



**Congress Submission to SDG National Implementation Plan
Consultation 2021**

September 2021

Introduction

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions would like to associate ourselves with the submission of Coalition 2030 of which we are a founding member. Please also find attached a brief submission from a trade union perspective.

Congress joins with unions around the world in campaigning in particular around Goal 8. Through its targets on workers' protection, decent work, social protection, inclusive growth, and environmental preservation, multidimensional SDG 8 on "decent work and economic growth" has a fundamental role in driving the recovery and the Agenda 2030 forward.

We entered the pandemic already with a "sustainability debt". The serious SDGs underperformance, in particular regarding the world of work and its endemic pre-existing labour market deficiencies, resulted in making those who are most vulnerable even more exposed to the impact of the crises: low-skilled workers, migrant workers, women, and youth, to name a few.

It is now imperative to focus on a human-centred recovery from the unprecedented crisis that is afflicting the world of work. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are helping us in this respect. They are more relevant today than ever because they provide the vision and show the path towards resilient economies and just societies. Recovery measures and investments must be in line with the SDGs to be lasting.

SDG 8 plays a fundamental role in the trade union call for a New Social Contract with:

1. **Jobs:** climate-friendly jobs with Just Transition, decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation.
2. **Rights:** the promise of the ILO Centenary Declaration for rights and protections for all workers, irrespective of employment arrangements.
3. **Universal Social Protection:** social protection for all, with the fight for a global social protection fund for the World's poorest countries.
4. **Equality:** Progress has stalled, and in some nations, it has been set back by the pandemic. Workers demand equality of income and equality of gender and race.
5. **Inclusion:** Working people want a peaceful world and a just, rights-based development model with the promise of the SDGs.

Policies and actions are urgently needed to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Focusing on key SDGs will be fundamental over the next nine years. SDG 8 is one of these key goals, having a strong leverage effect on other targets and goals, thanks to its multidimensional nature.

Evidence on SDG 8

The [ITUC SDG monitor](#) finds that the UN regions, North America and Europe are the regions with the best SDG 8 composite indicator score. Africa is the continent with the lowest scores. Considering the countries income groups, the results show huge differences between low-income countries and high-income countries. Although this certainly depicts a North-South divide, it does not necessarily mean that richer countries are doing well. In fact, high-income countries are performing slightly above the world average (100), thus still having a long way ahead towards sustainability.

It is our view that Ireland is an example of this. By way of example, in the retail sector here, many thousands of workers have spent the last 18 months on the frontlines of the public health

emergency, transformed overnight into newly essential workers – and without whom large sections of society would have ground to a halt.

If the pandemic did us at least one favour it helped to reveal the terrible hypocrisy at the heart of the modern economy - our shameful dependency on workers who are among the lowest paid and the most insecure in the workforce. Here in Ireland, we have a low pay rate of some 23%, according to the OECD. The OECD average is 15%. Our low pay rate is the third highest in the EU and applies to a disproportionate number of those employed in sectors such as Retail and Distribution.

Low paid workers still face the same exorbitant childcare and housing costs that afflict all of society and reflect the very poor social wage that exists here, relative to other EU states.

Housing costs are now some nine times average earnings and the average house price in Dublin - the area of greatest housing need - is now beyond the financial reach of 85% of the population, a truly shocking indictment of housing policy over recent years.

It is our view that the Living Wage provides the crucial benchmark for any society that wants to think of itself as decent and, arising from this pandemic it should be our goal to ensure that workers can enjoy a proper standard of living.

As a society, we now need to have a detailed and robust conversation about these glaring contradictions and about how we can transform those bad jobs into good jobs and meaningful careers.

Applause and praise are important, but they won't pay any bills or find you somewhere to live.

They need decent pay, they need job security and they need a voice at work - and that means collective bargaining rights across the economy.

They also need to see a stronger social wage - particularly in respect of affordable childcare and affordable housing.

Recent IHREC/ESRI research also sets out how young people, people with disabilities, Travellers and East European migrants are at much higher risk of disadvantage around employment, and have less access to decent work.

- Regarding security and stability of work, one third (33 per cent) of younger workers (18-24) had a temporary contract, compared to 6 per cent of 25-64 year olds in 2019.
- 34 percent of the general workforce worked in a professional/managerial job, but only 14 per cent of Eastern European workers.
- The employment rate for people with disabilities (41 per cent) was 32 percentage points below the national average (73 per cent), highlighting a significant gap in employment.
- Census data on ethnicity and religion for 2016 reveals high unemployment rates among Black and Muslim respondents relative to others, though unemployment rates among Irish Travellers, at 80 per cent, were highest of all the groups measured.
- Just over one fifth (22 per cent) of employees had low hourly pay (defined as less than €12.16 per hour in 2019). Low hourly pay rates were much more common among some groups: 60 per cent of young workers (aged 18-24), 38 per cent of Eastern European migrants and 32 per cent of lone parents.

- 20 percent ethnic minority workers reported discrimination in the workplace, almost three times the average rate of discrimination (7 per cent). 14 per cent of workers with a disability experienced workplace discrimination and 11 per cent of non-Irish workers.

The IHREC research also references the lack of collective bargaining rights in Ireland – something Congress has campaigned on over many decades – we need legislation enacted which would give workers the legal right to compel their employer to engage in collective bargaining negotiations through their trade union. Historically, public policy in Ireland favoured collectivism in a voluntary industrial relations framework. The industrial relations architecture provided by the State was designed to encourage and facilitate the representation of both worker and employer interests through trade union organisation.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 currently governs industrial relations and preserves the voluntary framework. Congress now believes that the time has come for a more mature and reflective debate about the positive role that stronger collective bargaining arrangements can play in our society and economy. We strongly believe that the benefits that would accrue from the development of a more advanced system of collective bargaining would be transformative, responding not only to the growing problem of income inequality in Ireland but also unleashing the possibility of higher levels of productivity and innovation particularly at the level of the enterprise through more developed worker participation. We are currently participating in the work of the LEEF Working Group established to review collective bargaining and the industrial relations landscape in Ireland and will soon produce an interim report.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 sets out a legally binding path to net-zero emissions no later than 2050, and to a 51% reduction in emissions by the end of this decade. Section 9 also provides for “in so far as practicable, the need to maximise employment, the attractiveness of the State for investment and the long-term competitiveness of the economy” and to “have regard to climate justice”. The experience to date for workers in Bord na Mona has not been a positive one. A Just Transition approach is the best mechanism to ensure the success of these actions and we would expect carbon budgets to take into account potential job losses and gains, the need for huge investment in reskilling and to ensure that nobody is left behind.

Ireland can also play a role in supporting decent work internationally. Global progress to end child labour for example has come to a halt for the first time in over two decades, reversing the downward trend that saw child labour fall by 94 million between 2000 and 2016. The number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide – an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years. That means one out of every 10 children is today in child labour. What’s even more shocking about these figures is that they don’t include the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. There’s no doubt that the health crisis has made things even worse.

Congress believes that serious consideration should be given to joining the Alliance 8.7 global initiative – the global partnership seeking to coordinate global action to achieve Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which includes the commitment to “by 2025 end child labour in all its forms”. The global Alliance 8.7 is spearheading the achievement of this target, bringing all stakeholders together and encouraging countries to commit to accelerate efforts to address child labour via their ‘Pathfinder Country’ mechanism, resulting in commitments by 22 countries to date. These include Irish Aid partner countries Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Vietnam.

National child labour laws and policies remain under-enforced and under-resourced. Examples of this include weak labour inspection systems that barely touch the informal economy where the

majority of child labour is found, and delayed review or publication of national lists of hazardous work prohibited for children under 18 years of age. Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda among others have developed robust National Action Plans for the elimination of child labour but await proper implementation for want of resources. The biggest setback has been the continuing pandemic which is reversing the progress made thus far, keeping children out of school and increasingly into work with the socio-economic impacts further pushing already vulnerable communities to the margins.

We also believe that the private sector has a role to play and while noting moves at EU level towards mandatory human rights due diligence (which would of course include child labour in company supply chains) we believe that international Responsible Business Conduct agreements between businesses, government, unions and NGOs to prevent child labour could also play an important role. Such agreements are concluded sector by sector, with the partners developing long-term strategies to tackle complex problems together. We have recently been made aware of such agreements based on recommendations issued by the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) in 2014. We believe that the development of the next national action plan on business and human rights could be a very useful context for the consideration of such initiatives here.

Conclusion

Any negative impact of the crisis on SDG 8 implementation will entail a heavy challenge for the whole 2030 Agenda.

Congress believes that any new National Implementation Plan must provide a longer-term vision, including ambitious targets, detailed implementation plans and clear timeframes across each of the 17 SDGs, including Goal 8 as set out above.

Congress remains available for any further opportunities to inform and shape the Government's development of the National Implementation Plan and associated work, in particular strengthening the whole-of-Government approach to delivering the SDGs. We once again point to the several issues and blockers to progress of the National Implementation Plan outlined in Coalition 2030's submission and agree that the promising areas of progress and the energy and ambition behind the recommendations generate a real drive for Ireland's success as a global leader in achieving equality and justice.