involving those in extreme poverty in shaping policies that affect them, alongside civil society, employers, and governments.

Gender discrimination

Women remain structurally disadvantaged in labour markets due to economic, institutional, and cultural barriers. Only 46.4 per cent of working-age women are employed versus 69.5 per cent of men. Those who work face a persistent 20 per cent global pay gap and limited access to leadership roles (UN WOMEN 2025). Care responsibilities keep over 700 million women out of the labour force, and many work in informal, part-time, or domestic roles excluded from labour law and union protections (ILO 2024d).

ACTRAV regional conferences framed gender equality as foundational to the new social contract. This was particularly pronounced in Latin America and the Caribbean. Collective labour agreements can enhance women's working conditions, promoting equal remuneration, access to professional training, work-life balance, and protection against harassment, violence, and discrimination. Governments and employers should support these initiatives.

Trade unions also recommended improving women's representation and leadership within trade union organisations and ensuring equal access to training, including digital skills. Policies promoting shared family responsibilities were also highlighted. In Africa, gender-based violence and harassment remain under-documented, highlighting the need for research to inform workplace and public prevention policies.

Progress is already evident: collective agreements increasingly incorporate gender-specific clauses, resulting in equitable parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and pay monitoring. In the European Union, legislation supporting gender equality, work-life balance, pay transparency, parental leave, and occupational health and safety strengthens efforts to combat discriminatory practices.

Protection of workers in vulnerable situations

Workers in vulnerable situations, including women, youth, migrant workers, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and refugees, often face low wages, poor conditions, and limited social protection, particularly in hazardous or informal sectors. Child labour and gender discrimination remain pressing concerns.

Trade unions emphasised that policies addressing employment and inequality must prioritise the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, especially in conflict-affected or climate-affected regions. This was particularly evident in the conferences covering the Arab States and Europe and Central Asia. Legislation should protect these workers, including platform workers, and extend social protections to physically disabled workers benefiting from remote work.

A comprehensive social contract should cover all sectors, including domestic and informal work, and challenge social norms marginalising women, youth, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers. Empowering vulnerable workers is essential for a fair and inclusive future of work.

Many countries have national policies or collective agreements addressing non-discrimination, universal social protection, and employment of disabled persons.

Examples include:

- ▶ Hungary: Filipino migrant workers in transport and industry successfully joined trade unions to claim better conditions.
- ▶ Malta: Unions organised underpaid foreign subcontracted workers, leading to three new laws ensuring equal pay.
- ▶ Armenia: Indian migrant workers facing forced labour via recruitment agencies secured at least civil contracts.
- ▶ Mexico: Trade unions influenced government adoption of legislation favourable to platform workers.

D. Erosion of rights, weakening of democracy, and constraints on social dialogue and workers' voice

Policies in favour of labour law enforcement

Lack of compliance with labour law is a widespread issue. Serious violations are often exacerbated by insufficient labour inspectors and limited access to justice for victims. In some countries, collusion between labour administrations and companies further discourages workers from asserting their rights or striking.

In the Asia-Pacific regional conference, a trade union leader noted:

“The labour inspectorate system has insufficient inspectors, exposing many workplaces and workers to risks of labour violations and health and safety hazards.”

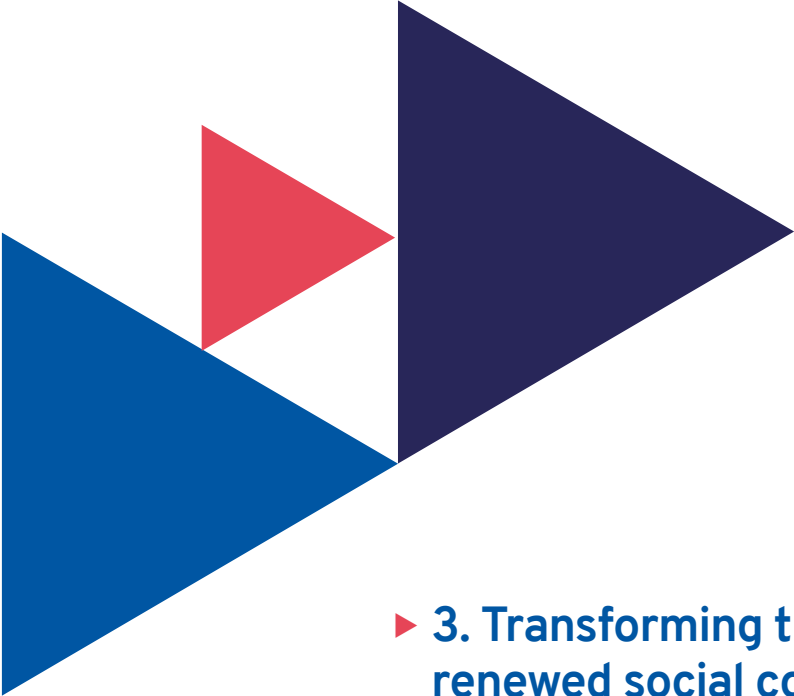
Participants recommended increasing the number of trained inspectors, providing adequate resources, and using new technologies to improve data collection and analysis. Labour inspections must remain independent, free from political or corporate influence, and cannot be replaced by less effective social audits. Mandatory human rights due diligence laws were highlighted as key instruments to protect workers and ensure remedies, with international expansion encouraged.

Rise in labour rights violations and persecution of trade union representatives

Furthermore, reprisals against trade unionists remain widespread, as illustrated by the ITUC Global Rights Index (ITUC 2024). Countries such as the Philippines and Colombia report killings and disappearances of trade unionists, while others, like Panama, exhibit entrenched persecution, including the closure of union bank accounts. In Europe, the right to strike is under attack in some countries, and in the Arab States, conflict and displacement shrink civic space.

Trade unionists called for a multi-faceted response focusing on prevention, protection, and accountability. Governments should ratify and implement international standards on freedom of association and collective bargaining, safeguarding civic space.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, trade unions highlighted the need for a dedicated ILO instrument targeting labour and administrative persecution of trade unionists in public institutions. Practical measures include using UN human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review to document violations, pursuing social dialogue, engaging in strategic litigation against enterprises with deficient human rights due diligence and removing barriers that obstruct trade union organising.



► 3. Transforming trade union action for a renewed social contract

A. Expanding representation and inclusion in a changing world of work

Across all regional conferences, trade union renewal and inclusivity emerged as a priority. Trade unions recognise that, to remain relevant and legitimate, they must reflect the changing composition of the workforce across all sectors and adjust their policies and practices accordingly.

In many countries, legal and institutional frameworks need to evolve to better support the organising of workers in informal or atypical forms of employment. Trade unions should proactively engage policymakers to advocate for such reforms. Women, youth, and migrant workers, often overrepresented in precarious and informal employment, require targeted organising strategies to ensure their representation and protection.

To increase their attractiveness and relevance, trade unions proposed using new technologies to:

- Increase structural transparency and efficiency, for example by enabling members to access real-time information on decision-making, participate in digital elections, track dues and affiliations, and consult meeting reports.

- Facilitate remote organising, particularly for workers in isolated, informal, or digital environments, through online membership systems and mobile outreach.

- Amplify the voices of workers in vulnerable situations on social media, while improving public communication on trade union advocacy and action.

- Expand access to training and advice, including online modules, mobile outreach centres (MOCs), and AI-powered chatbots for frequently asked questions.

- Establish digital grievance and complaint mechanisms and map rights violations to support evidence-based advocacy.

B. Building economic expertise to influence decision-making

To contribute effectively to economic policies that prioritise decent work, living wages, and just transitions, trade unions must enhance their capacity to engage in economic dialogue at both macro (national and international) and micro (enterprise and sectoral) levels.

Participants across all regions stressed the importance of investing in economic literacy and analytical skills within the trade union movement. This includes collaborating with economic experts, developing tailored training modules for union leaders, and actively participating in policy dialogue forums. By doing so, trade unions can move from being reactive stakeholders to co-creators of fair and inclusive economic frameworks.

C. Reinforcing transnational cooperation and trade union solidarity

Solidarity among trade unions is both a core value and a strategic necessity in an era of globalised supply chains and internationalised production. Strengthening international cooperation within the labour movement is critical to holding multinational enterprises accountable and influencing global discussions on wealth distribution, governance, and the renewal of the social contract.

Conference participants across all regions emphasised the need to build stronger cross-border alliances, particularly in regions affected by trade union fragmentation. In countries with trade union pluralism, efforts to promote unity and coordinated action are essential to amplify workers' voices and increase bargaining power.

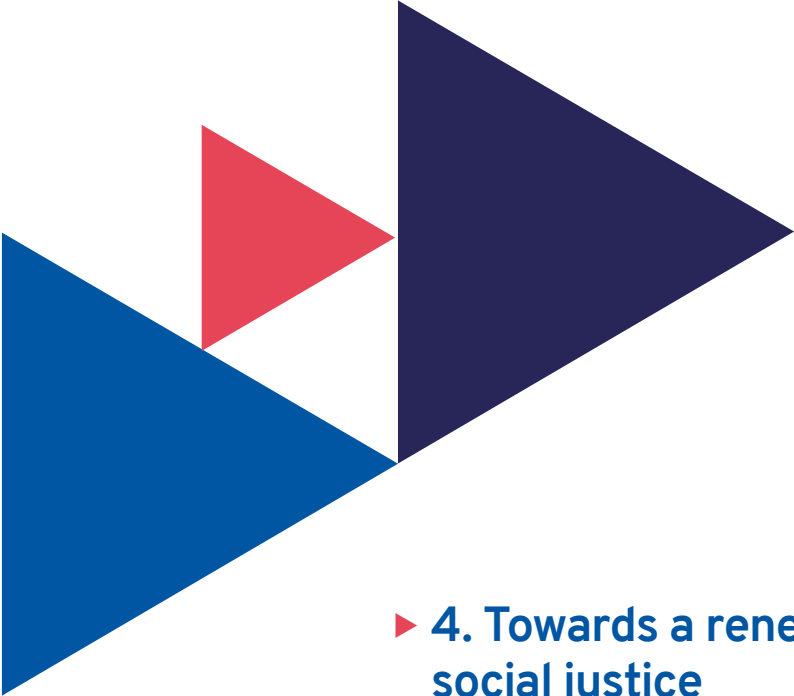
Several regional experiences offer instructive lessons, including the European Union (EU), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where trade union coalitions have played constructive roles in shaping regional integration agendas that advance social, environmental, and economic justice.

D. Building alliances

The challenges facing workers today, climate change, inequality, digital disruption, and democratic decline, cannot be tackled in isolation. Many of these challenges are transboundary in nature and require broad alliances beyond the traditional labour sphere.

Trade unions must deepen their cooperation with NGOs, academic institutions, and civil society organisations, particularly those working to advance rights-based development and just transitions. These partnerships can increase policy influence, broaden legitimacy, and enhance the impact of collective actions.

Strategic alliances are essential for protecting civic space, safeguarding freedoms, and holding governments and corporations accountable to the principles of social justice, crucial for the establishment of a renewed social contract. Working together, these actors can ensure that no one is left behind in the face of today's profound transformational changes.



► 4. Towards a renewed social contract for social justice

It was clear throughout the series of conferences organized by ACTRAV that the current moment calls for a profound renewal of the social contract. The world of work, and society at large, faces three interlinked deficits that limit progress towards social justice. First, the social contract must place decent work for all and the full respect of labour rights at its centre, as the primary vehicle of social progress and equality. Second, it must ensure systematic inclusivity, enabling every person, especially those in vulnerable situations, to participate fully in and benefit fairly from economic and social life. Third, it must equip societies and economies with the institutional agility required to navigate an era of rapid and complex transformations through strong and effective social dialogue.

The crises of recent years, beginning with COVID-19 and continuing through multiple environmental, geopolitical, and economic shocks, have shown that those societies that are most inclusive, are also the most resilient. Countries with robust institutions and comprehensive social protection systems have managed transitions and mitigated inequalities more effectively. Inclusivity and adaptability, therefore, are not only moral imperatives but also key determinants of social cohesion, peace, and sustainable growth.

Labour institutions founded on International Labour Standards remain a cornerstone of the social contract. They define the rights and responsibilities of workers and employers and shape the distribution of power and resources that determine levels of inequality in any society. Strengthening these institutions is therefore essential to a social contract that delivers social justice.

Ensuring systematic inclusivity

For the social contract to serve all, it must be genuinely inclusive. Yet in many countries, large segments of the population remain beyond the reach of state protection and public policy, whether because of their employment status, nationality, geographic location, or migration situation.

A renewed social contract must therefore prioritise the extension of legal and institutional coverage to all workers and enterprises. This entails investing in fiscal and legal systems that protect every worker, promoting formalisation, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Building adaptability and institutional agility

Equally vital is the capacity to adapt. Accelerating technological change, climate transitions, demographic shifts, and cross-border crises require institutions that can respond swiftly and fairly.

Regulatory frameworks often lag behind innovation, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic management of work. Policymakers must ensure that new technologies serve people and protect rights.

Migration flows linked to conflict, climate change, and economic distress also demand adaptable policies that protect migrants and refugees while expanding opportunities in host countries.

Above all, global challenges require multilateral solutions. Strengthening multilateral cooperation and updating international norms must be at the heart of a new social contract capable of managing transitions that no country can address alone.

Conclusions and directions for the future

Every transition creates both opportunities and disruptions, and every policy choice involves trade-offs. The social contract of the future must therefore be defined by its capacity to anticipate and mitigate the negative effects of transitions, preventing the deepening of inequalities and the erosion of trust in institutions.

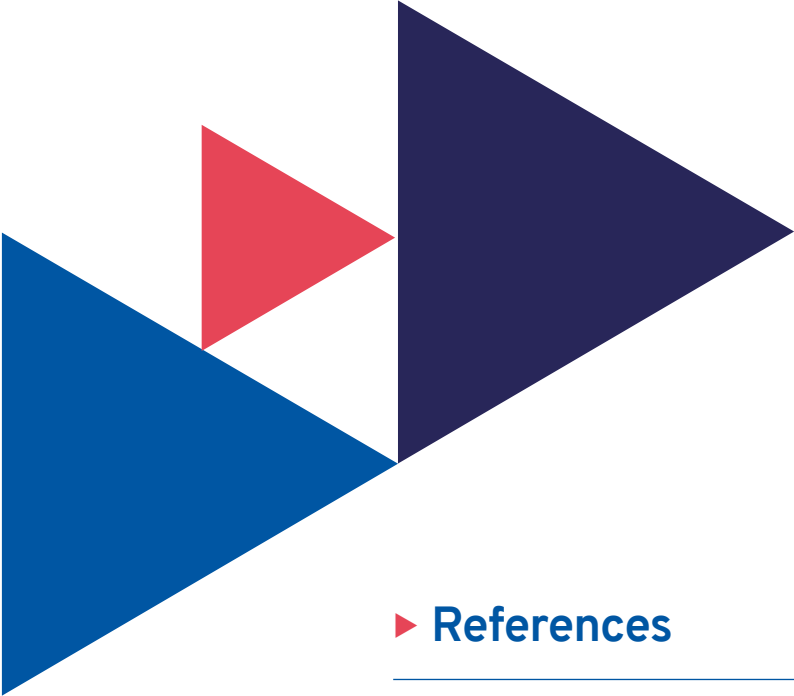
The forthcoming World Social Summit (Doha, 2025) provides a crucial opportunity to turn this vision into action. It should serve as a platform to reassess the adequacy of social and labour institutions in responding to today's realities, as well as the capacity of the multilateral system to address global challenges. Strengthening existing mechanisms and ensuring that systems can adapt swiftly to change will be essential.

A renewed social contract must also integrate economic, social, and environmental objectives within a single, coherent policy framework. Achieving these goals requires recognising and managing trade-offs between growth, inclusion, and sustainability while maximising their synergies. Macroeconomic policies must link directly to social and environmental outcomes, making the reduction of inequalities and the pursuit of full, productive employment central priorities. Similarly, environmental strategies must incorporate the principles of a just transition, ensuring that workers and communities affected by industrial and energy shifts are supported throughout the process.

Finally, no renewed social contract can succeed without broad participation. Inclusive social dialogue among governments, employers, and workers, anchored in the ILO's tripartite model, remains the most reliable means to ensure that future policies reflect the lived realities of all sectors of society. Such dialogue also enables the social contract to evolve, maintaining its relevance as new challenges emerge.

This report, presented as ACTRAV's contribution to the Summit, embodies the labour movement's call for a renewed social contract grounded in freedom of association, collective bargaining, and social dialogue. Representative and independent trade unions remain indispensable agents of social progress. Across the regional and global conferences convened by ACTRAV, workers' organisations have demonstrated their unwavering determination to defend rights and promote a human-centred future of work.

Yet much remains to be done to ensure that global governance systems, including those of the trade union movement itself, remain relevant, responsive, and effective in addressing the major challenges of our time. Following the Summit, trade unions should continue to monitor progress, engage actively in the follow-up process, and contribute to the implementation of the political declaration. Through sustained dialogue and collective action, they should work to transform commitments into tangible results, ensuring that every person, everywhere, can share in the dignity of work, the protection of rights, and the promise of a fair, inclusive, and sustainable future.



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