HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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SDG 8 and Interlinkages with other SDGs – Decent Work and Economic Growth

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Conference Room 4

Secretariat Background Note[1]

With just five years left to meet the 2030 Agenda, SDG 8—promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all—remains one of the most off-track Goals. Although modest gains have been made, including increased access to financial services, progress has stagnated or regressed across critical areas such as youth employment, informality, labour rights and child labour. The erosion of decent work is symptomatic of broader global structural challenges, including macroeconomic volatility, inequality, climate shocks, geopolitical fragmentation and digital transformation.

The SDG 8 agenda is not only central to the economy but also foundational to the 2030 Agenda. Decent work underpins poverty reduction, gender equality, education, and climate resilience. Achieving it requires addressing both the quantity and quality of employment, with equal attention to rights, social protection, productivity and inclusion.

Key Challenges and Emerging Risks

Despite recovery in some economic indicators post-COVID, a disconnect persists between growth and job quality. Global unemployment remains

[1] This note builds on the outcomes of the UN Expert Group Meeting on SDG 8 convened by UN DESA and ILO in cooperation with UN partners in New York from 6 to 7 February 2025. A complementary technical note prepared by ILO and DESA provides additional substantive background: https://sdgs.un.org/HLPF/2025/ThematicReviewEGMs/SDG8#documentation. A summary of the meeting is available at: https://sdgs.un.org/documents/summary-sdg-8-egm-58016.

historically low (5 per cent in 2024), but underemployment, informality and job precarity are widespread. Over 2 billion workers—58 per cent of the global workforce—remain in informal employment, with women and youth disproportionately represented.

The situation is especially acute in least developed countries, where informal work exceeds 89 per cent. Productivity growth has slowed significantly, compounding the decoupling between wages and labour output. Labour's share of GDP continues to decline, pushing income inequality higher. Meanwhile, gender pay gaps exceed 20 per cent, and young women face NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rates that are more than double those of young men.

Social protection remains patchy and inadequate. Nearly half the global population lacks any form of coverage. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, labour markets are further stressed by displacement, weak institutions and fiscal constraints.

Additionally, fundamental labour rights are in decline. Violations of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and protection against discrimination and forced labour are growing concerns. Despite progress, nearly 138 million children were engaged in child labour in 2024, with around half in hazardous conditions.

Digital, Green, and Care Economies: Opportunities and Gaps

The digital transformation offers new opportunities — especially for youth and women — through entrepreneurship, remote work, and financial inclusion. Yet the expansion of platform work and automation has created new vulnerabilities. Most platform workers operate without social protection, face algorithmic bias, and are excluded from labour rights frameworks.

Green and care economies have immense potential to generate decent jobs, particularly for marginalized groups. However, without supportive policies including reskilling, gender-sensitive planning and regulatory safeguards, these sectors may reinforce existing inequalities. Investment is often limited, and decent job creation remains a secondary consideration in many national strategies.

Financing and Policy Coherence

The implementation of SDG 8 is constrained by severe fiscal limitations. Many low- and middle-income countries face mounting debt burdens and insufficient public investment capacity. In 2024 alone, developing countries paid over $400 billion in debt servicing, crowding out social spending. An estimated $982 billion fiscal gap persists for economic and labour market recovery.

Global economic governance and financing systems have yet to fully align with decent work objectives. Trade and investment regimes often fail to incorporate labour rights clauses, and supply chains remain governed by asymmetrical power dynamics. As a result, workers at the lower end—particularly in informal sectors and smallholder agriculture—are routinely excluded from value gains.

Policy Priorities for Acceleration

The SDG 8 Expert Group Meeting identified a comprehensive set of interlinked policy priorities to transform the trajectory of SDG 8:

Reposition decent work at the center of economic policy. Full employment and decent work should be explicit macroeconomic objectives. This requires employment-rich structural transformation, supported by industrial policy, labour institutions and public investment. Macroeconomic strategies must be job-centered, inclusive and climate-resilient.

Universalize social protection. Establishing lifecycle-based universal social protection systems is key to building resilience and fostering inclusive growth. Portable and subsidized models must accommodate informal and non-standard workers. Financing should be secured through tax reform, global solidarity and innovative tools such as green and social bonds.

Foster formalization through rights-based strategies. Formalization should be viewed as a progressive continuum. Supportive legal frameworks, financial inclusion, portable benefits, and capacity-building—especially for women and rural workers—can facilitate transitions from informality. Regulatory reform must prioritize incentives over punitive enforcement.

Uphold labour rights and strengthen institutions. All Governments must uphold international labour standards, including freedom of association, elimination

of forced and child labour, and occupational safety and health. Collective bargaining and tripartite social dialogue mechanisms are critical to inclusive and accountable governance.

Govern the digital and green transitions. Technology and sustainability policies must be accompanied by labour market safeguards, anticipatory training and regulatory frameworks. Platform work needs to be brought under the ambit of labour laws. Digital skills must be embedded in education, and green policies should be co-created with workers and affected communities.

Invest in the care economy. Care work remains undervalued and predominantly informal. Investments in childcare, eldercare and health systems can yield substantial employment dividends while reducing gender inequalities. This sector must be central to macroeconomic and labour market strategies.

Realign trade and supply chains with decent work. Trade and investment agreements must incorporate binding labour clauses. Supply chains should transition from voluntary codes to enforceable due diligence, with support mechanisms for small enterprises and informal workers. Public procurement can be a powerful lever for promoting fair labour practices.

Strengthen data and monitoring systems. Robust, disaggregated labour market data is essential for policy design and accountability. Measurement frameworks should incorporate indicators for job precarity, labour rights and non-standard employment. Integrating satellite data, artificial intelligence analytics and community-sourced information can help fill current gaps.

Bridge generations and promote lifelong inclusion. Employment policies should support all age groups. This includes youth employment guarantees, inclusion of older workers and lifelong learning systems. The care economy also provides a cross-generational opportunity for decent job creation.

Plan across the SDGs. SDG 8 is deeply interconnected with other Goals, from poverty (SDG 1) and education (SDG 4) to gender equality (SDG 5) and climate action (SDG 13). Policy coherence must be mainstreamed. For instance, care investments enhance health and education outcomes, while green industry boosts resilience and productivity.

The world is at a critical juncture. Without decisive action, decent work will remain a promise unfulfilled. Progress on SDG 8 requires systemic reform:

rethinking economic models, redistributing power in labour markets and mobilizing sustainable financing. Global cooperation must match national ambition. New York

The 2025 HLPF presents a pivotal opportunity to recommit to the vision of SDG 8—one where growth benefits all, where work is safe and dignified, and where no one is left behind in transitions shaping the future of work.

Proposed questions for discussion

- Which areas under SDG 8 are most in need of urgent acceleration, and why?
- How can national macroeconomic frameworks be restructured to prioritize full employment and decent work?
- What mechanisms are effective in transitioning informal to formal work, particularly for women and youth?
- How can decent work goals be embedded in digital and green economy transitions?
- What are promising financing models to close the decent work and social protection gaps?
- How can data systems be improved to track progress on non-standard work and labour rights?