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ILO technical forum opens two-day information and knowledge sharing session on skills in the changing world of work

SIEM REAP, Cambodia - Experts and practitioners in fostering and implementing skills programmes in developing economies opened a two-day Forum here exchanging knowledge and lessons learned on skills for development, the relationship between skills and trade, the importance of skills for inclusive economic diversification and growth, and skills and the changing world of work.

In the opening address, Minister of Labour and Vocational Training of Cambodia, H.E. Ith Sam Heng, said governments must work with business, workers and other social partners to meet the challenges of development in a changing economic environment, and that his country needed “the right skills and the right quality” if it is to take its rightful place as a middle, lower income country.

The need for an integrated approach to skills development was a common thread in many of the first days’ presentations. John Buchanan, professor of Business Analytics with the University of Sydney noted that skills policies should not always be simply reactive: “The type of labour you are developing shapes your economic future. It is a question of the character of growth, not just the quantity of growth. Understanding the labour market trajectory in a given country will, in essence, shape the skills policies and training”.

The point was underlined by Hyungkyoo Kim, country director of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) project in Nepal. “Assistance in skill development should be applied to the country in line with their industrial development. At some level it’s a macro-economic question. Domestic efforts, or micro economic changes alone will not always be enough to attract business from outside.”

Commenting on the significance of the Forum, Magnus Saemundsson, First Secretary, Embassy of Sweden in Cambodia, noted that the exchange of experiences, both successes and lessons learned, would lead to important steps in the participating countries and the ILO in the areas of trade, sustainability and inclusive growth.

The day saw representatives of many of the countries where the ILO, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and KOICA have active, if diverse, skills programmes underway. Delegates heard of the positive impact on businesses of the ILO’s Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification (STED) programme.

Case studies were presented on tourism and light manufacturing in host country Cambodia, and horticulture in Malawi. STED aims to identify the skills needed for future
success in trade and development. Beyani Munthali, Employers’ delegate from Malawi, a STED implementation partner, said he appreciated of the rigorous survey of businesses that is an important element of the programme. “STED provided a tool (for Malawi) that can actually produce something tangible. It’s an asset for us. One that we might be able to use in other sectors,” he said.

Also central to the day was a conversation on the relationship between skills and the changing world of work. Dmitry Sudakov, from the Moscow School of Management, SKOLKOVO, explored ideas on how work will look in coming decades, with output from all sectors of the economy becoming more customised and digitalised. Products and services alike will have “the human touch”, he told delegates.

For Renee Tan, from the Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore, the key to keeping skills up the challenge of new technology is to focus not only on companies, but to listen to the needs of workers and helping them develop skills such as critical thinking, project management and initiative, often through work based training, said Tan.

“Companies will better understand the entire work chain is interlinked, and you rely on your workers to innovate,” she said.

In the final session of the day, Alexandre Munguambe, General Secretary of the Workers Organization of Mozambique sounded a sombre note about the future of work, “Technology will continue to expel millions from their current jobs, those that do not have complex roles,” he said. “We will need more and more skilled workers, investment in basic education and lifelong learning.” He added that in his country is preparing: “The government and the social partners have been working strongly together to prevent exclusion of workers by new technologies.”

In the discussion on the disruptive changes in technology and work organisation, employers underlined the need for everybody to adjust – employers and workers. They also expressed their readiness to provide more workplace learning and apprenticeship training. They however pointed to the role of Governments in providing support measures to MSMEs and businesses in informal economy. They also highlighted the need for better regulation and support measures for those who are affected by disruptive changes, and the role of workers and governments in pushing this agenda ahead.

Preliminary joint research on the relationship of skills policy and trade was presented by the ILO and the World Trade Organization. Among the findings were that skills development systems have to be more responsive to the demands of trade on business, and also ensure the continued employability of an economy’s workforce.

Day two of the Technical Forum on Skills for Trade, Employability and Inclusive Growth will be held in Siem Reap on May 31.