



► Policy Brief

June 2022

Skills development and lifelong learning in Asia and the Pacific Strengthening the role of trade unions¹

Key points

- Social protection for workers and skills development opportunities can be seen as working towards the same end.
- The policy directions of countries pursuing improved skills development and lifelong learning frameworks have shown signs of converging.
- There is wide variation across countries in the extent to which trade unions take a role in skills development initiatives.
- There are three areas in which trade unions can pursue an expanded role in advancing skills development and lifelong learning initiatives: accountability, sustainability and accessibility.
- An expanded role for trade unions will also strengthen tripartism and contribute to the human-centred approach in adjusting to the future of work.

► Introduction

Since the end of the global financial crisis in 2010, developments in the global economy have rapidly transformed the nature of work as well as the relationship between workers and their jobs. In response, several countries in the Asia-Pacific region have embarked upon new skills development initiatives.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an acceleration in the pace of change. This has added to the urgency for tripartite stakeholders to respond with guiding strategies and policies for the skills development

and lifelong learning needs of workers. One particularly important group of stakeholders is trade unions.

The extent to which trade unions are involved in skills development and lifelong learning initiatives varies across countries. Viewing access to skills development opportunities as an intrinsic aspect of social protection provides a natural rationale for strengthening the role of trade unions in skills development efforts. Just as with trade union advocacy of social protection for workers, there is also enormous scope for trade unions to promote the access of workers to skills development opportunities.

The challenges that require increasingly urgent attention from stakeholders may be classified broadly as accountability, sustainability and accessibility. In some ways, the challenges are greater for trade unions. Perhaps

¹ Randolph Tan Gee Kwang, Director of the Centre for Applied Research at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, wrote this brief, with guidance from Pong-Sul Ahn, Regional Specialist in Workers' Education, ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok. ILO Skills Specialists Ashwani Aggarwal and Akiko Sakamoto reviewed a draft of the brief.

because of that, trade unions also have the opportunity to effect positive changes.

► ILO policies on skills development and lifelong learning

At the 190th International Labour Conference (2021), the International Labour Organization (ILO) took several important steps to underscore the seriousness of the challenges posed by issues on skills development and lifelong learning. Included in the Conference agenda was a general discussion of Report VI, *Shaping Skills and Lifelong Learning for the Future of Work*.² This identified the need to upgrade skills policies to respond to a range of challenges, including climate change, the adoption of green technologies, re-organization of workplaces due to COVID-19, informal work and others. Most notably, Report IV pointed out that "the key to successful skills policies and systems is to connect education and training to the world of work by building bridges" through "more effective tripartite dialogue and cooperation".

The Conference also adopted a resolution "to request the Director-General to develop a strategy and action plan on skills and lifelong learning". As the Conference pointed out, an upgrading of skills policies would be in line with several Conventions and Recommendations. We would go even further and point out that in response to the increasing challenges, it is in line with past Conventions and Recommendations to consider an expansion of the role of trade unions.

In light of the gathering momentum for change, it is timely to examine whether the existing policy framework is adequate to promote the role of trade unions and whether there are improvements that could build on the foundation of existing ILO policies relevant to skills development and lifelong learning. This foundation is encapsulated in the Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142), the Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (No. 195) and the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work. Any changes to the policy framework should also be aligned with the process of the International Labour Conference Standard-setting on Apprenticeships (2022–23).

The entirety of Convention No. 142 is devoted to articulating guidelines for "policies and programmes of vocational guidance and vocational training" at the national level, with elements succinctly listed in its first five Articles. In particular, Article 1 covers the scope and context of policy application. It clearly sets out the obligation to focus on the needs of the individual while considering the national and regional context in adopting and developing "comprehensive and coordinated policies and programmes of vocational guidance and training".

Articles 2 and 5 of the Convention essentially address the need for policy coordination and the potential for policy overlap and conflict, with the former covering other agencies, such as those involved in the system of formal education and the latter covering employers' and workers' organizations.

While this apparently places employers' and workers' organizations on equal footing, workers' organizations such as trade unions may be more susceptible to constraints due to a lack of resources.

Articles 3 and 4 deal with accessibility, with the former relating to information and guidance, such as legal rights, and the latter relating to specific needs, both current and changing, of prospective training participants in all segments of the population and "in all sectors of the economy and branches of economic activity and at all levels of skill and responsibility". There is a clear concern here with those who are disadvantaged and/or have special needs. In many lower-middle-income economies, the extensive presence of informal workers continues to present a major challenge, not least in terms of access to skills development opportunities.

Recommendation No. 195 builds on Convention No. 142 by referring specifically to "training and lifelong learning" and gives the definition that "lifelong learning encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life for the development of competencies and qualifications". The Recommendation reiterates in detail the principles outlined in the Convention on the need to consider the social, demographic and economic contexts while remaining focused on the needs of the different segments of a population in pursuing lifelong learning.

In line with the emphasis on accessibility, Section VII of Recommendation No. 195 specifically mentions the need to "promote diversity of training provision", while Section VIII reiterates the need for information "career guidance and training support services".

Recommendation No. 195 also introduces the need for accountability in two distinct ways: enabling the

² See www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_813696.pdf.

recognition and certification of skills through a national qualifications framework (Section VI) and through research into policy impact (Section IX). Most notably, Section VI specifies the need to consider "prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally". In this way, the Recommendation articulates a need for ensuring accountability, something that the Convention had not done.

Finally, in a recognition of the globalization that had taken place in the three decades since adoption of Convention No. 142, Recommendation No. 195 emphasizes the importance of international collaboration. In retrospect, the augmentation in the Recommendation in the areas of national qualifications frameworks, research and international cooperation clearly anticipated the complex developments that the global employment landscape underwent in the one and a half decades between its publication and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The focus on skills development and lifelong learning was renewed in the Centenary Declaration in June 2019.

Unlike Convention No. 142, the Declaration is not confined to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems. It only mentions it once (Section III, para. A(iii)) in the same paragraph where reference to skills is made. Similarly, unlike Recommendation No. 195, it only mentions lifelong learning once (Section III, para. A(ii)).

In a world in which few could have imagined the horrific extent of the pandemic, the reference in the title to a future where changes to work and the workplace would be the norm rather than the exception was remarkably prescient. However, the human toll of the pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of recognizing the value of workers and individuals beyond their economic roles in the production process.

In this sense, the Declaration therefore serves to emphasize again the need to take a "human-centred approach" and include the needs of the individual in skills development and the lifelong learning framework.

The international momentum for policy change that is currently evident is aligned with the recommendations of Recommendation No. 195's (Section II). A reinvigorated global policy initiative built on the principles of Convention No. 142 and Recommendation No. 195 and that recognizes the critical role that trade unions have, as well as the resource limitations they face (which are currently preventing them from doing more in skills development and lifelong learning) will give fresh impetus to the promotion of frameworks that centre on workers and prioritize the needs of those with the most severe skills and learning gaps.

A focus on the individual needs of workers will also reiterate the relevance of the vision articulated in the Centenary Declaration.

The need to take a worker-centric approach is not diminished by the rise in overall skills levels. While having a higher-skill job role provides greater protection against skill decay, it does not completely inoculate against it.

With rapidly accelerating changes and disruptions occurring on a global scale, it is more critical than before for employers' and workers' organizations to be engaged to ensure that the urgent revamp of skills development and lifelong learning frameworks that many countries are undertaking are responsive to stakeholders' needs. This was clearly envisioned by Convention No. 142 (Article 5).

► ILO programmes on skills development and lifelong learning

To expand the capacity of trade unions in skills development, the ILO has launched important initiatives.

There are several ILO programmes and projects in the areas of skills development and lifelong learning whose work may also inform the policy-formulation process. Three initiatives relate to skills upgrading efforts at the country level and provide practical insights on the implications that a global skills development policy could have on skills-improvement efforts.

The Apprenticeships Development for Universal Lifelong Learning and Training (ADULT) conducts research studies at the global and country levels on the relevance of apprenticeships to lifelong learning and the future of work. The countries covered in the studies are Dominican Republic, Finland, India and South Africa. The ADULT project's aim is to develop strategies for modernizing apprenticeships.

The Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification is a programme that provides sector-level technical assistance on identifying the skills development strategies required for future success in international trade. A tangible outcome of the programme is the production of the *Rapid Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification Manual*. This is a practical guide that provides implementation advice using an approach that has been piloted in several countries.

The third programme of interest is SKILL-UP. This is a joint effort with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed to help ILO Member States enhance their skills

systems to take advantage of new opportunities offered by emerging global drivers of change relating to increased digitalization, international trade integration, technological change, large international migration flows, climate change and demographics, among others.

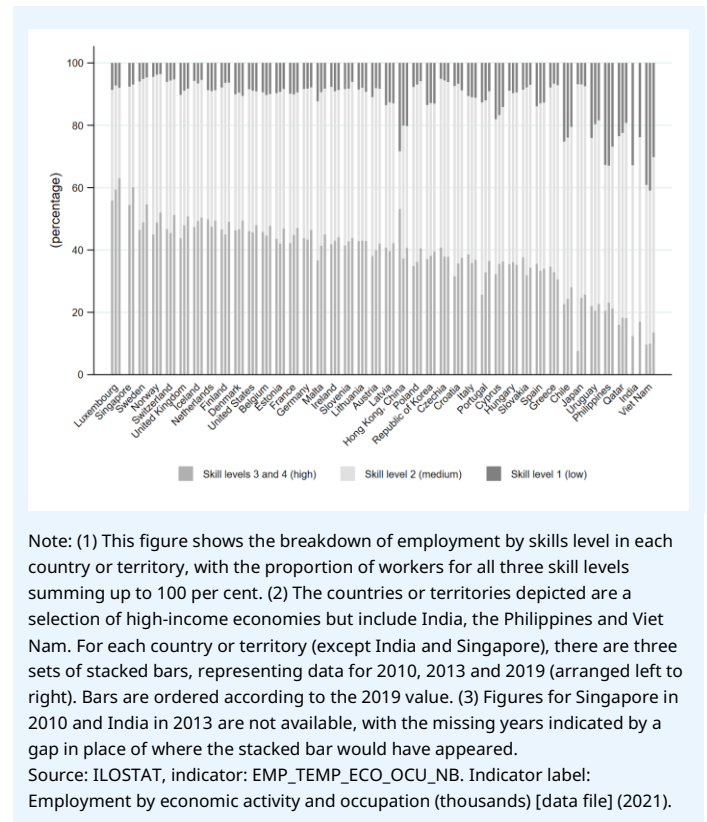
The ILO has also been involved in collaborations with individual countries in the Asia-Pacific region in various areas of workforce skills, including developing skills policies and systems as well as developing training programmes for specific groups of workers.

► Trade union involvement in skills development: Examples from the Asia-Pacific region

In the past few decades, the global economy has become much more complex and interconnected as a result of new technologies. This has driven an intensification of economic competition. While the resulting growth spurt has led to accelerated income growth, the rapid pace of change has also led to the widening of workforce skills gaps as many workers face increasing challenges in keeping up with the raising of job requirements due to technological disruption.

In response, there have been broadly similar shifts in the workforce skills profiles of many countries, away from low-skilled towards high-skilled (figure 1).

► **Figure 1. Employment, by skill levels, 2010, 2013 and 2019**



While the pressures of change have mounted since the global financial crisis of 2009, they now pale in significance when compared to the widespread disruption to the lives and jobs of much of the world's population over the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has kept millions of people away from their full work routines, reduced their incomes and denuded their skill sets through forced disuse.

The magnitude of the upheavals to countries and their labour markets has put their TVET policies and systems at risk of being inadequate to meet future skills and learning needs.

In particular, it has raised concerns about access of those who have the most urgent needs. Inadequate access to training can lead to skills gaps worsening, with those with poorer access at a disadvantage. Over time, this can lead to other problems, such as increasing inequality and widening income and wealth gaps.

Ultimately, persistent imbalances in the allocation of resources increase social divides and impede societal development. While no country can be completely free of such a problem, lower-income economies tend to be at greater risk because of the lack of resources to promote development to begin with.

As a result, the TVET systems of countries have been coming under increasing demand to undergo rapid augmentation and enhancement to more effectively support the vast numbers of workers suffering from the fallout.

Not surprisingly, the trajectories in policy development of countries pursuing improved skills development and lifelong learning frameworks had already shown signs of converging.

Trade unions have varying degrees of involvement in addressing these challenges. For a better understanding of the actual state of affairs, it is useful to examine five countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Middle-income economies

In an acknowledgment of the major challenges that it faces in skills development, India has rolled out many skills initiatives over the course of several decades. In 2014, the Government published the National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and formed the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship to spearhead the policy implementation efforts.

To set out the framework for implementation of the policy, the National Skill Development Mission was launched in 2015. There is no mention at all of representation of trade unions or workers' organizations in its mission statement. There is also no mention of trade union representatives on the sector skills councils that oversee skills development efforts within sectors.

Under the 2009 initiative between the Indian Government and the ILO (known as the National Skill Development Policy, or NSDP), a prominent role had been formally accorded to trade unions to participate in various aspects of the skills initiative. Despite the prominence of that initiative, there are doubts about the extent to which the commitment to accord a formal role to trade unions was realised. At the very least, there was little evidence of follow-through.

Another country with a new skills development strategy is Viet Nam. Trade union representatives from the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour were involved in the consultation stage leading to the formulation of the Vietnamese Vocational Training Strategy (2021–2030).

And another important development in Viet Nam is the new Labour Code, which went into effect on 1 January 2021. It allows workers to form independent worker representative organizations, which do not have to be affiliated with the Vietnam General Confederation of

Labour. And workers are free to choose which independent organization they want to join. In a significant new addition, the revamped Labour Code also extends legal protection to employees who do not have a written employment contract. While these may not appear directly connected to skills development and lifelong learning, they certainly increase the scope for trade union activism and hence the potential for trade unions to contribute in areas that are of priority.

Compared with India and Viet Nam, there is much more involvement of trade unions in the skills development efforts in the Philippines.

With representatives from trade unions participating in various top-level decision-making bodies, such as the nation's Congress and the board of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, union leaders have a role in policymaking on skills development that is one of the most active among middle-income economies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Some Philippine trade unions are also active in training provision. One prominent example is the Associated Marine Officer's and Seamen's Union of the Philippines, that was instrumental in establishing the Maritime Academy of Asia and the Pacific.

High-income economies

There are also compelling examples from high-income economies of trade unions involvement in skills development and lifelong learning.

In the Republic of Korea, trade unions are very active in voicing their opinions on social and economic issues, especially those relating to the labour policies of the government of the day. Such representations are often coordinated by the two umbrella trade union bodies, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

As an example of the type of influence wielded by the FKTU, the new President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol visited the headquarters of the FKTU in April 2022 to discuss "urgent labour issues" even before his inauguration. Among the issues that the FKTU website reported the FKTU president raising with the President-elect of the country were protection of basic labour rights, shortening of actual working hours, reduction of the number of non-regular workers and an increase in the minimum wage.³

In 2018, the FKTU and KCTU presented their separate observations to the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations on the

³ FKTU, "FKTU Meets with President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol", 18 April 2022.

functioning of the skills system, which had implications for the Korean Government's compliance with Convention No. 142. Through these activities, trade unions in the Republic of Korea have been instrumental in shaping the development of skills policies.

In Singapore, trade unions are actively involved in skills development and lifelong learning. The umbrella body for trade unions, the National Trade Unions Congress (NTUC), participates in the development of skills policies through its representatives in Parliament.

In an approach that resembles the direction taken by the Associated Marine Officer's and Seamen's Union of the Philippines, the NTUC also participates in training provision through its role in the Employment and Employability Institute, which is a tripartite cooperative effort.

The NTUC led the push in 2019 to establish company training committees. The rationale was to ensure that workers in companies that are undergoing transformation have access to training that is aligned with the needs of the transformation that is taking place. Perhaps most importantly, trade unions also have a critical role in setting up funding to support the training of workers.

Lessons from the Asia-Pacific region

These examples demonstrate that while it is not uncommon to find trade unions with a supportive role in facilitating skills development initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, there are few in which their roles are formally recognized.

Some of the variations in trade union involvement may be due to differing jurisdictional characteristics rather than a deliberate exclusion. For this reason, it would be useful to consider an ILO-led initiative that recognizes that trade unions can help redress specific gaps in the skills development landscape.

Even in cases in which the role of workers' organizations is designated by legislation, the participation of trade unions may be constrained in practice by limitations on resources, a shortage of technical expertise or simply a lack of human resources.

Although the need to upgrade policies is widely recognized, progress has varied across countries. The differences are even more marked when it comes to recognizing the institutional role of trade unions in skills policies.

While there has been increased recognition of the importance of the role of training in overcoming the challenges of disruption, more can be done to improve

the understanding on how well existing training systems perform in relation to those challenges.

There is much scope for trade unions to fill the gap in understanding through research and analysis from a worker-centric perspective. There should also be improved information on how the future resource demands of training in various sectors will be met.

► Areas for expanded trade union involvement

There are at least three areas in skills development and lifelong learning in which greater recognition of the role of trade unions could be accorded: accountability, sustainability and accessibility.

(i) Accountability

Accountability involves standards-setting and accreditation as well as the monitoring of resource utilization and the matching of them to outcomes. Issues of governance are also relevant.

The landscape for training and skills development is complex and evolving. Initiatives often require multistakeholder collaboration. Even from the government perspective, there is a need for more than one ministry or agency to be involved.

To ensure that the significant investment of resources receives continued support from stakeholders, robust and transparent systems of accountability are important. Such systems should be based on the careful monitoring of outcomes of programmes and initiatives. This is an area in which trade unions can clearly contribute. In particular, trade unions can ensure that accountability for the outcomes of skills development programmes provide better choices and improved job security for workers in the long term. The role of trade unions in monitoring accountability can and should be seen as a balance to the concern of employers that investment in skills upgrading meet their business objectives.

To ensure that implementation is carried out in accordance with policy intentions, governance and oversight are required, along with the responsiveness to stakeholders' needs.

An important factor for determining the success of implementation of a training framework is the development, specification and enforcement of training standards. While this may appear straightforward in

principle, in practice it is one of the most challenging aspects of maintaining a viable training framework with good outcomes. The reason is that enforcement of standards requires a system of quality assurance that depends on the availability of reliable quality assurance inspection. The stronger involvement of trade unions would provide a much-needed perspective on standards from the point of view of workers' needs.

Finally, an intrinsic part of accountability is to clearly identify whom to hold accountable. As an institutional stakeholder, trade unions should also share responsibility for the outcomes of skills development initiatives.

(ii) Sustainability

Sustainability involves understanding that all countries, regardless of their size or stage of economic development, face resource constraints in skills development and lifelong learning and must be prepared to make the trade-offs necessary to ensure that the outcomes are consistent with stakeholder commitments.

While the principles of the policies for skills development and lifelong learning apply to all countries, specific applications clearly depend on the stage of development of the economy in question as well as its demographic profile and current workforce needs.

The needs of a lower-income economy would tend to be much more basic in nature and could require strong foundations and reliable infrastructure to be established.

The education system is an important part of the infrastructure for skills development and lifelong learning.

In cases in which the education infrastructure is capable of meeting the needs of the population, establishing a framework for skills development and lifelong learning would benefit from the strength of the infrastructure. In contrast, in the case in which the education system is still unable to fully meet existing needs and the educational elite tend to rely on external resources (such as overseas universities), the training infrastructure would have to establish the foundations of training expertise, standard setting and accreditation (and accountability) at a more fundamental level.

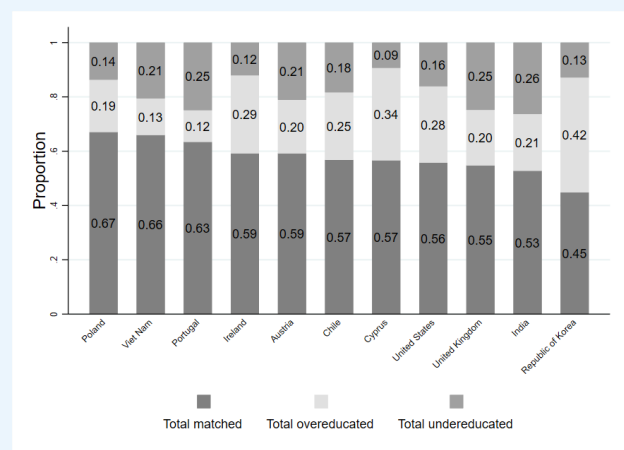
Countries with large populations have the advantage of size, which can lead to a reduction in unit training costs through economies of scale. On the other hand, large populations present challenges of dispersion and a lack of training reach, especially to rural segments, which can negate the advantages of scale and complicate efforts at training outreach by increasing administrative overhead costs.

High-income economies usually have much better infrastructure for delivering training than lower-income economies. However, because advanced economies operate across a much broader range of technologies, their workforce usually has more complex training needs. To effectively cater to these needs, a more sophisticated design of training programmes as well as a more intricate organization of training implementation plans are required. Trade unions can ensure that the skill needs of new technologies are managed at a pace that is sustainable for workers.

While high-income economies may be in a better position in terms of resources and infrastructure, their successes in having a good-performing education system are not free of problems.

Another group of the workforce facing complex challenges are the overeducated workers (figure 2). The problem may be more widespread than depicted because there are countries for which data are not available. Whether skills mismatches that result from overeducation can or should be addressed by training remains unclear. It may be useful to consider it in a comprehensive assessment of the outcomes from a skills development and lifelong learning framework.

► **Figure 2. Education mismatch, selected countries, 2020**

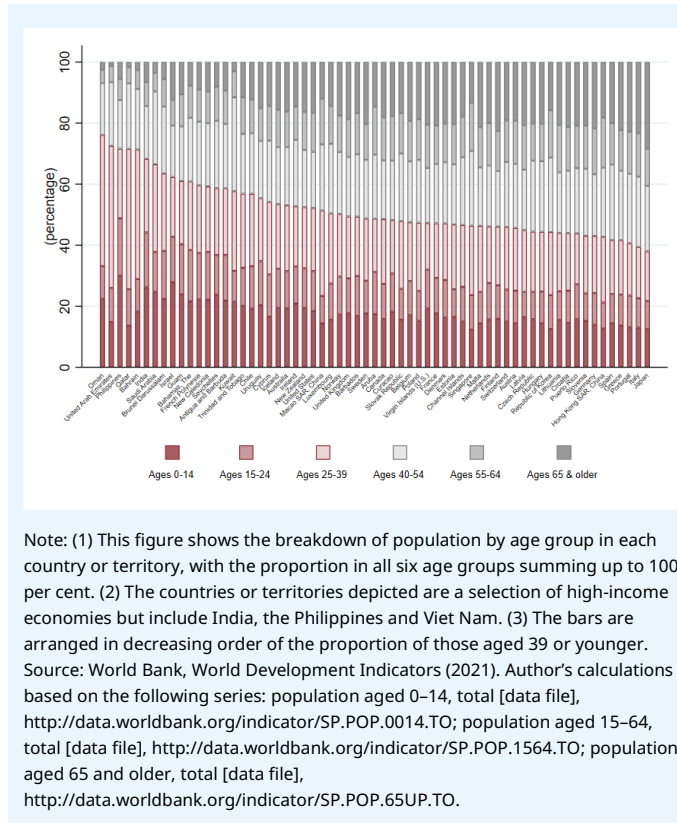


Note: (1) The figure compares the proportions of employees based on the matching of their educational qualifications to their individual job requirements. (2) The countries included in the comparison are high-income economies for which data are available, as well as India and Viet Nam. (3) The countries are ordered according to the proportion this is matched.

Source: ILOSTAT, indicator: EMP_NORM_SEX_STE_EDU_NB. Indicator label: Employment by sex, status in employment and 'educational mismatch', normative approach (thousands) [data file] (2021).

Many countries with a young workforce (figure 3) face a real danger of squandering what should have been rich demographic dividends through a persistent lack of attention to ensuring access to TVET.

► **Figure 3. Population, by age group, 2020**



Given reliable systems for skills development and lifelong learning, demand for significant investments of resources must be sustained over long periods of time. Any shortfall in including a framework for accountability would be perilous.

Finally, information on the state of market demand for skills requires regular and timely monitoring of job market trends. While this is something that the ministry overseeing industry and business should be responsible for, it is also a role that trade unions should have a share in so they can contribute to a sustainable pace of change for the workforce. In recognition of the increasing complexity of the landscape for skills, trade unions are well-placed to address the need for workers to have the necessary mindset to prepare for change.

(iii) Accessibility

As already explained, Convention No. 142 emphasizes accessibility, which relates to the availability of up-to-date information for prospective training participants. It also refers to the availability of financing and support.

There are strong grounds for re-examining policies relating to accessibility. The unequal impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has been having on certain segments of the population has increased the urgency for

coordinated action to repair the damage to the foundations of the learning framework wrought by the prolonged interruptions.

Among the low-income segment of the population and the low-skilled segment of the workforce, the scars inflicted by the pandemic may not be physically evident. If such challenges are neglected and their negative effects linger, they could impede the long-term capacity of individuals to learn and acquire skills.

Certain groups of workers face considerable challenges in accessing programmes for training and skills development. The greatest of these is funding. Even in cases in which funding is available, there could be other challenges, such as a lack of information on the need for training, the type of programmes available and eligibility to participate. The most prominent groups are those at the lower end of the wage spectrum.

An emerging group with a potentially growing and urgent need for training are gig workers, especially those in delivery and transport.

And in countries such as India, Philippines and Viet Nam, rural populations for whom inadequate infrastructure and physical access present challenges remain a group of major concern.

Finally, special attention should be directed to the skills development needs of women in all these groups. This is especially critical in countries where gender discrimination is a severe issue.

Priority should be accorded in training to those with urgent needs, keeping in mind that workers with severe skills gaps are more likely to have performance issues in their jobs.

Ultimately, the three areas of accountability, sustainability and accessibility are inextricably linked. After all, a framework for skills development and lifelong learning is a major undertaking at the national level over a lengthy period. The involvement of trade unions will have a positive impact on all three.

► Conclusion

There is little doubt that countries understand the importance of skills and lifelong learning. In the case of all five countries described here, they have articulated national initiatives aimed at promoting skills development and lifelong learning as workforce priorities. However, the extent to which trade unions have taken a role has varied widely.

There is scope for improving policy alignment even in countries in which the skills policies and systems are well-developed. One example is individual learning accounts. In countries in which there are already individual learning account entitlements that do not depend on income levels and offer more benefits to the low-income segment relative to wages, there should be consideration for increasing the entitlements. Such increases could be supplementary in nature and be awarded conditionally on the use of the basic entitlement.

Some groups of workers for which this is relevant are gig workers as well as those working for small enterprises and who do not have the same access to training as employees in large multinational corporations or public service. Furthering progressivity would align with Convention No. 142 (Article 4) in extending and adapting systems.

In doing so, however, it is critical to acknowledge the need for fiscal sustainability. A skills development and lifelong learning framework that is not sustainable will not be capable of meeting the long-term needs of stakeholders. It will be important for any fresh policy initiative to articulate the need for reliable systems of governance.

While good policies are important, they are only a start. The key remains whether good policies are implemented well to thus produce the targeted outcomes.

Universally accepted policy guidelines would contribute to consistency in application. As countries emerge from the long shadow of the pandemic, a coherent international policy on skills and lifelong learning would place workers on a firm footing to benefit fully from the recovery.

Contact

ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
United Nations Building
Bangkok 10200
Thailand

T: +66 2288 1234
E: BANGKOK@ilo.org
E: AHN@ilo.org
www.ilo.org/asiapacific