

Speech to ICTU/TCD Conference: Sustainable Development and Global Labour Rights

It is my great pleasure to open this important conference. A conference that brings us together to reflect on the challenges of sustainable development, the urgency to strengthen global labour rights and securing a decent future of work for all.

We live in some of the defining challenges of our time. However, in recent times we have seen extensive multilateral action culminating in the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. A political framework of a set of global goals that tackles the common ills of social injustice, poverty and inequality.

Agenda 2030 has also offered countries the opportunity to build a global coalition for decent work and stronger labour rights within a universal paradigm for sustainable development. With the strong, decent work component that runs through that agenda not just Goal number eight on decent work itself, but all those goals which speak to fight against inequality, poverty and exclusion, it is an agenda of values and objectives for the common good. Thus, what better way to achieve it than by putting it into real action by discussing today how we can implement them here in Ireland and how we can contribute through solidarity to meet their objectives for workers across the world.

In respect of the implementation of the Agenda-to quote UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, this is the first generation in history which has the opportunity to make poverty history, but at the same time, it's the last generation which has the chance to save the planet.

Putting Goal 8 at the centre of Agenda 2030 gives recognition that decent work is central to sustainable development. Agenda 2030 may seem over-ambitious with its 17 goals, 169 related targets and 230 indicators. But colleagues we can afford to be ambitious for this agenda. Failure to realise these goals puts the future on a trajectory towards social and industrial unrest, environmental destruction, increasing threats to democracy and the exploitation of workers. Indeed, Agenda 2030 is a political framework which should unite our efforts to bring about a society built on social solidarity, peace and equality.

The universality of the agenda means that it is an agenda for every country, giving national ownership to it. Therefore, Ireland must act at the national level as well as taking collective action in the solidarity effort globally to ensure implementation.

For a long time, we have tried to reconcile jobs, economic growth and environmental protection as we recognise that climate change hits working people and their communities first and to stabilise the climate profound changes need to be made to energy systems and therefore to all economic sectors. The 2030 Agenda and the subsequent Paris Agreement on Climate Change requires us to reconcile these two objectives and affords us the opportunity to recognise that tackling climate change offers us an opportunity for job creation and a commitment to securing a just transition for workers and their communities.

The implementation of Agenda 2030 faces a further challenge, that of migration. The world urgently needs to tackle the issue of the movement of people. It is not sufficient to speak simply about migration, or of refugees, or of displacement, we must talk about all of these things. We must advocate that Agenda 2030 is the political framework to address the root causes of migration, whether it be poverty, conflict or climate change.

One of the most important elements of this agenda is that human rights include rights at work and basic notions of social justice are explicitly included.

However, colleagues the challenge to realising greater labour rights and decent work under these global goals of eradicating poverty and delivering equality is an immense one.

We know that the current global economy is unable to provide work to some 200 million people. The ILO estimates that 57% of those who today live in extreme poverty are of working age, they are working people and they account for 12% of the total working age population. Ending poverty and promoting decent work are thus integral to realising the objectives of Agenda 2030.

The unemployment crisis is catastrophic, particularly for those of the next generation of workers. If you under 25 years of age, you are three times more likely to be without work than other adults.

According to surveys conducted by the International Labour Organisation- in 28 countries, a quarter of young people aged between 15 and 29 years old are neither employed, nor in education or training (NEET), a status which carries risks of underemployment, skills deterioration and discouragement. It is estimated that 156 million employed youth or 38 per cent of working youth in emerging and developing countries are living in extreme or moderate poverty. Shockingly, 168 million children are at work. I am sure colleagues that we would all agree that the potential of the generation that must work to achieve the 2030 Agenda's sustainable development goals is being wasted.

In addition, between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 per cent. Worldwide women earn 77 per cent of what men earn.

Investing in gender equality at work and in enabling women and men to balance work and family responsibilities is a top priority in structural reform of the labour market and increasing the productive potential of the world's workforce.

Thus, gender equality in the labour market and in social policies must be addressed. Male and female labour must be properly valued and rewarded, this requires policy and laws to protect both formal and informal economy workers and ensure compliance with anti-discrimination and minimum wage legislation and provision of effective and universal access to social protection.

The widely ratified ILO conventions on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work are key benchmarks for international investment in the decent work agenda. The universality of these labour norms is the baseline for fair treatment in the workplace and a starting point for addressing labour conditions and sustainable development. Throughout the financial crisis of the last decade, workers' rights have been continuously eroded allowing for the exploitation of workers, erosion of wages and increasing poverty. Ireland has been only one of a handful of countries which is bucked the trend and in 2015 strengthened collective bargaining rights for workers, established a low pay commission and began tackling the scourge of exploitative work practices such as zero hour contracts. But much more is needed as we look towards the future of work.

The future of work and economic growth brings its own challenges. Indeed, some leaders of industry believe that for workers to survive under the effects of the forthcoming fourth industrial revolution they must make themselves cheaper than the technology they are competing with. We hear that we must address the challenges of new forms of work but colleagues these are old practices of exploitation repackaged to appear as new employment opportunities to a new generation.

Moreover, the neo-liberal agenda has created an economic system that has driven economic growth at a cost to working people. It has driven many into extreme poverty, created the conditions for the erosion of workers' rights and the growth of inequality. For Agenda 2030 to truly be achieved we need also to work together to ensure a fairer economic model.

In this regard Goal 8 itself recognises that Decent work and Social Dialogue is the foundation of fair and inclusive growth, it is a driver of development and social advancement, this along with social protection for those that can't find or unable to work, addresses inequality and creates a social floor for working people.

This conference will discuss how Agenda 2030 can address the need to create decent throughout Global Supply Chains which have emerged from the last decades of globalisation and the growth of multinationals.

The International Trade Union Confederation has found that a hidden workforce of 116 million in the global supply chains of just 50 multinational companies with most failing to accept responsibility for a minimum living wage, job security or decent working conditions.

Global Supply Chains contain exploitative and poor conditions for millions of workers. More than one fifth of the global population are in jobs where long hours' dangerous conditions, forced labour and low wages have become the norm.

There is overwhelming public support for action in global supply chains. In a poll undertaken by the International Trade Union Confederation in 2016, it found that 82 per cent of people hold companies accountable for the actions of their subcontractors and 77 per cent of people want companies to be open and transparent about their subcontractors in global supply chains.

In acting upon our common goal for decent work, it is public support such as this that we should harness by working together to organise workers and consumers alike to ensure that transparency, responsibility and accountability need to be associated with global supply chains not unsafe, insecure low wage work. Indeed, a responsible private sector need to abide to international labour standards and contribute to the countries they operate.

Colleagues if we can make this agenda become a reality in the next decade, we will be turning the tide back in the direction of social justice and assuring a sustainable and equal society for future generations. However, in a world full of difficult challenges we must stand together against all injustices wherever they appear. We see this reflected in society and politics with the growth of extremism and expressions of xenophobia. This requires us to respond and to respond with urgency.

To conclude I would like to quote President Michael D. Higgins on his reflection on Agenda 2030 – “This universal agenda for global development invites us to complete a shift in mindset and discourse. It is a proclamation of interdependence, that calls on us to take part, not just in the previous north-south conversation, but in the new conversation about our humanity and its collective future. “