



# ► ILO's response to the impact of COVID-19 on the world of work: Evaluative lessons on how to build a better future of work after the pandemic

August 2021





# INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO faces significant changes in its operating environment, and new challenges in addressing decent work deficits. Since the crisis began, the ILO has had to rapidly adapt its programme tools, intervention models, development cooperation projects and [evaluations methods](#) to ensure they remain relevant and effective. Moving forward, the pandemic will have an enduring impact on the ILO's work, and the organisation Organization will need to continue to adapt its strategy and actions in this way.

Since 2020, the ILO's Governing Body has given the highest priority to the question of how the Organization can best contribute to the global recovery. The June 2021 [International Labour Conference has adopted a Global Call to Action](#), outlining measures to create a human-centred recovery from the pandemic to avoid long-term scarring of economies and societies, building on the Centenary Declaration and its human-centred approach to the future of work.

In October 2020, the ILO's Evaluation Office (EVAL) established a framework and [protocol](#) to ensure high-level and decentralized evaluations conducted in this period collected relevant data about how the Organization was responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of its actions. Such evaluations provide valuable lessons on how the needs and priorities of constituents might have changed, what issues are emerging that require urgent attention, and whether the ILO is well positioned to respond to them.

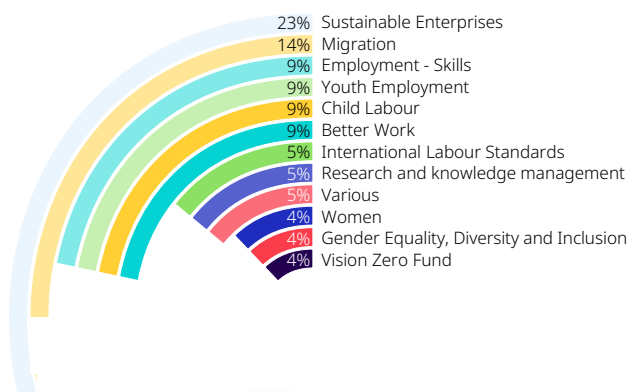
This i-eval In-FOCUS learning series report provides a brief overview of key findings and lessons from evaluations conducted from 2020 to 2021. It is a summary of phase I of a full synthesis review that will be released in September 2021. A phase II synthesis review will be completed at the end of 2021 focusing on an additional purposive sample of evaluation reports to shed light on the effectiveness of ILO's targeted response to the pandemic.



## METHODOLOGY

Throughout 2020 and 2021, all evaluations were asked to include questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic response following ILO EVAL's protocol on collecting evaluative evidence on the ILO's COVID-19 response measures. These focused on two dimensions – the ILO's policy action at national, regional and global levels, and its institutional readiness and capacity to deliver timely support in a responsive manner. The review analysed a purposive sample of 22 evaluation reports to identify findings related to the aforementioned sub-areas of analysis.

► Percentage of evaluation reports reviewed by theme



## KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The initiatives evaluated by the reports considered for this synthesis review covered a range of areas related to inclusive economic growth and employment, the protection of all workers, social dialogue and social protection.

The review of ILO projects revealed various conditions that promoted the progress and success of the ILO's immediate response to the urgent need for action in the outbreak of the pandemic crisis. These are summarized below:



## ► What is working, for whom and why?

### ILO's institutional readiness and crisis response



**Finding 1 - ILO strategies and actions remain broadly relevant in the context of the pandemic and can make an important contribution to a human-centred recovery as envisaged in the Centenary Declaration and the ILC resolution on a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.**

The intervention types that proved most relevant and effective in the period examined by the reports were those related to protecting workers in the workplace. This was to be expected given the health emergency that was taking place at the time suddenly elevated the importance of many of the policy areas these projects addressed, such as Occupational Health and Safety (OSH), the situation of migrant workers, and the needs of workers in global supply chains. Interventions related to growing jobs and incomes and improving access to these did not perform as well at the height of the pandemic due to the terrible economic conditions at that time. However, as economies and labour markets recover, such interventions will become increasingly important and require further analysis concerning their potential longer-term effectiveness and impact.

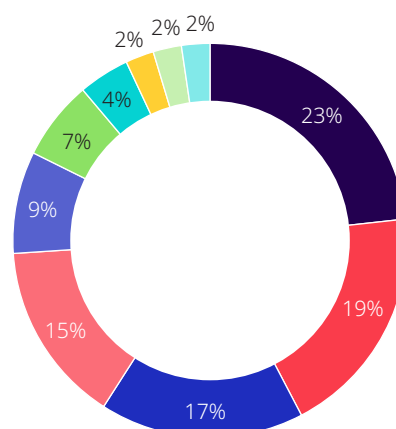


**Finding 2 - ILO interventions were forced to adapt to the unexpected restrictions imposed by the pandemic. They experienced implementation delays and were often unable to implement activities as planned. Despite these challenges, and to varying degrees, projects were able to adjust their planned activities to ensure they remained relevant to the suddenly changed circumstances and to the changing needs and priorities of constituents during the crisis.**

Not all the reviewed interventions could significantly change their direction in response to the shock brought about by the pandemic. Yet, those that were showed

that the ILO was quick to respond to the crisis, could be agile in developing highly relevant activities and resources that meet stakeholder needs, and can overcome barriers to internal collaboration to unlock latent synergies and capacity to innovate. In general, projects quickly adapted to their new circumstances by using new remote delivery methods, training content, and conducting research into the pandemic's effects. Some were able to make more extensive changes and introduce new strategies and services to directly respond to the crisis.

### ► Types of adjustments made to enhance relevance during the global pandemic



- Virtualization of delivery modes
- Research on COVID effects
- Adjusted content of training/advice
- New information/awareness products, guidelines
- Expanded/changed strategy and activities
- Sourced additional donor funds
- Supported personal protective equipments
- New global policy initiatives
- Devlp. of COVID-related national policies/protocols
- Supported cash transfers



## Operational efficiency in responding to the health crisis



**Finding 3 - The COVID-19 pandemic has led to strengthened internal collaboration and has improved communication in some programmes. The ILO showed that, when faced by a crisis, it could overcome its tendency to “work in silos”. This needs to be maintained in the post-COVID world.**

Evaluation reports commented on how the pandemic provided a new imperative for the ILO to work as one and to overcome a tendency to work in a fragmented, even internally competitive way. This focus on collaboration needs to be maintained – there is plenty of room for further improvement and the risk remains, when the crisis subsides, of the ILO reverting to its old, more fragmented habits.



**Finding 4 - The use of cost-effective virtual/remote delivery methods in ILO interventions greatly increased during the pandemic, overcoming a past hesitancy to use these methods. Their continued use in the post-pandemic recovery phase is likely and this may have an enduring and positive effect on ILO's efficiency.**

The use of virtual/remote delivery methods during the pandemic was greatly expanded, often increasing participation, as these were applied to activities such as training, provision of expert support, and awareness raising. These offered significant efficiencies in delivery.

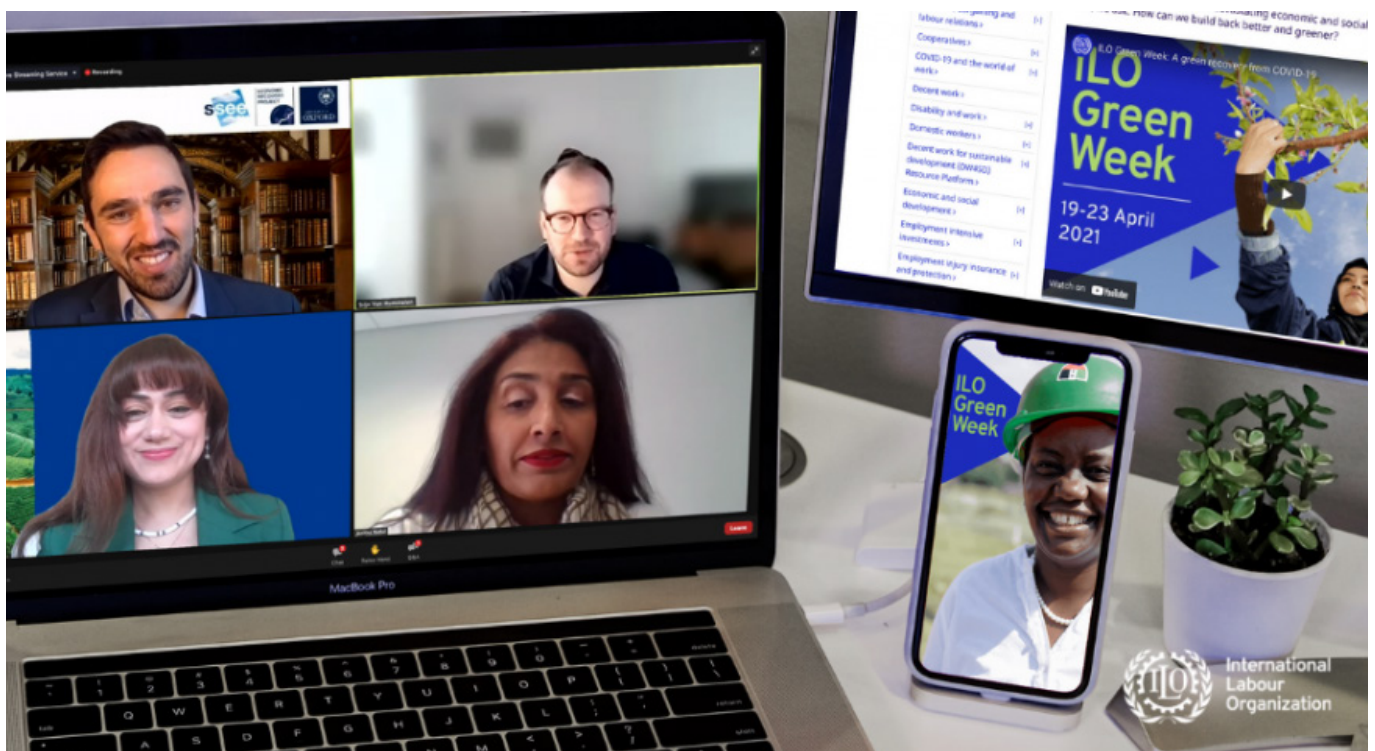
Greater familiarity may have helped ILO staff to overcome an entrenched preference for conventional face-to-face methods. While this has opened the door for their more widespread use after the pandemic, the review found some stakeholders warning that not all support can be effectively delivered remotely, that some institutions and communities are not well placed to use virtual technology, and that some vulnerable people may be frozen out.

## Research and knowledge management capacities in times of crisis



**Finding 5 - In terms of the visibility of the ILO's work in response to the pandemic, its research and knowledge management (RS&KM) capabilities were especially effective. This was evident through various publications and policy guides developed by the reviewed projects in response to the pandemic, but especially through the ILO Monitor serial publication.**

Many of the reviewed evaluation reports adjusted their workplans either to include research on COVID effects on individuals and enterprises or to develop new information/awareness products and policy guidelines. The global reach of the serial publication ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work was a particular highlight - it was reported to have a very high profile as a source of high-level analysis on the impact of the pandemic on the labour market.



## ► What has changed and why?



**Finding 6:** The ILO's work in the period aligned with global, regional and national development strategies and priorities in place at the time. New priorities are now emerging in the wake of the pandemic and the ILO will need to maintain an ability to adapt its approach to ensure that it coheres with plans and strategies as they evolve. Tripartite mechanisms and strategic partnerships need to be maintained to advance progress towards achieving the Decent Work Agenda and the Centenary Declaration goals.

With the ILO's approved Programme and Budget for the 2022-23 biennium, it should use tripartite mechanisms to maximize the alignment of the ILO's work with national and global priorities as they develop. The ILO should also work with other UN agencies and the development community to ensure that the Decent Work Agenda and Centenary Declaration goals form part of revised strategies to put the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) back on track.

Most recurrent priorities for future action under the ILO's post-COVID strategy include reversing the effects of the pandemic's destruction of jobs; reviewing the focus of the work of different ILO departments and units away from product-centred approaches and towards more localised solutions; and focusing on resilience at all levels to improve capacity to respond to future shocks.



**Finding 7:** The challenges posed by the pandemic will lead some countries and constituents to change their priorities and this may have implications for the ILO's work. While the ILO needs to be responsive to these changing priorities, it should continue to be a strong advocate for a human-centred approach in shaping a future of decent work for all.

Reports highlighted how shifting priorities during the pandemic were affecting the operating environment of the ILO's work – e.g. labour inspectorates being more tolerant of breaching of labour standards, environmental standards and Green Jobs dropping in the hierarchy of needs etc. Some of this may be transitory, but there is a risk, as countries try to rebuild their labour markets, that they focus less on these work quality issues. In responding to constituent needs, the ILO needs to ensure that standards are maintained or improved and that “build back better” covers both quantity and quality of employment.



## ► What is next?

   **Finding 8: The reports provide valuable operational insights into some of the new priorities and drivers of change that the ILO will need to consider going forward to maximise its relevance. An overview is provided below.**

### ► Inclusive economic growth and employment


- Elevated priority of “work quantity and quality” due to the widespread destruction of jobs and the possibility that job-generating global supply chains may be changed.
- Even greater global challenges in youth employment in the years ahead.
- The disproportionate effect of the pandemic on women will require ILO's renewed and refocused attention to gender equality.
- Increased challenges faced by informal sector workers, people with disability, and other vulnerable groups and minorities in securing work in a highly competitive labour market.
- The fragility of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in adapting to any reconfiguration of global supply chains, the need to build the resilience of enterprises in responding to future shocks, and the potential for green jobs to create new opportunities in place of the jobs that have been lost.

### ► Protection of all workers

- The reversal of progress towards eliminating child and forced labour in the aftermath of the pandemic, and the heightened vulnerability of migrant workers and refugees.
- The lifted profile given to Occupational Safety and Health, which became the highest priority during the pandemic.

### ► Universal social protection and social dialogue

- The lack of social protection systems in some countries and the ongoing relevance of the ILO's work in guiding improvements in national policy frameworks and social protection systems.
- The fragility of social dialogue systems in some locations, which are vitally important if the right balance in the development of national post-pandemic strategies is to be achieved.

 **Finding 9: Considering the radically changed circumstances in which the reviewed projects found themselves as a result of the pandemic, the evaluation reports offered a number of insights into the sustainability of the ILO's work and its possible future directions.**

Sustaining results of ILO's work in response to the pandemic will require targeted actions, such as promoting regulatory reforms that encourage business diversification and resilience; expanding online training, collaboration, consultation, and information sharing; doing more for small and medium factories in global supply chains; and revising strategies and programs to ensure they support women in a changed post-COVID world.

