

SDG 8

Reclaiming the socio-economic transformation space for realizing SDG 8 in Africa

BY TRYWELL KALUSOPA, AFRICA LABOUR RESEARCH NETWORK (ALRN), ITUC-AFRICA

Globally, the dialogue on the progress made to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since their political high moment in 2015, is in earnest and has gained momentum. That debate is equally relevant and alive for Africa. This article seeks to add to the global dialogue from a trade union point of view, focusing on the assessment of progress in Africa towards SDG 8 targets on growth and employment. It argues that the current capitalist neoliberal global financial and economic production system tends to reproduce economic insecurities, a prime source of inequalities, unemployment and poverty. It asserts that the unfettered globalization enterprise, defined in the purview of the integration of trade, technology and labour, is an inherent driver of decent work deficits around the world. This is clear in the global commodity and value chains of the formal and informal economies that are now linked across borders, altering political, socioeconomic structures and ultimately employment relations. In that light, the increased integration of the global economy simply means that both formal and informal workers are enmeshed in integrated capitalist production processes that present newer challenges to worker organizations and ultimately undermine human development and progress. The article closes with some recommendations that underscore the need for a radical development paradigm that can address the historical and structural rigidities that hinder real structural transformation in Africa.

Quest for sustained economic growth, productivity and creation of decent jobs in Africa

In Africa, over the years, evidence suggests that there is no automatic link between economic growth and employment and sustained human development. For example, the earlier widely acknowledged and much publicized improved growth performance experienced in the new millennium¹ did not translate into concrete employment gains and human development. The annual average growth rates accelerated from 2.2 percent during the period 1980-1989 and 2 percent during 1990-1999 to 4.6 percent for the period 2000-2006,² rising in the later years to a GDP growth

rate between 4 percent and 5.8 percent; with about a quarter of African countries recording a growth rate of more than 7 percent. Yet, the employment situation has not shown commensurate improvement over the past decade. This growth is driven by external factors, including strengthening global demand and a moderate increase in commodity prices in formal natural resource enclaves; while the rest of the national economies did not have the presumed trickle-down effects.³

The 2017 Africa regional report on Agenda 2063 and the SDGs assessment observes that, “a decade away from the SDG endpoint, African countries continue to search for policy mixes to help accelerate the

¹ See, e.g., World Bank (2009); ILO (2008).

² World Bank (2009), p. 31.

³ UNECA (2019).

achievement of these targets”.⁴ The assessment also paints a gloomy picture of the slow decline in the rate of extreme poverty (US\$ 1.90 per day) in Africa, to a mere 15 percent during the period 1990-2013; with women and young people bearing the full brunt of poverty.⁵ Decent jobs, which are an important route out of poverty, are hard to find given that Africa’s growth has not created sufficient jobs to match demand. Approximately 60 percent of jobs in Africa are considered vulnerable, less than 1 percent of the unemployed receive unemployment benefits and only 19 percent of the African population (excluding North African) is covered by social insurance.⁶

In addition, SDG target 8.2 focuses on raising productivity, diversification, technological upgrading and innovation. The assessment report noted that the agricultural value added per worker in Africa (excluding North Africa) at constant dollars is US\$ 1,221, below the world average of US\$ 1,978 and US\$ 1,657 for Asia and the Pacific countries, which continue to search for policy mixes to help accelerate progress on these targets.⁷

Future prospects – where do we go from here?

So where do we go from here? What holds for Africa and what are some of the practical recommendations on achieving SDG 8 and related goals in general? Following are some of the dominant views that trade unions have been voicing in various fora.

Advocating for an alternative development paradigm

The enduring structural features of African economies (enclave and dual economies) that entrench the underutilization of labour are a product of colonial capitalism, which captured a small segment of the economy, the formal sector, leaving the bulk of the economy (non-formal segment) under pre-capitalist

modes of production.⁸ They also reflect the failure of post-independence policies to deal with them.⁹ As such, this disarticulate structure implies that the formal sector has a growth momentum of its own, and relates to the non-formal segment in a manner that marginalizes and impoverishes it, resulting in uneven development. This structural distortion therefore implies that even in the presence of growth, the economy is unable to absorb the vast numbers of the unemployed and underemployed into the mainstream economy.¹⁰ As a result, most Sub-Saharan African economies are not able to meet SDG 1 on poverty elimination. Going forward, it is only through the conscious implementation of integrative measures such as redistributive policies and active labour market policy interventions that sustainable employment creation and poverty reduction can be achieved. The centrality of an ethical development State that is inclusive with an endogenous agenda is proposed to drive this process.

Dealing with capitalist tech oligarchies in the labour market

From a labour narrative, the issue of market concentration and monopoly practices among multinationals, especially technology companies, usually results in market distortions and poor working conditions, which continue to undermine progress on SDG 8. Automation can reduce worker control and autonomy, as well as the richness of work content, resulting in a potential deskilling and decline in worker satisfaction. Life-long learning measures will be crucial for those workers who are in transition in the labour market. More especially for those working on digital labour platforms, technology should be used to guarantee payment of minimum wages and facilitate the portability of skills and social protection and the payment of social security.¹¹ Companies need to ensure

4 UNECA (2017), p. ix.

5 UNECA (2017).

6 Ibid.

7 UNECA (2017), p. 50.

8 The non-formal segment is broader than, and encapsulates, the informal economy, which is defined by the ILO as “all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law and practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements” (see ILO, 2002).

9 ANSA (2006).

10 Ibid.

11 ILO (2019).

that they have policies on transparency and data protection so that workers know what is being tracked. Workers should be informed of any monitoring done at the workplace and limits should be imposed on the collection of data that might prompt discrimination, such as on union membership. Workers should have access to their own data, as well as the right to hand that information to their representative or regulatory authority. The need to develop an international governance system for digital labour platforms that sets and requires platforms (and their clients) to respect certain minimum rights and protections is therefore cardinal. Trade unions are actively further calling for the recognition of social dialogue as a governance tool to tackle the impact of new technologies on work. The underlying view is that governments, employers' and workers' organizations should work within a framework that respects the dignity of workers.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as catalysts of job creation

SMEs remain a potential entry point to industrialization, entrepreneur revival and job creation in Africa; yet their role has not been well harnessed. There is a need to encourage the establishment of national data bases on the size and structure of the SME sector, including output, product range, employment and exports and a competitiveness observatory for the development of SMEs. This should be able to assist in national tracking and monitoring on their contribution to achieving SDG 8 in the national context and comparison at regional and global levels.

Enhancing national statistical systems

One gap has been the inability and incapacity of national statistical systems to enhance the collection of quality data on SDG 8 targets. For example, the 2017 Africa regional report on Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) assessment of the continent's performance alludes to the fact that "approximately six out of every ten SDG indicators cannot be tracked in Africa due to severe data limitations".¹² The report underscores the fact

that "strengthening statistical systems in Africa is an imperative for successful implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063 as it underpins evidence based policy making".¹³ Accordingly, investing in the improvement of national statistical systems contributes to better informed policies, faster response times to pressing issues, increased civic engagement, and of course, markedly improved transparency and accountability. This means "disaggregated data by age, gender, income and geographical location is necessary to better target support to groups at risk of being left behind in the development process".¹⁴

Evidence also points to gaps in SDG labour market indicators owing to under-resourced and weak national labour market information systems (LMIS) infrastructure, especially in Africa. This calls for the development of common methodologies in the data collection and analysis of core labour market indicators that integrate SDG targets. There is also need to establish multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms for LMIS at national and regional levels to share experiences and develop national LMIS that are SDG target compliant.

Domestication through national development plans

The other gap lies in the opaque nature of the implementation of national development plans in Africa. Whilst there have been efforts in some few countries to engage key civic stakeholders at the formulation level, evidence points to less involvement of these stakeholders by most national governments in implementation; and this makes it difficult to assess progress in their SDG compliance. It is therefore proposed that national governments should include social partners in planning and assessing their national plans on the SDGs.

¹² UNECA (2017), p. ix.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Strengthening participation of social partners in measurement of targets

Based on the fact that most agreed SDGs and targets are in place, there is a need to strengthen work being undertaken across institutional stakeholders to develop policy tools that measure human-centered development and progress. The need for additional measures to capture well-being, environmental sustainability, and equality should be reinforced. For example, to reflect the growing conviction that decent employment is a key sustainable route out of poverty; work should focus on indicators as identified by the ILO and other stakeholders over the years to measure full and productive decent jobs, such as: (i) employment-to-population ratios; (ii) vulnerable employment; (iii) the share of working poor (US\$ 1 a day) in total employment; (iv) growth in labour productivity; (v) gender equality for the future of work; (vi) inclusive social protection for formal and informal workers; (vii) collective worker and employer representation and social dialogue; (viii) labour protection on health and safety; and (ix) environmental sustainability and equality at the workplace and beyond.

Strengthening the role of the State and social protection mechanism

Practically, from a human development perspective, there are concerns that the mass-based poverty and social deficits in Africa require active social protection systems that reduce poverty, contribute to asset redistribution and that include measures to address the underlying structural basis of poverty and social exclusion. There is a need to reinforce the human rights-based dimension. An essential element of this is the need to tackle more concretely and firmly the formalization of the informal economy. Formalizing the informal economy according to ILO Recommendation 204, supported by ILO recommendation 202 on social protection floors, in a sustainable way is pivotal to reach the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. In view of the importance of the informal economy as a source of employment in Africa, it is critical that the decent work deficits that characterize it are addressed as a basis for sustained poverty reduction. The typical challenges affecting workers in the

informal economy, more particularly in the SMEs, that need to be addressed include the following:

1. Exposure to inadequate and unsafe working conditions, and high illiteracy levels, low skill levels and inadequate training opportunities.
2. More uncertain, less regular and lower incomes than those in the formal economy, suffering longer working hours and an absence of collective bargaining and representation rights, and often have an ambiguous or disguised employment status.
3. Their physical and financial vulnerability is increased by the very fact of working in the informal economy, which is either excluded from or effectively beyond the reach of social security schemes or safety and health, maternity and other labour protection legislation.

Strengthening independent monitoring tools on SDG 8

The participation of trade union organizations is based on a call to strengthen the buy-in to an independent monitoring process on SDGs such as the one developed by International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The monitoring report is focused on priority goals and targets and structured by a standardized methodology. The reports complement 'official' monitoring, using also additional indicators relevant to trade unions. The objective of these reports is to reinforce workers' efforts to keep governments accountable to their 2030 Agenda commitments. By evaluating the implementation based on transparency, consultation and social dialogue, trade unions establish whether key requirements for an inclusive approach are being met. Based on this analysis, they provide specific recommendations to governments.¹⁵

The call for a New Social Contract

The trade union movement calls for a New Social Contract for governments, business and workers, with a

¹⁵ See country reports output (https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/hlpf2018-countryprofile-congo_en.pdf).

floor of a universal labour guarantee for all workers. This means rights are respected, jobs are decent with minimum living wages and collective bargaining, workers have some control over working time, social protection coverage is universal, due diligence and accountability must drive business operations, and social dialogue ensures just transition measures for climate and technology. “Just transition” is premised on an inclusive approach that brings together workers, communities, employers and governments in social dialogue to drive the concrete plans, policies and investments needed for a fast and fair transformation towards a low carbon economy. It adopts a rights-based approach to build social protection systems, provide skills training, redeployment, labour market policies and community development. Governments must strengthen their capacity to deliver just transition measures and implement National Just Transition Plans, together with social partners.

Conclusion

This article has examined the assessment of progress towards SDG 8 targets in Africa. It underscores the fact that the current development paradigm in Africa reflects the perpetuation of global unbalanced production systems driven largely by capitalist interests that undermine progress on SDGs. It highlights the view that both formal and informal workers are trapped and embedded in the vicious systemic and structural rigidities in the global production systems that breed a ‘dog-eat-dog’ society. In that regard, real progress on SDG 8 and other allied targets requires a structural transformative agenda, one that strives for a sustainable development framework that is anchored on equality and solidarity that cuts across production, protection, reproduction, redistribution and social cohesion functions.

Therefore, given the mass-based poverty and social deficits, Africa will require a human centered economic governance system propelled by an ethical State that will address the underlying structural basis of poverty and social exclusion. What is needed is a comprehensive development paradigm shift that recognizes a broader and tactical disengagement from deepened neoliberal globalization; and the re-engagement of the global partnership that

recognizes the role of the developmental State in the provision and guarantee of human dignity. The SDGs must be seen beyond the ‘basic business as usual’ policy interventions that place emphasis on conventional macro-economic measures that undermine the role of the State and workers’ conditions of employment. Their implementation must not be driven by the promotion of a neoliberal market agenda that often reinforces enclave forms of resource exploitation and allocation that perpetuate underdevelopment and poverty in Africa.

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Trywell Kalusopa, is a professor at the University of Namibia and a senior labour researcher at the African Labour Research Network (ALRN), hosted by International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) –Africa Region.