



ITUC-AFRICA 2025 NEW YEAR MESSAGE

"African workers and industrial relations Labour Landscape in 2024: Challenges and Pathways to Socio-Economic Justice in 2025 and beyond"

The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa: <https://www.ituc-africa.org/>), having diligently advanced its mission in 2024 to promote and safeguard the rights of African workers, pauses at this juncture to reflect on the year's experiences. As we close the chapter on 2024, it is crucial to assess the status of African workers and the broader labour landscape across the continent.

Africa's socio-economic landscape in 2024 presents a complex matrix of challenges and opportunities, particularly from the perspective of labour and trade unions. The interplay of high and growing unemployment, mainly due to jobless growth, shrinking civil liberty spaces, inadequate social protection, rising inflation, austerity measures, debt crises and their tolls on national budgets due to high servicing rates, endemic and persistent illicit financial flows activities by big business and the rich, surmountable but deepening gender inequality, lip service to addressing the climate change crisis, escalating global tensions and avoidable and resolvable violent continental conflicts, and worrisome occupational safety and health situation, has significantly impacted workers, their families, communities and economies.

1. Unemployment and Underemployment

Unemployment and underemployment remain persistent and deeply entrenched problems in Africa, driven by structural economic challenges and exacerbated by external shocks. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), Africa's average unemployment rate was 7.5% in 2024. Still, this figure belies the realities of pervasive underemployment and informal labour, which accounts for nearly 85% of employment across the continent.

Youth unemployment is especially concerning, with over 60% of Africa's unemployed population under the age of 25. In countries like South Africa, youth unemployment exceeds 55%, reflecting systemic issues in education, skills development, and job creation. The closure of businesses due to economic challenges such as inflation and rising operational costs has further compounded this issue, with sectors like manufacturing and retail particularly hard-hit.

Underemployment, a less visible but equally damaging problem, affects millions who work in low-wage, insecure jobs without benefits or protections. For example, the informal economy in Nigeria employs over 60% of the labour force, yet most workers in this sector lack access to pensions, health insurance, or legal recourse. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and economic vulnerability. The rise and ascendancy of platform work and the gig economy are exacerbating and compounding the plight of unprotected workers.

2. Social Protection

African social protection systems remain underdeveloped and fragmented, exposing millions of workers and their families to economic shocks and vulnerabilities. As of 2024, only 17.8% of Africa's population is covered by at least one form of social protection, with many countries providing limited or no access to unemployment benefits, pensions, or healthcare. This is particularly alarming when inflation, conflict, and climate change have heightened economic insecurity.

For instance, in Ethiopia, recurrent droughts have displaced millions, while in Sudan, ongoing conflicts have created millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) with no access to essential social services. Workers in the informal sector, women, and migrants are disproportionately affected, as they often fall outside the scope of existing social protection programs.

Trade unions and labour organisations have advocated for universal and inclusive social protection systems. ITUC-Africa, for example, has consistently called for increased investment in social protection through innovative financing mechanisms such as taxing luxury goods, curbing corruption, and addressing illicit financial flows. Ensuring access to these systems is a moral imperative and a prerequisite for building resilient economies.

3. Inflation, austerity measures, and their impact on workers

Inflation has become a defining feature of Africa's economic environment in 2024, driven by global supply chain disruptions, currency devaluations, and domestic mismanagement. Average inflation rates across the continent hover around 15%, with food prices increasing by as much as 20% in some regions. In Ghana, for example, the cost of staple foods such as maize and rice has doubled within the past year, pushing millions into hunger and poverty.

Women and children are disproportionately affected as feminine poverty continues to rise. In Nigeria, the number of out-of-school children has reached alarming levels, with an estimated 10.5 million children not receiving formal education—a trend directly linked to the economic pressures on households.

Austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions have compounded these challenges. Governments have slashed budgets for healthcare, education, and public infrastructure by prioritising debt repayment over social investments, disproportionately harming the poor and working class. Labour unions oppose such measures, advocating for progressive taxation, increased public spending, and social investments to stimulate economic growth and alleviate poverty.

4. Democracy, civil liberties and multilateralism

We affirm that democracy should continue to be the only game in town. However, we reject the push for the forceful adoption of liberal democracy as the only game in town! Africa is still far from practising and consolidating multiparty, participatory and accountable democracy. In Eswatini, an absolute monarchy that brokers no criticisms and uses suppression and oppression to govern remains entrenched despite the demand of the people for representative democracy. In Mozambique, the world is watching a sad and steady decline into anarchy due to disputed elections. In Nigeria, the people are groaning under strenuous socio-economic sufferings on account of government policies that are not delivering the dividends of democracy to the people. Across the continent, we are witnessing arbitrary arrests and disappearances of political opposition voices, and civil liberty spaces continue to shrink and accountability weakened. We are also concerned that the sanctity of the rule of law is fast eroding as agencies and institutions critical for an enduring rule of law are deliberately being

undermined and weakened. Multilateralism is also losing its potency, though it remains a crucial tool in the governance of globalisation.

5. Debt

Africa's debt crisis has reached critical levels in 2024, with total public debt exceeding \$1.5 trillion. Debt servicing now consumes over 50% of government revenues in many countries, leaving little room for investment in essential public services. Ghana, Zambia, and Kenya are among the nations grappling with debt restructuring negotiations, while others, such as Angola and Mozambique, face the threat of default.

The labour movement has been vocal in calling for rethinking the global financial architecture perpetuating this crisis. ITUC-Africa continues to push for debt forgiveness, responsible lending practices, and inclusive national debt management processes. These efforts ensure that resources are redirected from debt servicing to critical areas such as education, healthcare, job creation and infrastructure development.

Additionally, there is growing recognition of the need for transparency and accountability in debt management. Civil society organisations and trade unions call for inclusive stakeholder consultations in national debt planning and restructuring processes.

6. Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs)

Africa loses an estimated \$88.6 billion annually to illicit financial flows, equivalent to 3.7% of the continent's GDP. These outflows, driven by tax evasion, corruption, and trade mispricing, deprive African governments of critical resources needed for development. Multinational corporations, through aggressive tax avoidance schemes, remain the primary culprits.

Trade unions are intensifying their campaigns to halt IFFs, recognising that these financial losses undermine workers' rights and social investments. Collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and international organisations are essential to closing loopholes, enforcing stricter regulations, and ensuring that wealth generated in Africa remains on the continent.

7. Peace and Security

The absence of peace and security undermines Africa's socio-economic progress. In the Sahel region, armed insurgencies have displaced millions, led to the deaths and hope of thousands of persons, disrupted livelihoods, and destroyed infrastructure. The civil wars in Sudan and Ethiopia have wrecked similar havocs. There seems to be no real drive and commitment to unknot and resolve the conflict in Eastern Congo as long as insecurity continues to present a blanket for the extraction of critical minerals to willing foreign buyers. Activities of extremists and terrorist groups with rift speculations of their links to external interests remain worrisome concerns for African workers and their trade union organisations. Of course, insecurity directly threatens the peace, stability and harmony necessary for nation-building and progress.

Addressing these challenges requires inclusive peacebuilding efforts prioritising decent work opportunities and social protections for vulnerable populations. Trade unions are critical to and remain seized in promoting dialogue, advocating for workers' rights, and rebuilding trust in conflict-affected areas.

8. Gender Equality

Gender inequality remains pervasive in Africa, affecting every aspect of women's lives, from education and employment to leadership and political participation. Female labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, with women disproportionately represented in low-wage, precarious jobs.

Trade unions advocate for gender-responsive labour policies, including equal pay, maternity protections, and affirmative action programs. A key priority is the ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 190 to eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace. Moreover, unions are pushing for policies that address feminine poverty and empower women through skills development, access to finance, and leadership opportunities.

9. Climate Change and Just Transition

Africa is on the frontlines of the climate crisis despite contributing less than 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events have devastated livelihoods, especially in agriculture-dependent economies. For instance, the Horn of Africa is experiencing its worst drought in decades, leaving millions at risk of starvation. Kenya is yet to recover from the devastating flooding that hit the country, leaving over 300 people dead, 188 injured, 400,000 displaced, and 75 missing. The UN Office for Humanitarian Aid reported at least 960 livestock and 24,000 acres of farmland. Africa's industrialisation aspiration is compounded by its current energy crisis. Over 600 million Africans are without electricity. Worse, the talks at the Conference of the Parties (COP), including the recent one in Baku, Azerbaijan, did not deliver the critically needed financing arrangement for ensuring adaptation and mitigation and Just Transition capabilities.

Trade unions are advocating for climate justice, demanding that industrialised nations, as the primary polluters, make adequate financial commitments to financing the adaptation and mitigation efforts of poor and developing economies. Whilst the concept of a just transition to addressing climate change remains central to ensuring that the shift to green economies creates decent jobs, reskills workers, and leaves no one behind, total and genuine commitment to the process is required.

10. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)

The mental health crisis among African workers is a growing concern, driven by unemployment, inflation, conflict, and climate change. Stress, anxiety, and depression are widespread, yet mental health services remain inaccessible for most. Governments must prioritise OSH policies that address workplace physical and mental health challenges. Trade unions are pushing for comprehensive interventions, including workplace counselling, stress management programs, and more vigorous enforcement of OSH standards.

11. Racism

Global race relations continue to keep the black race below forcefully. Relationship with Africa continues to mirror and display colonial overhang and white privileges. African diaspora and persons of African descent are still treated as less human, discriminated against and suffer political exclusion and lack socioeconomic privileges and opportunities compared to other races. For instance, African migrant workers are more likely to face discrimination, abuse and egregious violations compared to their Arab and Asian counterparts in the Middle East. Worse, former colonial overlords are developing new and endless tactics and politics to pillage Africa, making it unstable but necessary for their continuous exploitation.

Policy Recommendations to our Governments, Affiliates and Allies for 2025 -

1. Unemployment – collective efforts to develop and accelerate skills development across the continent, including ensuring that skills incubation centres are spread across all communities and constituencies on the African continent.
2. Debt and IFFs: Advocate for debt cancellation, restructuring, and eliminating illicit financial flows. Enact a global fair tax system to ensure equitable wealth distribution.
3. Social Protection: Expand social safety nets through innovative financing, such as taxing luxury goods and curbing corruption.
4. Food Security: Subsidize agricultural inputs and mass transport, regulate price gouging, and invest in sustainable food production systems.
5. Regig the United Nations—We shall continue to advocate for an inclusive, democratic, and transparent multilateral system where the voices of Africans are heard and respected, including in the UN’s Peace and Security Council and the ILO Governing Body. Our engagement to make democracy work for our people remains sacrosanct. We shall continue to defend civil liberties and encourage our governments to undertake genuine efforts to build, improve and consolidate a culture of the rule of law whilst we shall recommit to organising and giving voice and representation to all workers, including those in the informal economy.
6. Trade and Integration: Support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by improving infrastructure, modern payment systems, and free movement of people via visa reviews for Africans and deepen integration to unlock economic potential.
7. Climate Justice: Demand financing from industrialised nations, ensure a just transition to green economies, make lifestyle changes to protect the environment, and make conscious efforts to improve energy production, distribution and utilisation for industrialisation.
8. Security - Develop, disseminate, and deploy an African security architecture premised on people, communities, and justice. A renewed, genuine, inclusive, and pragmatic dialogue should be embraced.
9. Racism - Renew commitment to pan-African consciousness through more significant support for the African Union in implementing Agenda 2063, including better financing of African public administration and better engagement with and protection of the African diaspora. The South African Presidency of the G20 as a multilateral space should be used to advance an agenda for social justice in Africa and developing economies.

Conclusion

While we know these challenges are daunting, we are encouraged and emboldened because we know they are surmountable. Therefore, we passionately appeal to our governments to consciously embrace collaborative and collective actions with critical actors, including trade unions. We call for solidarity and cooperation from our allies and recommit to contributing to efforts towards attaining social justice.

ITUC-Africa wishes you a happy and prosperous New Year!

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