

## Towards Effective and Inclusive Trade Unions for the Realisation of Decent work in Malawi

Since the advent of industrialisation and trade unionism, solidarity has been acknowledged as one of the best ways to advance the worker's needs and interests. However, solidarity is not enough. Based on a study conducted between August and October 2019 on workers' representation in the agricultural sector, what workers need is solidarity that is effective and inclusive in order to realise decent work for all amongst many goals.

Workers' solidarity is normally expressed through trade unions. These are organisations for the representation of workers' interests aimed at improving terms and conditions of work. In 1999, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) came up with a concept that sums up all the aspirations of workers for improved terms and conditions of work as **decent work**. Decent work is achieved when workers: are paid a fair income, have a secure form of employment as well as fair and safe working conditions, equal opportunities, social protection, prospects for personal development and social integration, and are free to express their concerns and to organise. Trade unions are essential for the realisation of decent work ideals.

Despite having a comprehensive policy and legal framework for the realisation of decent work, Malawi still has a long way to go. First, according to the 2019 study on workers' representation in the agricultural sector, the majority of workers and employers have a narrow conception of decent work predominantly equating it to good wages. Consequently, other than fighting for increased wages, there is no pressure on trade unions to negotiate for the other equally important aspects of decent work.

Secondly, effective trade unions are essential to the realisation of decent work for all. Trade unions derive their mandate from the law, their constitutions and strategic plans. Trade unions have made great strides in realising decent work through: initiation of the decent work country programme, ensuring that Collective Bargaining Agreements incorporate the decent work agenda, improvement of the national minimum wage, spearheading pension and labour law reforms, increased union density, the reduction of strikes, the existence of relevant policy papers on issues of child labour and gender among others. Trade unions have however had their achievements weakened by limited financial and membership base, limited skills, lack of relevant collective bargaining agreements, partnerships and collaborations.

Thirdly, at the core of the decent work agenda is the aspect of equal opportunities for all. This includes meeting the strategic concerns and needs of women and informal sector workers. The study found that in five of the six unions studied, women representation is below 40%. For instance, out of all members of the Malawi Congress of Trade Union, only 27% are female. Similarly, in Sugar Plantations and Allied Workers Union of Malawi, only 4% of the members are female. Furthermore, the study found that in two of the six unions studied (Teachers Union of Malawi and Sugar Plantations and Allied Workers Union of Malawi), there was no female in the top five decision making positions (president, vice president, general secretary, deputy general secretary and treasurer general). This is contrary to the Labour Relations Act, 1996 which provides for at least 20% female representation in union leadership. It is only in two out of six unions studied (Malawi Union of the Informal Sector and the Tobacco and Allied Workers Union of Malawi) where women constitute 40% of the union leadership. This contravenes to the Gender Equality Act of 2013's 40-60 representation ratios. The study further found that the informal sector workers who form the majority of the Malawian labour force are not fully recognised for collective bargaining purposes.

In view of these challenges, a lot still needs to be done by trade unions and stakeholders for effective and inclusive decent work. The following are the key major recommendations in this regard. First, with respect to the narrow understanding of decent work, **increasing a shared understanding on decent work will ensure that trade unions negotiate for all aspects of decent work.** Secondly, in order to address challenges relating to effectiveness of trade unions in achieving decent work, **there is need to enhance capacity in various skill areas namely financial resource mobilisation, recruitment of new members, collective bargaining as well as forging relevant partnerships and collaborations.**

Thirdly, with respect to improving women's participation especially in leadership positions, **there is a need for reserving quotas for women in key leadership positions and lobbying for revision of the minimum gender quota from 20% to 40% in line with the Gender Equality Act of 2013.** Lastly, inclusion should also include **developing a legal framework that recognises the informal sector for inclusivity in collective bargaining.**