

SDG 8

Decent work requires decent public policies

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Inequality has split the world; 80 percent of the world's population lives on less than US\$ 10 per day. The wage share of national income has been steadily declining for decades, in parallel with the erosion of labour market institutions. Neoliberal policies, austerity measures introduced in response to the recent global economic crisis and public spending cuts in developed and developing countries alike have had a negative impact on low-income workers, especially women and girls who are generally the ones to fill in for loss of services. There has been an unprecedented rise in the share of work that is informal and precarious, in which women are over-represented. Poverty relief and women's empowerment should be linked to income growth and wages. Equal pay and a living minimum wage should be part of social and economic policy goals. In order to achieve SDG 8 on "inclusive and sustainable economic growth and full and productive employment and decent work for all" we need a bold shift from inaction to targeted investments and labour reforms aimed at building an inclusive labour market that secures women's equal access to paid and decent work, their representation in decision-making and their ability to access quality public services and quality education.

During most of the last half century people-centred public policies in both developed and developing countries have resulted in sustained wage-led growth. This growth resulted in the distribution of income, creating a vibrant middle-class. Through organizing and collective bargaining, workers and their families enjoyed higher standards of living than did their parents. This also had the effect of increasing wages and working conditions throughout society. Moreover, gains made in the public sector contributed to gains for workers in the private sector. The agreements reached in the public sector influenced the wage levels and standards of living and work for workers in manufacturing, distribution and retail, as well as in other service sectors. In fact, public policy set the stage for the development of many countries in both the developed and developing worlds.

Through government investments in health, education, infrastructure (roads, telecommunications and

other utilities), transport and other public services, the private sector was able to grow, attracting more investment partners. Governments in many countries, especially in the post-independence period, played the role of entrepreneur, providing the stimulus when the private sector did not want to take the risk. In addition, the increase and expansion of opportunities for women to work in the public sector contributed to the improved standards of living for women in many countries. Women's increased involvement in the labour market also ensured that entire families benefited and prospered.

Through genuine and effective social dialogue, workers and their families benefited from social protection measures, and the respect for human and trade union rights. Through trade unions and similar community-based organizations, people have had a voice in society. With the erosion of opportunities for decent work, societies worldwide are now charac-

terized by the widening gap between rich and poor and increased inequalities of all kinds. The sustained and well-orchestrated attacks on labour rights, along with social protection and income redistribution have created a class of ‘the working poor’.

The increase in part-time and precarious work has hit workers in all countries, particularly women, young people, and people with disabilities. In countries with aging populations, the lack of social protection also means that elderly people are especially vulnerable. The removal or reduction of social protection systems results in older people living lives without dignity and respect. They are then forced to seek employment in order to survive in their later years, very often this is precarious employment.

The move to public-private partnerships (PPPs) and various forms of privatization currently being promoted by donors, international financial institutions (IFIs) and increasingly the UN are often at odds with the goal of decent work and its targets. PPPs and privatization models focus on the need of investors to realize return on their investment, paying scant attention to the needs of the people. The evidence is mounting that PPPs are not the answer to the achievement of the SDGs. Recent revelations and discussions highlight disastrous results in the UK,¹ for example, as well as the importance of having a strong civil service when contemplating PPPs.²

Zooming in on the Caribbean, experiences with PPPs, especially in Jamaica, have increased costs to the users. There is a new highway, but Jamaicans who use it are paying high toll charges, which are subject to regular increases (now and in the future), resulting in more and more motorists using the old road.³ The institution of user fees for health services in Jamaica resulted in such poor health outcomes that they

have had to be reversed.⁴ After increased costs and little improvement in services to the public resulting from seeking private investment in telecommunications, the government in Belize passed constitutional changes to ensure that telecommunications remain in public hands.⁵ In those countries that are using PPPs in water and sanitation services, PPPs have contributed to the increased national debt situation. The challenges of finance and the vulnerabilities of the sub-region place it in an even more acute position. Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago and Belize are commodity exporting countries; others are tourism-dependent. Weak growth and high debt obligations in the tourism-dependent countries means that fiscal positions are under severe strain. And the commodity exporting countries, because of weak global demand are also feeling financing pressures.

The future of work

In many developing countries, there is the urgent call to ‘transform the public sector’ in order to make it more ‘modern’. The structural adjustment programmes initiated in the 1980s and 1990s sought to do this, but the results were disastrous. Among other things, they created fear, a lack of trust between the employer and employees and, as a result, workers in many ways felt targeted and their jobs threatened. Current concerns on the ‘future of work’,⁶ discussed in the ILO’s seven Centenary Initiatives,⁷ are highlighting fear and uncertainty in many spheres, owing to their projections that current inability of countries to generate sufficient jobs for its working population will only intensify in the future. The (sub)regional and global discussions to date have not given enough focus on the public sector. In many instances, the future of the public sector and public services seems to be left hanging.

1 Benjamin/Jones (2017) and www.world-psi.org/en/report-slams-uks-disastrous-reliance-ppps.

2 www.world-psi.org/en/imf-official-highlights-need-strong-civil-service-and-dangerous-risks-associated-ppps.

3 <http://jamaica-star.com/article/news/20160615/high-rates-drive-motorists-toll-roads>.

4 See e.g., www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/Abolition-of-user-fees--impact-on-access--care-provided--lessons-learnt_46701.

5 www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/aug/28/michael-ashcroft-belize-telemedia-barrow.

6 See e.g. ILO (2017).

7 www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/history/centenary/lang--en/index.htm.

In a number of developing countries, the public sector is the largest single employer. In tackling questions and concerns of high debt and weak growth, the IFIs as well as development partners are targeting the public sector – seeking to reduce its size and scope. However, at the same time they are suggesting that the public sector plays a key role in the realization of the SDGs. The calls for increased productivity in the public sector are not matched by efforts to measure outcomes of such measures. There is no corresponding pressure on the private sector.

Undoubtedly public services cannot be unchanging. They need to deal effectively with a constantly and rapidly changing environment. Public employees and contractual workers are both users and providers of public services. They are the first to point out the inefficiencies and are usually able to provide solutions and alternatives to improve the provision of public services. Public workers/employees recognize the need for change, they also recognize that change must be effectively managed. The implementation of the SDGs has already resulted in changes in public services, and will continue to do so, promoting a collaboration across ministries and departments that has been largely absent.

There are also those changes in the public sector that result from changing politics: reduced financial resources; the current financial crises and policies of global institutions that impose their will on regional institutions and local governments. Some changes are also the result of internal problems: some services may be ineffective or badly managed; there may be instances of corruption; or too much political interference in regulatory functions. To be sure, we all have a vision in which our country is prosperous. And that vision must speak to the development and maintenance of equitable societies, the improvement and expansion of quality public services and the further promotion of sound democratic traditions.

So, what will public service provision for the 21st century look like? We tend to extrapolate from what we know rather than predict the discontinuities that send us in new directions. As a report by the United States National Intelligence Council titled *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* states:

“We are at a critical juncture in human history, which could lead to widely contrasting futures. It is our contention that the future is not set in stone, but is malleable, the result of interplay among megatrends, game-changers and, above all, human agency. Our effort is to encourage decision makers - whether in government or outside - to think and plan for the long term so that negative futures do not occur and positive ones have a better chance of unfolding.”⁸

We must think of possibilities and exercise choice about matters that will affect our future for the greater good. Public service unions have a role to play in helping governments think about how best to position countries in the light of likely possible futures. That requires people in all countries to understand what we want as a society, and what our values are. Informed by the views and needs of workers, especially in the public service/sector and the wider community, governments will then be better able to make the choices that determine the role, functions and general character of public services. That decision-making must be based on an informed, people-focused agenda.

In addition to responding to contemporary or current challenges, the public services of the future must also be able to provide strategic thinking and policy advice to governments. The pace of change within the public services must also respond to the changes that occur in the countries and communities served. This is especially true as countries work on the implementation of the SDGs.

Competing and increasing demands for services where budgets are dwindling necessitates careful thinking, especially when the aim is to promote higher living standards through increased national productivity. Public servants as policy advisers are able to add substantial value to public policy decision-making – providing they are operating in public services that value their work and ensure that they have the best available tools and resources to do their jobs. Quality begets quality.

8 United States National Intelligence Council (2012), preface.

The advances in technology and science and the possible value-added to people and societies require careful analysis of the public policy questions that need to be answered and solved. No matter the future of work, what it looks like or who delivers it – there will always be a need for informed public policy and quality public services to ensure that no one is left behind.

The quality of essential public services and public service worker conditions go hand in hand. When digitalization is used to cut budgets, outsource jobs and de-skill workers, services to the public inevitably suffer. This approach contains risks for privacy when citizens' data is handed over to private companies and can isolate those citizens who do not have access to the required technology to access services online. Too often, the narrative that accompanies the push for digitalization is based on a presumption that the public sector cannot bring about necessary reforms or provide services more 'efficiently' and is often in effect a cover for privatization, outsourcing and job losses. The introduction of digital technologies in the public sector must be accompanied by adequate training, investment, worker and user participation and consultation and must be grounded in collective bargaining.

Financing implementation

Member States recognize and accept that the SDGs are highly ambitious. They have also agreed to focus on achieving the goals, and that the targets should be tailored and adapted to the circumstances in the respective countries. In order to achieve the ambitious outcomes that focus on decent work, social and public services, needed infrastructure and a more sustainable environment, countries need at least the following elements:

- Sound domestic policies, the rule of law and an effective regulatory framework;
- A responsible and strong private sector that creates decent jobs;
- Efficient and effective public investments in public goods (education, health care and infrastructure); and

- Responsible and appropriate international support in the form of equitable international policy frameworks and international co-financing.

These complementary elements constitute a national platform on which countries can best achieve the objectives that are embodied in the SDGs. All national and local stakeholders must be fully involved in determining what is needed and to identify and decide the best mix of public and private investment required, while ensuring that sound policies are in place. International human rights and labour standards provide a sound platform on which to build these policies.

Estimates to achieve the SDGs suggest that financing is a major challenge. But is it really impossible to find the needed money? The evidence is mounting that profitable multinationals are using the loopholes in existing financial systems as well as tax havens to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. A taxation system based on fairness and ability to pay is an important first step for governments to generate the finance needed to make as well as make the public investments that are key to realizing the SDGs. Through effective and progressive tax systems, governments can mobilize substantial finance to create the enabling environment for public and private investment.

Some leaders have suggested that meeting the SDGs is also a moral challenge. Having embraced the 2030 Agenda, will governments, corporations and other social actors pursue partnerships at all levels in a genuine attempt to build strong, sustainable societies for all people? Or will they continue to promote the survival of the fittest? A large part of official development assistance must focus not only on strengthening countries' tax collection systems, but also on ending international tax evasion, money laundering and the use of tax havens. These are leakages that impact negatively on economic and social development in all countries, affecting the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. To achieve the SDGs, the emphasis must shift from PPPs and privatization to the creation of decent work, sustained public spending and tax justice.

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