

r4d (Research for Development) Conference

Job Creation and Conditions for a Social and Environmental Impact

Discussion of Results from Current Research on Labour Markets



The r4d Conference at a glance

Contributing through research to solving development challenges is at the heart of the Swiss Programme of Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d programme), jointly financed and coordinated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) between 2012 and 2022.

At the hybrid r4d conference on 28 October 2021, an intergenerational group of speakers, composed of researchers and practitioners from Switzerland, India, Peru, Bangladesh, Bolivia and Ghana, and a diverse audience of experts from around the world shared multiple perspectives. Young social and environmental activists from Switzerland presented their views and ambitions for the future (see [programme](#)). The online participants dialed in from more than 10 countries.

The conference participants discussed research findings and contributed from their various organisational and individual perspectives to the discourse on job creation, decent work conditions and the economic, social and environmental impact of recent developments in national and international labour markets. Two panel discussions were devoted to the critical review of examples from research projects in the textile and agricultural sectors and the future implications for such projects in low- and middle-income countries. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 8 and 10 formulated in the UN Agenda 2030 served as a common reference. One focus was set on small businesses in the textile industry in Bangladesh as part of the global textile value chains and the questions that arise in connection with the rapid growth of the industry. In this context results from the r4d research project “[skills for industry](#)” were presented. Another focus lay on research on transformation in rural agrarian societies (r4d [FATE](#) Project) in Bolivia and the consequences for small-scale producer families, with a particular focus on gender relations. The third focus was set on the policy implications and the impact of framework conditions in Ghana to the development of the industry as well as the service and agricultural sectors.

Several questions were raised such as: how can sustainable development be ensured effectively in the cooperation programmes in the field of industrial and technical economic development? How does the feminisation of certain sectors relate to women’s empowerment – and how can development initiatives adequately respond?

How important are labour conditions to ensure decent work (SDG 8) and reduced inequality (SDG 10)? When does economic development really benefit the wider population? How are rural livelihoods maintained? How can the resilience of low-income groups be strengthened in a process of industrialisation and export-orientation ?

Key findings of the r4d conference

- **Multidimensional aspects** should be included in the research, especially while analyzing the impact and objective of job creation. For example, is a quantitative wage component as important as the qualitative enforcement of labour conditions? Several speakers pointed out various points of view, which demonstrated the complexity of the analysis and confirmed that reaching decent working conditions such as **healthy and secure working conditions** are more satisfying to the majority of workers and employees than salary increases.
- The specific **needs, potentials, risks, and opportunities** of the practice partners and target groups should be better explored at the beginning of all research projects. The cooperation with further related elements along the whole “value chain from **micro, meso and macro levels**” as well as the international markets behavior should be deeply assessed. Thinking and working along an evolving process and taking into consideration feedback loops as well as the adjustment or even reorientation of originally foreseen approaches and activities along the process allow for a dynamic implementation and will allow for the inclusion of new and innovative ideas.
- **Unpaid work for family care** should be taken into consideration in all cooperation programmes to ensure a better understanding of the value of care work and to empower women, who are more affected by this type of work. Focusing on informal work and transferring it to **formal work** remains key in the process of reaching decent work and reducing inequalities.
- To optimize human capital, future r4d programme research projects should analyze the question of how middle-income countries are generating jobs fast enough to absorb the **better educated youth** in these economies. In this respect, **technological development** could play a more important role and be integrated into research programmes (see TECH4IMPACT Programmes at the EPFL).
- **Low productivity** remains an issue in many Least or Middle Income Countries (LMIC). Despite high employment and significant contribution to national prosperity, worker productivity often remains low.
- Transferring the knowledge and expertise from countries like Switzerland revealed positive aspects but such transfer cannot be applied without strong considerations of the labour conditions, educational and skills levels as well as economic development in each LMIC.
- A critical reflection on the **social and environmental impact of economic growth** was presented particularly by the younger generation. Some younger speakers pointed out the limits of economic growth and more specifically its negative effect on the

environment. The environmental impact of economic growth includes the increased consumption of non-renewable resources, higher levels of pollution, and global warming. The potential impact of degrowth was presented and its need to ensure a real impact on the environment in the future. However, degrowth concepts need to account for gross deficits in living standards in many economies of the global South.

- **Relocation versus local production** has the potential of allowing a better environmental impact but at the same time a safe balance between increasing local production and a policy of relocation creating employment abroad must be ensured.
- The **sustainability of research project results** depends heavily on the inclusion of all key stakeholders of different interest groups and ages in the public and private sectors, and particularly also of representatives of opposing groups. A better integration of diverse stakeholders at the beginning of the research process is challenging but fosters mutual understanding and sets the basis for a strong and credible multistakeholder engagement along the whole process.
- 80 per cent of the poor live in rural areas. The majority of the rural population depends on agriculture. Results in the agricultural project in Bolivia showed that the **feminisation process is not constant** and also has its downsides (such as heavy work burdens on women's shoulders). Regarding women's empowerment, the gains are far from being secured. Thus, future projects need to keep an eye on gender dynamics in economic development.