

Understanding work

The Global Commission on the Future of Work, established on Monday, has a critical role in addressing the decent jobs deficit that affects the lives of roughly three billion working people. The body, which includes two representatives from India, is to present a report at the 2019 commemoration of the centenary of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Experts will build on recent dialogues in over 100 states on the implications for individuals and societies from the changing dynamics of work, production processes and rapid technological transformation.

Meanwhile, the ILO's ongoing assessment of major trends in different segments of the employment scenario points to the challenges that lie ahead and the adaptations required to advance its broader mission to promote social justice. Foremost, the far-reaching modifications witnessed in the means of production and access to mobile information and communication technology have created a flexible overall work environment. These applications allow relative independence from the rigid office settings and make room for people to function with autonomy and even achieve a better work-life balance. But in an increasingly competitive economic climate, these same developments invariably entail more intense activity and longer hours. Noteworthy is the acceleration in the demand for industrial robots, at an annual rate of 9% since 2011, making the upgradation of human skills imperative upon corporations and governments alike. In the manufacturing sector, where two-thirds of them are concentrated, the robot density — one machine deployed per 1,000 employees, in 2015 — was at 14 in the advanced world and two in developing countries. Harnessing the opportunities from these new technologies and mitigating the human costs from this unfolding transformation is a function of recognising the rights and responsibilities of individuals and employers.

In this latter respect, the overall record is not particularly encouraging. In 2016, less than half of all women in the working age bracket were engaged in the labour market, compared to over 75% among men. Worse, this situation is projected to persist over the next 15 years. Similarly, declining ratios of the population in the working age are expected to exacerbate the challenge of care for the elderly. Persistently high levels of unemployment since the global financial crisis perhaps encapsulate most of these concerns. The growth in international migration by as much as 50% since 1990 and the rise of xenophobia in many parts of the world illustrate the dangers from the lopsided trajectory of the current phase of globalisation. Compounding the effects of these challenges are two not unrelated factors. The first is the continued exclusion of about 50% of the global labour force from the formal sector of employment, with all-round insecurity. The other is the absence of meaningful social protection coverage for the majority of the world population; only 27% has recourse to comprehensive minimum support. Given this backdrop, the 2019 centenary must necessarily be more than an occasion for ceremony and symbolism.

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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