



International
Labour
Organization

▶ ACTRAV Webinar Series on Trade Unions in Transition



▶ **ACTRAV Webinar Series on Trade Unions in Transition**

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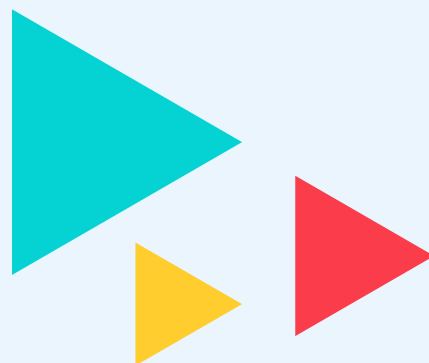
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▶ 1



▶ 1. Introduction: ACTRAV webinar series on trade unions in transition

In 2021, the International Labour Conference adopted the Global Call to Action for a HumanCentred Recovery from the COVID-19 Crisis That Is Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient (ILO 2021a). The Global Call builds on the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2019, which identified four main drivers of change in the world of work: technological innovations, demographic shifts, environmental and climate change, and globalization (ILO 2019a).¹ These forces of change are profoundly affecting labour markets, with major implications for the future of trade unions (Visser 2019). Against this backdrop, trade unions across the globe are seeking new ways to remain relevant to their members and society at large. There seems to be a consensus on the important role played, and to be played in the future, by trade unions in actively shaping the broader development agenda and in promoting and defending workers' rights. However, trade unions must overcome various significant challenges if they are to continue to be relevant, effective and inclusive.

Accordingly, the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) has organized a series of webinars for trade union leaders in different (sub)regions of the world to discuss key challenges and opportunities for trade unions in transition.² Such virtual seminars were held from June to December 2021 for Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, Northern Africa, Western Africa and the Gulf States; they were hosted by the respective subregional confederations of trade unions: the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council, the East African Trade Union Confederation, the Horn of Africa Confederation of Trade Unions and the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa.

The webinar series has been structured around the following objectives:

- a. assessing key transitions and sustainability challenges faced by trade unions;
- b. exploring four possible scenarios for the future of trade unions;
- c. exchanging experience and best practices related to trade union revitalization;
- d. examining trade union responses during the COVID-19 crisis; and
- e. introducing the concepts of strategic thinking and foresight to support trade unions in dealing with uncertainty and anticipating change, and to enable transformative action.

The four possible scenarios for the future of trade unions that have informed the webinar series are as follows:

- a. marginalization – decreasing rates of unionization and ageing unions;
- b. dualization – where unions defend their current positions and cater to those members who are closest to them;
- c. replacement – where the functions of trade unions are taken over by entities such as non-governmental organizations, social movements, governments, employers or other intermediary agencies; and
- d. revitalization – using innovative tactics and coalitions to make trade unions strong, relevant, democratic and representative actors that can organize and service the “new unstable workforce” in the global North and South (Visser 2019).

Most recently, the COVID-19 crisis has further aggravated existing challenges in areas such as trade union membership, organizing workers in the informal economy, and defending, protecting and advancing the interests of all workers (ILO 2021b). Workers' organizations need to take stock of the risks but also the opportunities brought about by this crisis and to strengthen their capacity to deal with future crises (ILO 2021c).

1 See also the landing page of the ILO Future of Work initiative, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/future-of-work/lang--en/index.htm>.

2 See the ILO web page “Trade Unions as Actors of Change”, <https://www.ilo.org/actrav/projects/trade-unions-in-transition/lang--en/index.htm>.

▶ 2



▶ 2. Challenges facing trade unions

The webinar series highlighted a number of critical challenges faced by trade unions in Africa and the Gulf States, including increased labour market flexibility, the informalization of work, dwindling membership and pressures on financial sustainability.

Participants across regions raised concerns about increased flexibility in the hiring and firing of workers, caused, *inter alia*, by globalization and environmental and technological change. These factors are pushing more workers into the informal economy, which is often characterized by significant decent work deficits. In such a context – where the traditional employer–worker relationship, the definition of work itself and workplaces are changing – trade union work is extremely difficult. As a result, membership levels have been declining in many regions of the world, negatively affecting the financial sustainability of trade unions.

The webinar participants concurred that the COVID-19 crisis had exposed the deepseated inequalities and inefficiencies in the economic model pursued by governments around the world. For instance, the crisis caused a steep fall in economic output that translated into decreased employment and greater pressure on livelihoods. In this way, the crisis also contributed to the expansion of informal and vulnerable employment.³

Participants further observed that the impact of the crisis on employment had been particularly severe in certain sectors, such as the tourism and travel industry. The closure of international borders and subsequent grounding of flights resulted in retrenchments and loss of jobs among airline staff and other workers who earned a living in the transport and tourism industries. Moreover, following the lockdowns and other preventive measures imposed by governments in the wake of the pandemic, some trade unions suffered drastic losses to their membership.

It also became clear from the discussions at the webinars that the limited access of trade unions to members and workplaces during the crisis had been exacerbated – particularly in Africa – by the lack of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in terms of both infrastructure and the skills required to use digital tools. As a result, the COVID-19 crisis indirectly led to wideranging restrictions of workers' and trade unions' rights, including freedom of association and social dialogue.

Additionally, collective bargaining came under pressure during the crisis, in a challenging economic context where companies had to downsize or close down altogether. For some trade unions, the main focus has been on safeguarding jobs (even where it meant accepting reductions in working time) so that their members could, to the extent possible, remain on salaried employment. Union leaders also highlighted the urgent need to prioritize negotiations with employers on reviewing existing collective bargaining agreements in the light of the crisis (ILO 2021d).

³ See the ILO landing page on “COVID-19 and the World of Work”, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/lang--en/index.htm>.

▶ 3



▶ 3. Key issues for trade unions in transition

Although the discussions during the webinars touched on a wide range of topics and varied across regions and subregions, the following common issues emerged: how the COVID-19 crisis had highlighted the need for trade union revitalization; organizing and servicing workers in the face of rising informality; internal governance challenges; promoting inclusive and effective social dialogue; digital unionism and the adoption of digital technologies; trade unions' capacity to navigate change and deal with uncertainty; learning from good practices in revitalization; and practical steps to move forward and pursue trade union renewal.

3.1. The need for trade union revitalization as highlighted by the COVID19 crisis

With regard to the main challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis, the discussions at the webinars raised the following points:

- ▶ The world of work has been profoundly affected by the crisis. Tourism, road and maritime transport, aviation, construction, commerce and hospitality, entertainment and manufacturing are the hardest-hit sectors (ILO 2021b).
- ▶ Governments launched fiscal stimulus programmes of an unprecedented scale with a view to supporting income and jobs as well as preventing an outright collapse of the economy in the wake of the pandemic.
- ▶ The pandemic was not just a health crisis, but also drew attention more generally to economic, technological and environmental challenges. It has exposed and aggravated existing challenges for workers and workers' rights, particularly in relation to youth unemployment, inequality and rising informality.
- ▶ Health and frontline workers were the categories of workers most affected by the pandemic.
- ▶ Informal workers, the self-employed and casual workers were disproportionately impacted because of their inadequate protection, their lack of opportunities for income replacement and/or savings, the precariousness of their employment relationship and their exclusion from support measures (ILO 2021b).
- ▶ Trade unions were already under great pressure before the crisis owing to various factors, such as rapid technological change, globalization and climate change. Revitalization was therefore already on the agenda of many trade unions.
- ▶ The crisis has accentuated the urgent need for trade unions to intensify their efforts aimed at revitalization and transformation.

3.2. Organizing and servicing workers in the face of increasing informality

With regard to how trade unions organize workers and service their needs, the discussions at the webinars raised the following points:

- ▶ As the informal economy continues to expand further, increasing labour market flexibility is negatively affecting trade unions' capacity to organize.
- ▶ Women, young people, migrant workers, refugees and people with disabilities are the most vulnerable workers, mainly owing to the informal and precarious nature of the work that they perform, their poor working conditions, their exposure to violence and marginalization, and their lack of protection or support by public services.
- ▶ Since the world of work is changing, it is imperative for trade unions as well to change the way in which they operate, particularly how they organize workers and provide services – for instance, to workers in the informal economy (ILO 2019b).
- ▶ Unless trade unions are able to organize an increasingly unstable workforce, they will lose representativeness and, as a direct consequence, credibility and power.
- ▶ Trade unions should broaden the scope of their activities by seeking to recruit new members among vulnerable groups, such as informal workers, gig economy workers, young workers, migrant workers and workers with disabilities.
- ▶ Trade unions should consider mapping the various categories of vulnerable workers and their respective needs in order to understand better how to effectively organize and provide tailored services to such members.
- ▶ Similarly, trade unions should develop and pursue innovative strategies to continue and broaden their representation of workers in general and to effectively service underrepresented workers in particular – for example, through the use of social media, online counselling and the provision of legal assistance.

3.3. Addressing internal governance challenges

As part of their revitalization agenda, trade unions should address a series of internal challenges, notably:

- ▶ strengthening internal governance and union democracy;
- ▶ enhancing the representation and participation of some categories of workers (for instance, migrants, young people and women);
- ▶ tackling deficits in their capacity (for example, with regard to the staffing of secretariats or technical and research capacity);
- ▶ strengthening union structures at the shop-floor level;
- ▶ increasing transparency and accountability;
- ▶ countering the general decline in trade union membership;
- ▶ tackling the proliferation and fragmentation of trade unions;
- ▶ strengthening financial sustainability, not least by limiting trade unions' financial dependence on development partners.

At the same time as addressing these governance issues, trade unions should renew their agendas and open up to experimentation, which includes exploring new strategies, emerging topics and opportunities for collaboration with other stakeholders.

3.4. Inclusive and effective social dialogue

With regard to the need for strengthened social dialogue and collective bargaining, the discussions at the webinars raised the following points:

- ▶ Effective social dialogue and cooperation between governments and employers' and workers' organizations proved indispensable when designing and implementing strategies and policies to address the negative impacts of the COVID19 crisis in an inclusive manner (ILO 2021b).
- ▶ Revitalization should be anchored in (a) inclusiveness (that is, defending all workers); and (b) effective social dialogue on the challenges and problems faced by workers during the crisis and the recovery phase.
- ▶ Trade unions must uphold social dialogue and collective bargaining as key mechanisms for enhancing working conditions and safeguarding workers' rights.
- ▶ Other aspects that trade unions need to consider incorporating into the agenda for social dialogue are: the structural transformation of economies; alternatives to a predominantly neoliberal paradigm of development; the impacts of free trade agreements on labour markets and workers' rights; the shaping of industrial policy; climate action; enhancing access to universal social protection; fostering digital skills; and extending collective bargaining to cover new and emerging forms of work.
- ▶ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, trade unions should assess the protection clauses in existing collective bargaining agreements – for example, provisions on sick leave or occupational safety and health while working from home.
- ▶ Trade unions should call for COVID-19 to be classified as an occupational illness.

3.5. Digital unionism and the adoption of digital technologies

With regard to the challenges and opportunities related to “digital unionism”, the discussions at the webinars raised the following points:

- ▶ The COVID-19 crisis confronted trade unions with major challenges in the area of digital technology. These include: (a) the massive labour market upheaval caused by the shift to online work; and (b) limited access to digital technology, which is particularly relevant in Africa.
- ▶ On the other hand, the crisis served as a catalyst of digital unionism by intensifying the adoption of digital technologies by trade unions, including technologies used to organize and service their members.
- ▶ As part of digitalization, ways should be explored to provide trade unions and workers with relevant ICT tools and infrastructure (for example, enhanced internet connectivity and access to networks, data and hardware).
- ▶ The crisis has also drawn attention to sensitive issues that were already on trade unions’ agendas, such as data protection and rights, algorithmic management, telework and socio-psychological risks.

3.6. Navigating change and dealing with uncertainty

With regard to how trade unions deal with uncertainty and change, the discussions at the webinars raised the following points:

- ▶ An important dimension of trade union revitalization has to do with unions’ capacity to deal with uncertainty, navigate change, experiment with innovation and explore possible futures.
- ▶ “Foresight” or “scenario thinking” can be useful tools for dealing with change, reflecting on an uncertain future and taking appropriate action. Many trade unions around the world are already doing this in one way or another.
- ▶ Strategic thinking or foresight can be applied to various areas that are central to the revitalization agenda, including innovative organizing practices, coalitionbuilding, the pursuit of a just transition and technological change.

3.7. Learning from good practices in revitalization

Some good practices in trade union revitalization that were discussed during the webinar series are summarized in the table below:

▶ Good practices in trade union revitalization

Country / trade union	Practical examples
Argentina	In Argentina, the Platform Workers Association is organizing workers in the gig economy through a new trade union supported by the main union federations.
Australia	Trade unions in Australia have made good progress in organizing young workers. The Young Workers Centre is a onestop shop where such workers can learn about their rights at work and obtain personalized advice or legal assistance. Trade unions use virtual organizing, social media, podcasts and TikTok.
Bahrain	A trade union in Bahrain developed a mobile app to recruit unemployed young workers in the country, and established a nationwide alliance with various civil society organizations.
Benin	The main trade union organizations in Benin have adopted a joint declaration and charter aimed at strengthening common action, establishing a new union structure and improving decision-making, the recruitment of new members and financing.
Botswana	Two major federations in Botswana signed a memorandum of understanding to work together within the national forums for social dialogue.
Colombia	Trade unions in Colombia have been involved in alternative social dialogue forums (for example, at the municipal and departmental level) covering issues such as skills development, territorial planning and post-conflict situations.
Denmark	Trade unions in Denmark signed a collective bargaining agreement with a Danish-owned digital labour platform addressing matters such as the transition from freelancer to employee status, insurance coverage and dispute resolution.
Indonesia	Taxi drivers and various trade unions in Indonesia established an Online Transport Action Committee, which has engaged in dialogue with firms and the Government to better regulate the sector.
Jordan	Trade unions in Jordan are supporting migrant workers in obtaining work permits.
Kenya	A mobile phone app was developed by Kenya's Central Organization of Trade Unions to enable informal economy workers to access national health insurance.
Lithuania and Ukraine	In Lithuania and Ukraine, unions are collaborating across borders through joint campaigning and a bilateral cooperation agreement to enhance the recruitment and representation of Ukrainian truck drivers in unions in both countries.
Mauritius	There is a national platform for trade union federations in Mauritius that enables them to coordinate with one another in social dialogue forums.
Nigeria	The National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria has extended its organizing activities to selfemployed tailors, while the Nigeria Labour Congress is implementing a programme to organize platform workers.
Republic of Moldova	The main trade unions in the Republic of Moldova worked together over several years on the development of a new law on labour inspection. These efforts included coordinating with the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations.
Russian Federation	Russian trade unions' engagement in national social dialogue led to the adoption of new legislation on teleworking, which was particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Country / trade union	Practical examples
Senegal	A trade union for private security workers was established in Senegal and entered into collective negotiations aimed at formalizing informal workers and enhancing their access to social protection.
Ukraine	Trade unions in Ukraine are using a mobile app to reach out to new members.
Uzbekistan	Trade unions in Uzbekistan have been organizing seasonal workers by, for example, allowing temporary dual union membership.
Viet Nam	Internal democracy features prominently on the strategic agenda of Vietnamese trade unions.
African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa)	ITUC-Africa supported its affiliates in assessing the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis in Africa, in gauging its impact on fundamental rights and freedoms of workers, and in strengthening the capacity of African trade unions for social dialogue to address the crisis.
Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI)	In 2020, BWI affiliates in Africa signed tripartite agreements to prevent dismissals and protect workers' income (in full or in part) for periods ranging from two weeks to two months. BWI also supports the capacity-building of unions in relation to occupational safety and health in the telecommunications sector in Western Africa.
IndustriALL Global Union	In 2020, IndustriALL launched a targeted computerization and digitalization programme for its affiliates in Africa.
International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA)	In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, IFWEA organized online study circles within and across countries in different regions involving grassroots leaders of trade unions; supported the hosting of online webinars on job security, health and safety, and trade union rights for union representatives from several countries; and conducted online training workshops on trade union organizing, collective bargaining and campaigning, with a focus on digital tools and methods.
International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)	The IUF recently established two trade unions to represent workers in the palm oil and flower sectors in Africa.
Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU)	Interventions by the OATUU during the pandemic included the provision of online support, raising affiliates' awareness of COVID-19 and its impact, and the mobilization of technical and financial support for affiliates to respond to the crisis.
Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC)	In 2020–21, SATUCC used the subregional social dialogue platform of the Southern African Development Community to engage governments and employers in a discussion of social protection and the rights of migrant workers during the pandemic. SATUCC also supported its members through subregional research on the impact of the crisis on workers.

3.8. Moving forward with practical steps for revitalization

Participants in the webinar discussions identified the following practical steps that trade unions should consider so as to advance their revitalization agendas:

- ▶ develop a strategy for revitalization with clear guidelines, an implementation plan and time frames;
- ▶ explore innovative approaches, methods and tools for strategic planning, foresight and experimentation;
- ▶ devise new ways of organizing and servicing various categories of workers, taking into account their specific needs;
- ▶ reaffirm the centrality of inclusive and effective social dialogue by ensuring that the priorities of under-represented groups of workers are reflected in trade union agendas and in social dialogue forums on current and emerging topics (such as socio-psychological risk, violence and harassment, digitalization and sustainable development);
- ▶ tackle internal democracy deficits by ensuring that young people, women, informal workers and other vulnerable groups are organized and represented in union structures (for example, by having young members participate in wage committees and giving them a seat at the executive table);
- ▶ fully embrace digital technology as a key vehicle for revitalization (for example, digital organizing in the platform economy);
- ▶ explore innovative collaborations with other unions, civil society organizations, governments and employers through coalitions, alliances and campaigns (for example, on trade and investment or the Sustainable Development Goals); and
- ▶ strengthen trade union cooperation within and across regions and subregions.

▶ 4



▶ 4. Trade union voices on revitalization

During the various webinars, testimonies were gathered from trade union leaders, academics and activists in different regions of the world.⁴ Four key points emerged from these testimonies, namely: (a) the urgent need to organize the informal economy in its broadest sense, encompassing rural economy workers, street vendors, migrant workers and platform workers; (b) the central role of social dialogue in all its forms and at all levels (enterprise, sectoral, national, international and regional), particularly during the COVID19 crisis, the recovery phase and beyond; (c) the fundamental importance of collective bargaining as a tool for trade unions to defend workers' rights; and (d) the considerable potential of "digital unionism". The testimonies highlighted several good practices, such as incorporating policies on digital technologies into collective bargaining agreements or enhancing trade union capacities to use digital technology to organize and service workers (ILO 2021c).

4.1. Urgent need to expand the scope of organizing

Trade unions are increasingly realizing the urgent need to speed up the process of transformation if they are to remain relevant. Rapid change in the world of work was accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, as reflected, say, in the expanding use of robots and remote forms of work. Accordingly, trade unions are obliged to rethink the ways in which they organize and mobilize workers.

"Organizing has become a big challenge and we have to invent new modalities for this, moving away from the traditional arrangements where trade union officials would visit enterprises to recruit members. Now we have to do this virtually, but there are connectivity issues in remote areas." – Francis Atwoli, Secretary General, Central Organization of Trade Unions of Kenya (COTU-Kenya)

Trade union revitalization calls for the stepping up of efforts to provide spaces in the representative structures of trade unions for, among others, young people and women, and to increase the recruitment of informal workers, who for a long time have been left out of unionization campaigns. For instance, the IndustriALL Global Union has developed a programme for its affiliates in Africa to support the formalization of artisanal smallscale mining, while trade unions in Senegal and the Syrian Arab Republic have made good progress in organizing informal workers.⁵ Such efforts became even more relevant during the COVID-19 crisis, given its disproportionate on vulnerable groups of workers, such as those operating in the informal economy.

"Trade unions in the Arab States region need to take urgent action to make up for the losses suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic and quickly adapt to this new situation." – Prof. Jamal Rahmani

According to the Executive Secretary of the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC), Caroline Mugalla, her organization is promoting the exchange of good practices for organizing informal workers – in particular, through the creation of a network of informal economy organizers in Eastern Africa. Moreover, EATUC has developed a trade union manual on organizing the informal workforce based on participatory engagement with activists from various Eastern African countries.

"In the Arab States region, there are over 15 million migrant workers, some of whom have stayed in their host countries for decades. This is another pool of potential new members for trade unions in the region." – Mustapha Tlili, Executive Secretary, Arab Trade Union Confederation

4 These were treated as qualitative data that was processed using a method of data analysis called content analysis. First, keywords and key phrases in the responses were highlighted and isolated as themes that could be used to categorize the data. Recurring categories were then identified and merged where necessary.

5 Testimony by Tendai Makanza, a programme officer at IndustriALL; submission by Rafael Peels, Senior Specialist in Workers' Activities (ILO-ACTRAV), during the webinar series on trade union revitalization.

Some informal workers in Eastern Africa have been organized into cooperatives. For instance, a trade union for motorcycle taxi riders in Rwanda also operates as a cooperative that offers its members financial services, safety and health education, and representation in negotiations with the Government to secure better working conditions. In the United Republic of Tanzania, female informal workers who sell assorted crafts and handmade products have been organized into groups through which they are able to effectively engage with local government authorities.⁶

4.2. Social dialogue and collective bargaining during the COVID-19 crisis

Trade unions all over the world have stood on the front line of national and international efforts to deal with the unprecedented pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Social dialogue and, in particular, collective bargaining have played a crucial role in trade unions' negotiations with governments and employers' organizations to protect workers' rights during the crisis and beyond (ILO 2021b; ILO 2021d).

"Trade unions can no longer simply see their mandate as being about solely organizing and representing workers on bread-and-butter issues. Gender, culture, ethnicity, migration, climate change, sustainable development and sexual violence against women are all extremely important topics that need to be included in social dialogue." – Caroline Mugalla, Executive Secretary, EATUC

The need for social dialogue to be at the centre of recovery efforts was highlighted by the ILO constituents in the Global Call to Action for a Human-Centred Recovery from the COVID-19 Crisis That Is Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient (ILO 2021a), adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 2021. However, social dialogue forums in many African countries remain weak and have proved ineffective when it comes to developing robust responses to the crisis.

"In some African countries, governments used the pandemic to suppress or undermine social dialogue. Policies to deal with its consequences were designed without the involvement of trade unions, whose members were among the hardest hit by the crisis." – Alex Nkosi, African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa)

The important question as to whether COVID-19 should be considered an occupational disease remains unresolved in various social dialogue platforms in many countries. Whereas workers tend to argue that it should, employers tend to disagree. As a result, insurers may be hesitant to provide insurance cover for COVID-19-related health problems.

However, interesting good practices have emerged among some trade unions with regard to using social dialogue effectively during the COVID-19 crisis (ILO 2021b; ILO 2021d). According to Tendai Makanza, a programme officer at IndustriALL, a mining sector union in Ghana developed, through social dialogue, occupational safety and health provisions and recovery plans for the mining sector. This union also set up an association for miners' wives and launched an outreach programme aimed at raising awareness of environmental and social challenges among communities in mining areas while developing collective sustainable actions to address them. The programme also served to identify the needs of miners' households during the pandemic, enabling the design of appropriate support measures.

In Zimbabwe, IndustriALL affiliates in the mining, energy, chemical, textile and clothing sectors established a joint occupational safety and health and collective bargaining forum to develop collective actions and strengthen solidarity in response to the major challenges faced by workers during the crisis. This forum has also been used to share resources for enhancing trade union interventions in the workplace, such as the provision of legal advice and assistance, joint industrial action and capacity-building for occupational safety and health.

⁶ Testimony by Caroline Mugalla, Executive Secretary of EATUC.

In Madagascar, Uganda and Zimbabwe, joint working platforms have been established by IndustriALL affiliates to increase trade unions' capacity to effectively participate in social dialogue.⁷ Moreover, IndustriALL has negotiated global framework agreements and memoranda of understanding with multinational corporations to strengthen and advance workers' rights along the supply chains in the mining, manufacturing, textiles and energy sectors. Affiliates receive technical support so that they can develop monitoring and reporting tools that enable them to seek remedial actions when corporations violate these agreements.⁸

Significantly, the COVID-19 crisis was accompanied by systematic restrictions on collective bargaining and the principle of freedom of association.

"In the early months of the pandemic, many IndustriALL affiliates lost access to workplaces and were unable to contact their members. This negatively affected trade unions' collective bargaining efforts."
– Tendai Makanza, IndustriALL

Negotiations for new collective bargaining agreements failed to take place as some companies closed down while others downsized. For some trade unions, the focus was on ensuring that their members remained on salaried employment. They may therefore not necessarily have prioritized negotiations with employers to review existing agreements.⁹

4.3. Using digital technology to reach out to members

Trade unions should adopt new technologies to complement traditional methods of trade union organizing and learning. The travel restrictions and other preventive measures imposed by governments in response to the pandemic alerted trade unions to the importance of using digital technologies to reach out to their members. Such technologies enable unions to organize remotely and communicate with workers in workplaces or areas to which physical access is difficult.

For instance, the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS) is using a freely accessible app to target young workers. The app includes an entertaining quiz that allows young workers to learn about labour law and other relevant legislation in Serbia, and it also provides access to material on trade unionism.¹⁰ Another example is COTU-Kenya, which has created digital platforms for the purpose of organizing workers in the gig economy, such as Uber drivers. Through these platforms, workers are able to pay their union dues, together with other statutory contributions, using their mobile phones.¹¹

"We must be 'first movers' and embrace digital technology to be able to carry out our trade union activities, and we must accept that this new norm is here to stay. If we remain resistant to it, then a bleak future awaits us." – Francis Atwoli, Secretary General, COTUKenya

Online platforms, robotization and crowdwork have the potential to increase the likelihood of job destruction in some industries, of precarious work with no social protection, of labour market segmentation, of involuntary self-employment and lack of employer accountability. On the other hand, digitalization has created new ways for people to interact, mobilize and organize, and trade unions should seize these opportunities.

"Digital technology has made it much easier to organize protests. It has also improved decision-making because one can easily consult with others without the need to hold a physical meeting, as we used to do. At the click of a button, trade unions are able to widely share information and to run a campaign or mobilize workers for a certain cause." – Alex Nkosi, ITUC-Africa

7 Testimony by Tendai Makanza, a programme officer at IndustriALL.

8 Testimony by Tendai Makanza, a programme officer at IndustriALL.

9 Testimonies by Alex Nkosi, a policy analyst at ITUC-Africa, and Tendai Makanza, a programme officer at IndustriALL.

10 Testimony by Ružica Grabovac Marković, President of the CATUS Youth Section.

11 Testimony by Francis Atwoli, Secretary General of COTU-Kenya.

The COVID-19 crisis prompted trade unions to accelerate their adoption of digital technologies that enable them to reach wider audiences – for example, by means of virtual training courses, webinars and meetings or through social media outlets. The General Secretary of the Federation of Somali Trade Unions, Omar Faruk Osman, pointed out that, in the wake of the pandemic, affiliated unions used digital technologies to organize young, informal and female workers, with a target of increasing their membership by 25 per cent.

However, digital technology also presents trade unions with a number of challenges. In particular, ICTs may not always be readily accessible to members and digital skills are not always well developed within trade unions. The potential benefits of a digital environment for advocacy are not fully understood, nor are the impacts that digital technologies may have in terms of facilitating the exploitation of workers. Trade unions must therefore be extremely careful to safeguard the Decent Work Agenda as they adopt such technologies.

4.4. Setting priorities amidst numerous challenges and opportunities

It is often difficult for trade unions to address the myriad challenges and opportunities that they face, given their limited resources in terms of time, personnel and funding. Several trade unions have taken up additional topics, such as skills development, entrepreneurial skills, and the provision of innovative and targeted services, as part of the revitalization agenda.

In Uganda, trade unions in the chemical sector are helping women to develop their entrepreneurial skills so that they can diversify their sources of income. These training activities are also used to discuss and develop support mechanisms for tackling genderbased violence and sexual harassment in the world of work. IndustriALL is assisting its affiliates in Africa (notably in Zambia) to procure ICT infrastructure and to develop their capacity through training courses that introduce them to new ways of organizing workers.¹² In South Africa, unions in the textile sector have established a health centre to provide medical support, including support on COVID-19-related issues, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable workers.¹³

“Establishing comprehensive workplace wellness programmes does not feature in social dialogue in our region [sub-Saharan Africa]. Collective bargaining is usually focused on remuneration and working conditions.” – Tendai Makanza, IndustriALL

Participants in the ACTRAV webinars also shared their experience in incorporating concerns related to home work into collective bargaining and social dialogue processes.¹⁴ According to Prof. Dung Pam Sha, some affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress have taken the following steps in recent years as part of their revitalization efforts:

- ▶ The National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria has extended its organizing activities to self-employed tailors.
- ▶ Telecommunications workers are being organized by the National Union of Postal and Telecommunication Employees.
- ▶ Lottery workers are being organized by the National Union of Lottery Agents and Employees.
- ▶ Some platform workers have been organized into a union yet to be officially named.

¹² Testimony by Tendai Makanza a programme officer at IndustriALL.

¹³ Testimony by Tendai Makanza a programme officer at IndustriALL.

¹⁴ Testimony by Tendai Makanza a programme officer at IndustriALL.

A number of global federations and African trade union confederations conducted rapid assessments to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on various sectors (see the box below). These assessments allowed trade unions to share experiences and good practices in responding to the crisis at the national and regional level.

▶ **Trade union studies of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on workers in Africa**

Rapid assessments were conducted by trade unions and trade union confederations as follows:

1. The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC), the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) and the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) conducted separate studies on the impact of the crisis on workers in their respective subregions.
2. The Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) and the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA) conducted separate studies on the impact of the crisis on the informal economy in West Africa.
3. The Nigeria Labour Congress conducted a study on the implications of the pandemic and response measures, such as lockdowns, for gender-based violence.
4. Affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress jointly commissioned a study on the impact of the crisis on the automobile sector.

Sources: IUF, SATUCC, EATUC, ITUC-Africa, BWI, OTUWA, Nigeria Labour Congress.

In response to violations of workers' rights in the construction sector in Eastern Africa, the Building and Wood Workers' International and its affiliates there conducted a subregional campaign to organize workers in large infrastructural projects undertaken by multinational corporations and funded by international financial institutions. As a result of this campaign, many young workers and female workers in the construction sector in Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania joined trade unions, with some of them assuming leadership positions.¹⁵

15 Testimony by Dr Steve. Akoth, Associate Researcher at EATUC.

▶ 5



▶ Conclusions: Advancing the revitalization agenda of trade unions

As part of ACTRAV's work programme on trade unions in transition, a series of webinars were organized in Africa and the Gulf States to discuss key challenges and opportunities for trade union revitalization. The discussions were structured around several themes: the main transitions facing trade unions and related sustainability challenges; possible scenarios for the future of trade unions; positive experiences with trade union revitalization; trade union responses during the COVID-19 crisis; and how trade unions can navigate change.

The critical challenges faced by trade unions in these regions include dealing with increased labour market flexibility, addressing the informalization of work, engaging in "digital unionism", supporting effective and inclusive social dialogue, reversing negative trends in trade union membership, and ensuring financial sustainability.

Trade unions can expand their scope by organizing all workers, including the most vulnerable (such as young people, women, precarious workers, informal workers, migrants and workers in the gig economy), and by devising more effective and innovative ways of meeting their members' needs. Trade unions have to ensure that they are relevant and attractive to workers in new forms of employment, and they should strive to facilitate inclusive collective bargaining. Young people are interested in the principles of trade unions and the topics that they work on, but not necessarily in their way of doing things. Trade unions can become more appealing to young workers, platform workers, women, precarious workers, migrant workers, workers with disabilities and informal workers by focusing on those topics that matter to them.

The adoption of digital technologies should be front and centre in trade unionism in Africa and the Gulf States. With improved access to ICT equipment and the internet, trade unions can conduct more online activities (such as recruitment, the dissemination of news and campaigns on specific topics) and achieve greater international solidarity.

Trade unions should tackle internal governance problems to strengthen transparency and accountability. By ensuring that all workers are represented in their decision-making bodies, trade unions can enhance the effectiveness and credibility of their work.

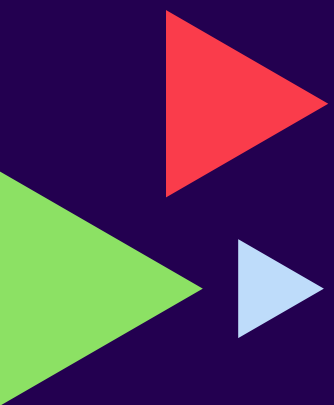
Inclusive and effective social dialogue on topics that matter to workers is key to ensuring the relevance of trade unions today and tomorrow. Collective bargaining proved indispensable in the response to the COVID-19 crisis, but trade unions have to go beyond bread-and-butter issues and address concerns related to violence and harassment, the challenges of achieving a just transition and technological change.

Many good examples of trade union revitalization were discussed at the webinars, and unions can learn from these and even replicate them in other sectors and countries. These examples covered such aspects as organizing workers in the informal or platform economies, servicing migrant workers across borders, developing apps to facilitate online recruitment and legal assistance, collaboration between trade unions and other civil society organizations, and the establishment of young workers' centres, to name but a few.

Trade unions in Africa and the Gulf States should regard the COVID-19 crisis as a wakeup call for them to redouble their efforts on revitalization – in particular, by assessing their capacity to deal with uncertainty and change. They can strengthen their strategic thinking and explore innovative approaches to the key challenges and opportunities of revitalization. It is up to trade unions to proactively address these challenges and seize the opportunities so as to ensure a relevant and representative union movement for the workers of tomorrow.

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