



► Policy Brief

January 2024

Skills for Social Justice

Advancing social justice through stronger skills systems

Key points

- Skills development is a powerful tool for addressing inequalities and advancing social justice by empowering individuals to have fulfilling careers and sustainable livelihoods.
- The strategic integration of skills in policies for greener jobs, structural transformations, social protection, digital transitions, and transitions to formality is necessary for creating an equitable and sustainable future for all.

Introduction

In recent years, global crises have exacerbated long-standing imbalances and structural inequalities that have disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups, widening societal gaps. For instance, for the first time in 20 years, the ILO's estimates of child labour have increased.ⁱ Gaps in schooling are persistent across countries for people with disabilities.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, the World Bank estimates the global rate for extreme poverty to be at 8.5 per cent (March 2023), representing 659 million people globally living in extreme poverty with under USD 2.15 per dayⁱⁱⁱ. Additionally, income inequality is prevalent in all low-income and high-income countries, with the richest 10 per cent of people receiving 52 per cent of all income globally, while the poorest half receive just 8.5 percent of income^{iv}. Literacy rates, which are indicative of low skills prevalence, stood at 61 per cent for low-income countries in 2020, compared to 96 per cent for upper middle-income countries^v. As expected, disadvantages again vary according to countries' level of income. The average total net enrolment rate in primary education across high income countries in 2020 was 97.9

per cent, compared to only 78.6 per cent for low income countries^{vi}. The average total net enrolment rate in lower secondary education followed a similar pattern, with around 63 per cent for low income countries (2019), 86.2 per cent for middle income countries (2020) and 98.4 per cent for high income countries (2020)^{vii}. The informal employment rate was at 15.7 per cent for high income countries in 2022, compared to 89.1 per cent for low income countries^{viii}. The lower people's skills are, the higher is their likelihood of being in informal employment, which further creates barriers towards upskilling.^{ix} Moreover, disadvantages accumulate over the lifetime of an individual, hence investments in skills need to start early in life. Among adults, lower-skilled workers continue to receive less upskilling throughout their work lives compared to those who are already better skilled^x.

Skills systems play a critical role in overcoming these inequalities and promote social justice—as stated in the new [ILO Strategy on Skills and Lifelong Learning 2030](#). Getting skills right is extremely important for individuals to thrive, for enterprises to find the right talent and be competitive, and for economies to develop. However, simply increasing investments in skills development and

matching is not sufficient for achieving social justice—these investments must be targeted at making skills development more inclusive and focused on eliminating barriers of access and participation in skills systems. This brief explores the role of skills and lifelong learning within ILO's social justice framework.^{xi}

What is social justice?

Social justice is reflected in the aspiration that “all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity”.^{xii}

Below are examples of the role skills systems can play in advancing each dimension of social justice^{xiv}:

- *Universal human rights and capabilities:* Everyone has the right to education and lifelong learning, and skills development can enable people to pursue a fulfilling career in line with their aspirations and earn an adequate wage to sustain their families and communities.
- *Equal access to opportunities:* Skills and lifelong learning are key enablers to make people thrive in their lives, particularly when skills systems address discrimination and help overcome access barriers for all.
- *Fair distribution:* Skills systems can promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups in sharing the gains of productivity by recognizing and valuing various forms of work and acknowledging skills acquired informally and non-formally.
- *Just transitions:* The resilience that skills development builds allows people to recover from crises more easily, such as those caused by economic downturn, conflict or environmental changes and helps them manage transitions better.

Social justice encompasses four broad dimensions that characterize its scope and impact.

How can skills systems advance social justice?

Skills systems play a key role in supporting the human-centred approach of the ILO in advancing social justice and promoting decent work such that the rights, needs, and aspirations of workers are at the heart of economic, social and environmental policies.^{xiii} All four elements within the social justice framework require effective skills and lifelong learning systems to achieve results.

Enhancing the inclusive and effective governance of work

Currently, millions of people are still excluded from effective governance of work and work in informal, unsafe or exploitative environments. Skills systems are important to help people escape the cycles of forced labour^{xv} and child labour, improve occupational safety and health, and build pathways into safe and decent jobs. Skills systems cater to people learning and working in the informal economy so that they acquire good quality skills that support their transitions to formality.^{xvi}

Social dialogue between governments, employers' and workers' organizations is an essential condition for the effective governance of work. Skills development can be a door-opener for wider social dialogue, including at the enterprise level. Social dialogue within skills systems takes place at different levels: in TVET agencies with tripartite governance, coordination committees, training funds, sector skills bodies, at regional or local levels, at the level of skills providers or within enterprises through collective bargaining. Meaningful social dialogue on skills reduces societal tensions, supports the implementation of skills reforms, improves economic efficiency and supports better coordination and collaboration of labour market actors.^{xvii}

Ensuring access to full, productive and freely chosen employment and lifelong learning

Access to full, productive, and freely chosen employment not only helps lift individuals out of poverty but also plays a

crucial role in reducing inequalities and fostering social inclusion.^{xviii}

Equal access and participation in lifelong learning – starting with early childhood education – builds the necessary basis to advance in life, gain further skills and obtain and retain decent employment. Further, core skills for work and life, such as social, emotional, cognitive, and metacognitive skills are very important alongside vocational and technical skills to improve the prospects of workers in the labour market. Often, disadvantaged groups have fewer opportunities to access and develop the same level of skills. Overcoming barriers for their equal participation is crucial to enhance their employability and ability to access decent work. Upskilling offers – to be accessible for all – need to be flexible, relevant and connected to career development services and recognition of prior learning.

Given the large number of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, skills policies that promote productivity growth in enterprises should have a special focus on these enterprises. When enterprises offer apprenticeships, it is important to ensure that they are recognized by the skills system and receive support for quality improvements.^{xix}

To maintain full, productive and freely chosen employment, coherence between economic, employment, and skills policies is crucial to invest in sectors with growth potential and at the same time anticipate and respond to the skill needs involved.^{xx} This requires inter-ministerial collaboration, strong skills intelligence systems and social dialogue.

Revitalizing labour market institutions for fair outcomes

Social justice also involves the equitable distribution of benefits of economic development: an objective that requires effective labour market institutions. Skills providers, agencies and bodies need to be well-equipped, and their staff sensitized and capacitated to address imbalances, reduce drop-out and foster fairness and equality. Teachers and trainers, for example, need to be well-motivated to cater to all kinds of learners and have the ability to produce inclusive and gender-responsive learning environments for all. Additionally, they should be able to use training materials reflective of a diverse group of learners and be equipped with the right knowledge or support services to provide reasonable accommodations for learners who need it, such as people with disabilities.

Gender imbalances which leave women at a disadvantage are more pronounced in low or lower middle income countries, where women attend on average 4.05 years/7.22 years of school and men 5.85 years/8.02. In low and lower middle income countries, 60 per cent/42 per cent of women of upper secondary school age are not in school, against 43 per cent/36 per cent of men. Interestingly, the pattern is reverse in high income countries, where 13 per cent of upper secondary school age girls are not in school against 16 per cent of boys, and where women attend on average 13.17 years of school compared to 12.73 for men.^{xxi}

Looking at the participation of women in occupations that are most likely to demand STEM skills, such as managers, professionals or technicians^{xxii}, the average global representation of women in these professions is 45 per cent, with substantial differences from country to country – ranging from 10 per cent in Afghanistan to 64 per cent in Belarus.^{xxiii}

To overcome gender imbalances, skills providers can introduce gender action plans to increase the uptake of women in STEM careers or the share of men in care occupations. Inclusion and diversity plans or policies can combat violence and harassment within skills providers, or workplaces that offer work-based learning. Further, the recognition of skills learned in the informal economy can provide stronger pathways for vulnerable groups to decent jobs and hence improve outcomes.

Effective skills development systems can also support a more equitable transformation of industries. For instance, a better skilled workforce can contribute to an improved position along value chains of countries originally exporting only raw materials. Countries can then harness high-end skills in exporting firms better and apply them more broadly in national contexts.^{xxiv} If managed well, revitalized skills systems facilitate a more equitable distribution of the gains from trade.

Protecting people over the life cycle and making transitions equitable

In times of compounding crises, skills are critical to build resilience among people and communities. Social protection policies need to be coordinated and integrated with skills development policies so that people are able to manage transitions and prevent risks.^{xxv} In fragile and post-crisis contexts, skills development is critical in rebuilding livelihoods, reintegrating forcibly displaced people, and establishing services and infrastructures again.

Community-based training helps address skill needs where they are most required.^{xxvi}

Another critical transition in the coming years will be that of climate change that has the potential not only to create “climate refugees” and require adaptive measures, but also transform industries and jobs towards greener methods of production and service delivery. Such a change will require heavy reskilling and upskilling of workers – for these transitions to be just^{xxvii}. In this context, skills are enablers and drivers of change for green transitions when new technology and innovation is adopted and introduced. Skills development is also important to act as a buffer for transitions when workers are reskilled and ensure that benefits of trade and investment, including green and digital, are distributed evenly in the society.

Investing in inclusive skills and lifelong learning for social justice

Skills and lifelong learning is not an end in itself, but a means to contribute towards the wider mandate and

priorities of the ILO: skills for greener jobs, skills for productive transformations, skills for social protection, skills for digital transitions and skills for transitions to formality.

Prioritizing inclusive skills development and the strategic integration of skills in major national policies promotes a more equitable and sustainable future with social justice for all.

Advancing social justice together:

#ThisWayToSocialJustice
#SocialJustice
#MakeSkillsWork

ⁱ ILO, 2021. [Child labour global estimates](#).

ⁱⁱ ILOSTAT. 2023. Data from 100+ countries.

ⁱⁱⁱ World Bank, 2023. [March 2023 global poverty update from the World Bank: the challenge of estimating poverty in the pandemic](#)

^{iv} Andrew Stanley, 2022. [Global Inequalities \(imf.org\)](#)

^v World Bank. [Literacy rate, adult total \(% of people ages 15 and above\) | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

^{vi} UNESCO UIS. [Educational Attainment | UNESCO UIS](#)

^{vii} UNESCO UIS. [Educational Attainment | UNESCO UIS](#)

^{viii} ILOSTATS. [Statistics on the informal economy - ILOSTAT](#)

^{ix} ILO. 2023. Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical update. Geneva: International Labour Office.

^x ILO, 2022. Adapting apprenticeships for the reskilling and upskilling of adults. p. 21. [wcms_861710.pdf \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xi} ILO. 2023. [Advancing social justice](#).

^{xii} ILO Declaration of Philadelphia, Part II(a).

^{xiii} ILO. 2019. Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, Part I(D).

^{xiv} ILO. 2023. [Advancing social justice](#).

^{xv} See [Skills to combat forced labour \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xvi} See [Skills for transitions to formality \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xvii} For more information, see [Skills policies, systems and digitalization \(SKILLS\) \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xviii} For more information, see [Skills for social inclusion \(SKILLS\) \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xix} [Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023 \(No. 208\)](#). For more information, see [Quality Apprenticeships \(ilo.org\)](#); [Upgrading apprenticeship systems in the informal economy \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xx} For more information, see [Skills strategies for future labour markets \(SKILLS\) \(ilo.org\)](#)

^{xxi} UNESCO. World Inequality Database on Education.

^{xxii} According to Skill level 3: ILOSTAT. International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) - ILOSTAT <https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/classification-occupation/>

^{xxiii} ILOSTAT, latest year available.

^{xxiv} The ILO Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification (STED) approach builds the capacity of countries to better reap the skills-related benefits from trade and investment. For more information, see www.ilo.org/sted

^{xxv} ILO. 2023. Aligning Skills Development and National Social Protection Systems.

^{xxvi} For more information, see [Training for Rural Economic Empowerment – Digital Tool \(TREEpedia\)](#)

^{xxvii} ILO. 2015. [Guidelines on just transitions towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#)