

## IDENTIFYING KEY ISSUES IN UZBEKISTAN'S LABOR MARKET FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Dinara Adkhamova

Master of Management, Istanbul Technical University

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**Abstract.** *This paper aims to examine the labor market in Uzbekistan, identifying its trends and challenges, with a focus on the issues preventing long-term sustainable economic growth and development. For understanding the dynamics of the labor market and how it relates to sustainable development, labor market theories provide a valuable framework. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their meaning, and the contribution of the labor market to sustainable development are all covered in this paper. Using a desktop research approach, the article will examine the relationship between sustainable development and the Uzbek labor market. According to research, the labor market's challenges include a low labor force participation rate in terms of household income, an adverse employment climate, issues with youth employment and skill development, a lack of formal contracts, and job prospects. The recommended remedies to these issues include issuing government policies and initiatives that support inclusive growth, encourage entrepreneurship and job creation, increase access to education and training, and enhance labor market intermediation. In addition, improving the education system, especially in rural regions, and supporting the expansion of private sector activities can also play a role in advancing the labor market and thus sustainable development goals in Uzbekistan.*

**Keywords:** *education, development, labor market, job prospects.*

### Introduction

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan, a landlocked nation in Central Asia, has seen a massive transformation. Later, beginning in late 2016, Uzbekistan underwent considerable changes as a result of the implementation of broad reforms by a new government. The goal was to improve public services for all citizens nationally and drive economic growth by rescuing the nation from its isolation and stagnation. According to the UN Framework 2021–2025, structural reforms must be accompanied by substantial expenditures in areas including public administration, the rule of law, human rights, labor rights, gender equality, natural resource management, and environmental protection in order to ensure long-term economic growth. The labor market, which is important for social welfare and economic prosperity, is one important aspect in attaining these goals.

The goods market, the services market, the capital and money markets, and the labor market are without a doubt the most significant marketplaces in existence today. The primary area of human activity and the engine of social growth is work (Bednarz, 2011). Three primary purposes of work are economic, social, and profitable. Because employment should be a way of earning money to support the necessities of the home and should be effective in producing the so-called economic output and social usefulness (Miciuła et al., 2021). Therefore, the primary goal of the state's economic policy in the domain of the labor market is to foster the maintenance of current jobs as well as the creation of new, better jobs.

The labor market is the mechanism through which employers and employees interact to determine the allocation of labor, wages, and employment opportunities. According to Boeri and

Van Ours (2014), the labor market is the place where goods and services that are supplied for a fee or other kind of compensation correlate to duties that are clearly defined in job descriptions. For something to be considered labor, it must be rewarded. According to Pert (1990) and Dobrotă (1997), the labor market is the economic environment in which equity holders can freely trade as buyers (the supply) and owners of human resources can freely transact as sellers (the demand). In this environment, the supply and demand for labor are adjusted by the price mechanism of the work, the real wage, the free competition between economic operators, and other specific mechanisms. In order to achieve inclusive and fair economic growth, the labor market must function effectively. The labor market is a key element of sustainable development.

Understanding the dynamics of the labor market in Uzbekistan and identifying policies and strategies that might support sustainable and equitable economic growth is essential given the crucial role that the labor market plays in attaining sustainable development. By examining Uzbekistan's labor market's trends, difficulties, and opportunities and evaluating how it contributes to sustainable development, this paper aims to contribute to this understanding.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Sustainable Development**

The Brundtland Commission released a report titled "Our Common Future" in 1987, which aimed to establish a connection between economic progress and environmental preservation. The report offered a frequently cited explanation of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987, p. 43).

While various definitions of sustainable development exist, the most commonly employed definition is the one put forward by the Brundtland Commission (Cerin, 2006; Dernbach J. C., 2003; Stoddart, 2011). Sustainable development aims to achieve long-term stability for both the economy and environment, which can only be accomplished by incorporating and recognizing economic, environmental, and social considerations into the decision-making process (Emas, 2015). Sustainable development is a development approach that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions. In order to lead the world toward a more sustainable future, the United Nations adopted a set of 17 global goals in 2015 known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs address a number of interrelated challenges, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, education, health, and economic development. They offer a broadly applicable framework for action to end poverty, safeguard the environment, and advance peace and prosperity for all. The SDGs are crucial for the globe because they tackle the most important problems that humankind is now facing and offer a path toward a more sustainable future. They urge all nations, governments, civil society, and the private sector to act collectively in order to create a more just and sustainable world for coming generations.

#### **Overview of labor market theories**

A key element of sustainable development is the labor market, and labor market theories offer a useful framework for examining the dynamics of the labor market and how it relates to sustainable development.

*Neoclassical employment theory* relies on the notion of a completely competitive labor market, in which both employers and employees have access to accurate information about wages

and employment possibilities, are rational in their decision-making, and do not individually affect wages. Additionally, it is expected that the labor force would be mobile and uniform, and that employers and employees will act individually without consulting one another (Kucharski, 2001; Vercherand, 2014).

The function and results of the labor market are shaped by institutions and policies, according to *institutional labor market theory*. According to this idea, social protection, collective bargaining, and minimum wage regulations may all contribute to reducing inequality, foster social inclusion, and improve the effectiveness of the labor market. This theory emphasizes the significance of policies that support the flexibility of the labor market while safeguarding the rights of employees and maintaining social protection. The rules governing both individual and group employment relations, unemployment protection, and active labor-market policies are the three pillars of an institutional framework for the labor market (Topel, 1999). It is crucial to take into account how these three pillars influence labor productivity, employment flexibility, wage flexibility, and human capital flexibility.

According to the *segmented labor market theory* (Reich et al., 1973), the labor market is not a single, homogeneous market but rather a collection of segmented markets with varying job characteristics, pay, and employment conditions. According to theory, social and institutional issues like discrimination, educational systems, and migration patterns cause labor market segmentation. According to this idea, measures that support equal opportunities for all workers and lessen labor market segmentation are crucial (Fichtenbaum, 2006).

#### **Background of labor market of Uzbekistan**

The labor market in Uzbekistan is undergoing significant changes as the country implements economic reforms and modernizes its economy. The government has introduced a range of policy measures to create an enabling environment for job creation, attract foreign investment, and foster entrepreneurship. The country has also launched several labor market initiatives to improve labor market efficiency, enhance labor market information, and reduce unemployment and informality. Some examples of such actions include but not limited to the following:

**Launching the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations.** In May 2017, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection in Uzbekistan was restructured into the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations. The ministry is responsible for developing policies to create new jobs, coordinating employment programs, ensuring the employment of graduates, and monitoring the distribution of benefits to low-income families (Mehnat, 2022).

**Issue of the Law on Employment of the Population.** It was adopted by the Legislative Chamber of Uzbekistan on April 28, 2020, and approved by the Senate on August 7, 2020. The law covers a wide range of topics related to employment, including the regulation of employment contracts, working conditions, vocational training, and social protection. It also includes provisions for the protection of the rights and interests of workers, as well as measures to prevent discrimination in employment (Lex.uz, 2021).

**Resolution on Additional Measures to Improve the System of Involving the Population in Entrepreneurship and Developing Entrepreneurship.** On October 13, 2020, the President of Uzbekistan issued Resolution No. PP-4862, which aims to improve the system of involving the population in entrepreneurship and developing entrepreneurship in the country. The resolution outlines a series of measures to support entrepreneurs, including the creation of new

business incubators and the establishment of a fund to provide financial support to small businesses (Lex.uz -2. 2023).

However, despite these attempts, there are still a number of difficulties in the Uzbek labor market. The population of the nation is young and increasing, and a significant portion of the population joins the labor force every year. Low productivity, a significant percentage of informal employment, and little chances for women and vulnerable groups are further characteristics of the work market. The COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on the labor market are not covered in this paper since it is outside the scope of the topic under consideration. But it is important to note that the pandemic has had enormous impacts on international labor markets, such as Uzbekistan's, leading to widespread job losses, lower wages, and more informal employment. Although there are signs that the labor market is recovering in Uzbekistan, it is still unclear how this pandemic will impact employees and businesses in the long run.

### **The relationship between the labor market and sustainable development**

The labor market is an essential component of the SDGs, and it is critical to achieving the SDG 8, which aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. SDG 8 recognizes that labor market policies and institutions play a crucial role in creating jobs and providing decent work opportunities, reducing informality and inequality, and promoting social inclusion.

In order to ensure the consistent implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) until 2030, a resolution was adopted at the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2015. To fulfill this resolution, Uzbekistan's Ministers approved 16 National Sustainable Development Goals and 127 associated tasks to be achieved by 2030. These goals and tasks were adopted on October 20, 2018 (NSDG, 2023). The labor market is a critical factor in achieving sustainable development. The labor market's efficient functioning is necessary to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. The labor market also plays a crucial role in reducing inequality, poverty, and social exclusion. The labor market's contribution to sustainable development depends on its ability to provide decent work opportunities, promote social inclusion, and enhance labor market efficiency. Policies that promote job creation, improve labor market information, and reduce informality and inequality can enhance the labor market's contribution to sustainable development. The labor market may considerably enable Uzbekistan to gain on the path to attaining the SDGs and NSDGs by encouraging decent work and eliminating inequality.

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this article will involve desktop research, which will mainly rely on qualitative data from various sources such as academic journals, books, official reports, and web sources. Using keywords associated with sustainable development and the labor market in Uzbekistan, a systematic search of several databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, will be used to gather data. The acquired information will subsequently be subjected to thematic analysis, which entails finding patterns and themes in the information and interpreting their significance.

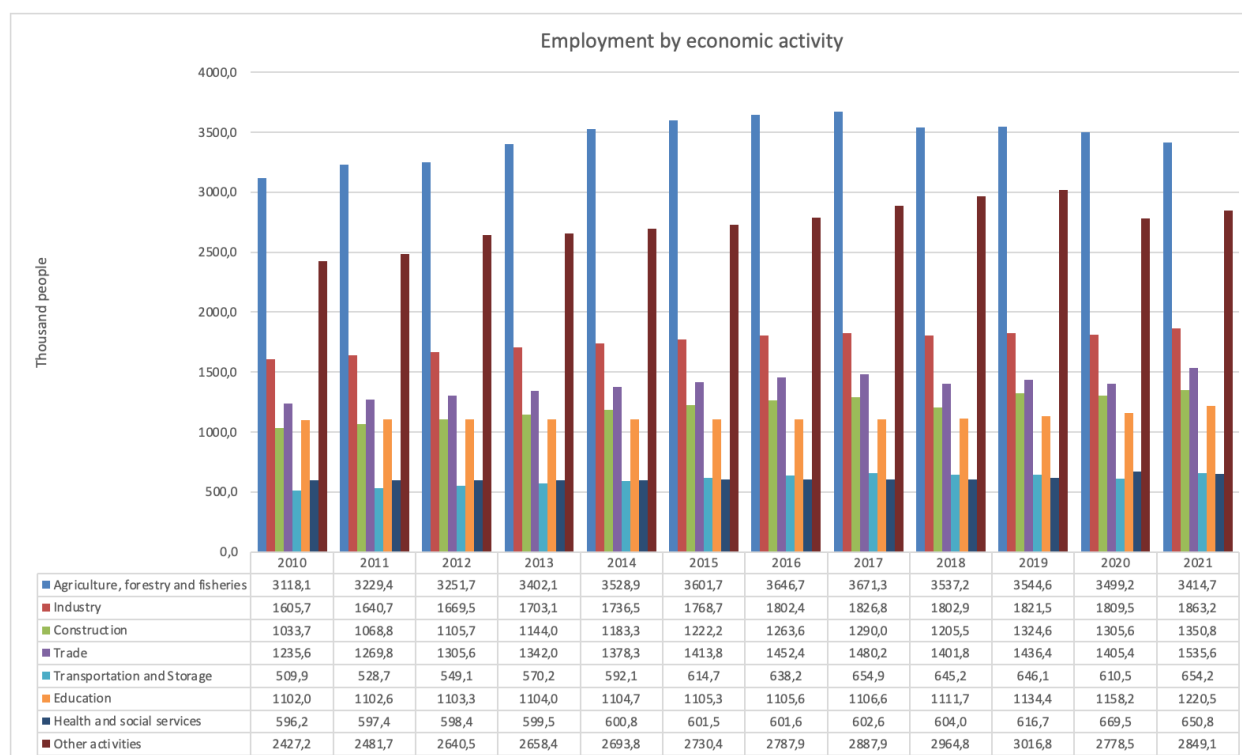
### **Analysis and Results**

In recent years, rapid economic growth has been observed in Uzbekistan, characterized by an increase in the physical volume of GDP by about 2.5 times in 2017-2022. At the end of 2022, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Republic of Uzbekistan at current prices amounted to

888.3 trillion. UZS and, compared to 2021, increased in real terms by 5.7%. In the sectoral structure of GDP, the share of agriculture, forestry and fisheries was 25.1%, industry - 26.7%, construction - 6.7% and services - 41.5% (Stat.uz, 2023).

The country has experienced significant growth in recent years, thanks to both external factors and economic reforms. The physical volume of economic indicators has shown positive trends between 2017-2021, with non-agricultural sectors creating job opportunities and contributing to stable growth. However, it's important to note that unemployment is still a major challenge in Uzbekistan, and ensuring that the working-age population has access to income-generating activities remains a priority for the country's development.

The economically active population in the country has increased from 12.3 million (2010) to 15 million people (2022). There are no significant changes in the sectoral structure of the number of employees, which is characterized by the following data (Figure 1). The sector with the most employment in 2010 and 2021 is agriculture, forestry and fisheries, with a slight increase in employment (9.53%). The industrial sector has also seen a significant increase in employment over the years, with an additional 258,000 people employed in the sector in 2021 compared to 2010. The trade sector saw a steady increase in employment from 2010 to 2021, with the largest increase occurring between 2020 and 2021, leaving the sector as the third largest in employment in the country. The next largest employment by sector is the construction sector, which grew steadily from 2010 to 2019, with a slight decline in 2020 and then a slight increase in 2021. Overall, “Other activities” accounted for the largest share of the change, while Health and Social Services saw the least change in the number of employees over time.



**Figure 1: Employment by economic activity**

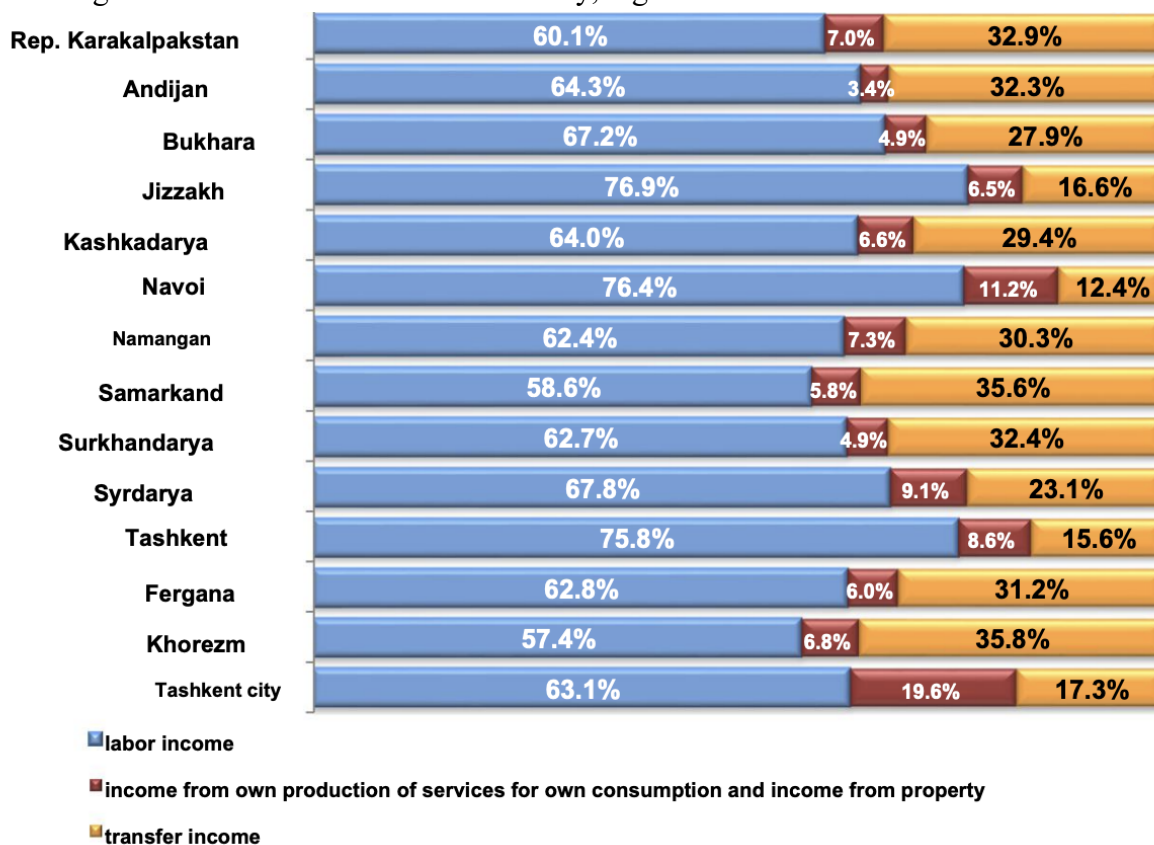
Source: made by Author, according to Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan (stat.uz)

**Identified issues and concerns**

Income share of the workforce is small. The World Bank Report (2022) states that household budgets heavily rely on income from employment, especially for the poorest 20% of

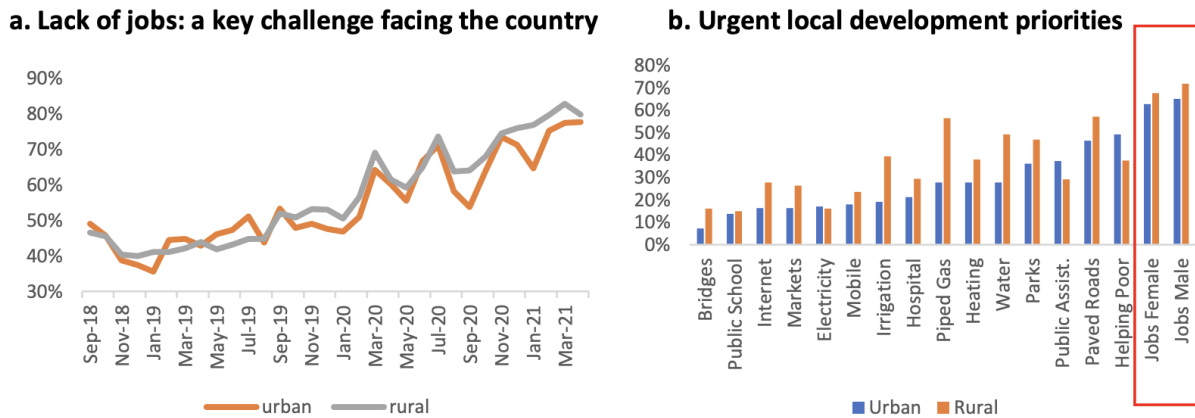
the population. However, compared to both the regional and worldwide standards, Uzbekistan's national revenue from work only makes up a very tiny portion of the total, estimated at 41% in 2017. The state receives the majority of the non-labor portion of revenue through taxes, capital ownership, and profits from state-owned firms, which is attributable to the tiny size of the private sector.

Despite rapid GDP growth, pay growth has slowed down, and the income share has likely decreased since 2017 as a result. Official statistics show that between January and December 2021, primary income accounted for 73.7% of the population's total income. In the population's whole aggregate income, the percentage of revenue from owning and producing services for own consumption was 6.5%, 2.2% from owning property, and 26.3% through transfers from abroad. As can be observed, a substantial amount of the population's income comes from transfers from other countries; in regions such as Khorezm and Samarkand, the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Surkhandarya, Andijan, Ferghana, and Namangan provinces, the proportion of income from transfers reached more than 30% (Stat.uz,2021). The labor market's challenges are frequently mentioned in national reports, highlighting how crucial it is to attaining more inclusive growth. Inclusive growth, in turn, is an essential aspect of social sustainability as it ensures that economic growth benefits all members of society, regardless of their socioeconomic status.



**Figure 2: The structure of the total income of the population by regions for January-December 2021 (in the total volume of the total income, %)**

Source: (Stat.uz,2021)



**Figure 3: Concerns over Jobs and Employment Are Dominant and Rising**

Sources: World Bank (2022)

Poor employment structure. According to the government's estimates, 8.6 percent of the labor force was reported to be unemployed in 2022. Additionally, as of November, 2022, there were 4.3 million economically inactive people living in the nation, up 0.5% (to 34.5%) or 19.8 thousand people from the same time previous year (Stat.uz 2022). A lack of job opportunities and the seasonality of the economy are believed among the factors contributing to this rise in both unemployment and inactivity. According to the State Committee on Statistics, there were only 1.1 million jobs available in 2018, which wasn't enough to keep up with the increase in the labor force. The estimates of official employment included working migrants abroad, which constitute to 2.6 million to the total in 2018 (World Bank, 2022)

On the other hand, the employment impact has been greatest in small and micro businesses, for self-employed people and individuals who own their own businesses. As a result, the employment effect has been concentrated (1) disproportionately among informal employees and (2) on the private sector. (Informal employment makes up 50% of the Uzbek labor force.) According to Seitz et al. (2020, 9), "In April, the share [of self-employed] reporting any self-employment income fell by 67 percent compared to the prior month, and remained down 26 percent in June." Many people in these categories work informally. According to one estimate, between 1 and 1.3 million people in Uzbekistan's informal economy may lose their jobs (ILO, 2021). In reality, employment frequently disregards the protection of labor laws, and working conditions are likely to vary substantially. The fundamental challenge that lies ahead is to emerge from this scenario with a cohesive, interconnected economy and labor market.

Thus, a lack of formal contracts and employment stability can block access to social safety measures like health care and pension plans, which could be detrimental to the wellbeing of employees and their families. As a result of migration and urbanization brought on by a lack of employment prospects in some locations, urban infrastructure and natural resources may be under pressure. A damaging effect on sustainable economic growth and development may also result from the concentration of employment losses in small and micro firms. These companies frequently play a significant part in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, two factors necessary for long-term economic growth.

Youth Employment issues and Skill Development. ILO estimates that in 2021, more than half of the youngsters aged 20 to 29 have finished their education but have not yet secured employment (ILO, 2021) The transition from education to employment is particularly challenging for young women and youth in rural areas due to a lack of knowledge and skills, particularly

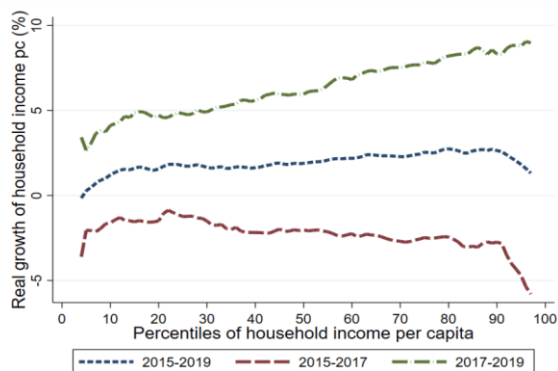
computer skills, a lack of local employment opportunities caused by low geographic mobility, ineffective labor market intermediation, and cultural factors that place young women at a distinct disadvantage.

According to UNICEF (2020), 50% of employers in "industry" for example, complain about a lack of skilled workers. Curiously, however, the number of firms in Uzbekistan who offer on-the-job training, apprenticeships, or internships is among the lowest in the region. It is true that one factor in this is the economy's overwhelming proportion of mostly unorganized SMEs, many of which lack the administrative and financial resources to invest in training. From the perspective of recent graduates, the situation appears to be exactly the opposite: the majority of them assert that they are unable to locate suitable, open positions on the job market. More than half of graduates end up working in a field or profession for which they were not educated.

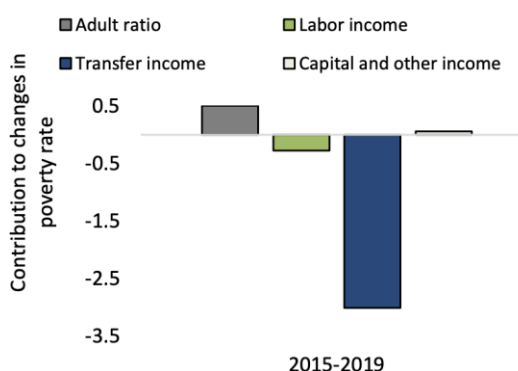
The issues related to employment structure, youth employment, and skill development in Uzbekistan are relevant to several SDGs including SDG 8, 4, 5 and 9. Therefore, fostering youth employment and skill development is essential to sustainable growth. Young individuals who don't have access to suitable employment opportunities risk social isolation, poverty, and slower economic growth.

The growth of income in recent years has been modest, especially for the poorest. Although incomes consistently rose between 2017 and 2021 (Stat.uz -1,2021), the growth was far below the pace of growth in per capita GDP, and growth was even slower among the poor. Official survey data show that between 2015 and 2019, the median income increased by around 1.4 percent annually, whereas GDP per capita increased by 4.8 percent annually after adjusting for inflation (figure 5). Over the same period, income growth among the poorest 20% was around half the average rate (0.74 percent a year) (World Bank, 2022). In terms of earnings, the dynamics of the average monthly wage from 2017 to 2021 reveal that 2021 saw the highest amount, with an average increase of almost 21.13% yearly (Stat.uz -2, 2021).

**a. Real growth in household income**



**b. Contributions to changes in the poverty rate**



Source: Household Budget Survey of Uzbekistan.

**Figure 4: Recent Changes in Poverty Driven by Transfers, Particularly Remittances**

Sources: World Bank (2022)

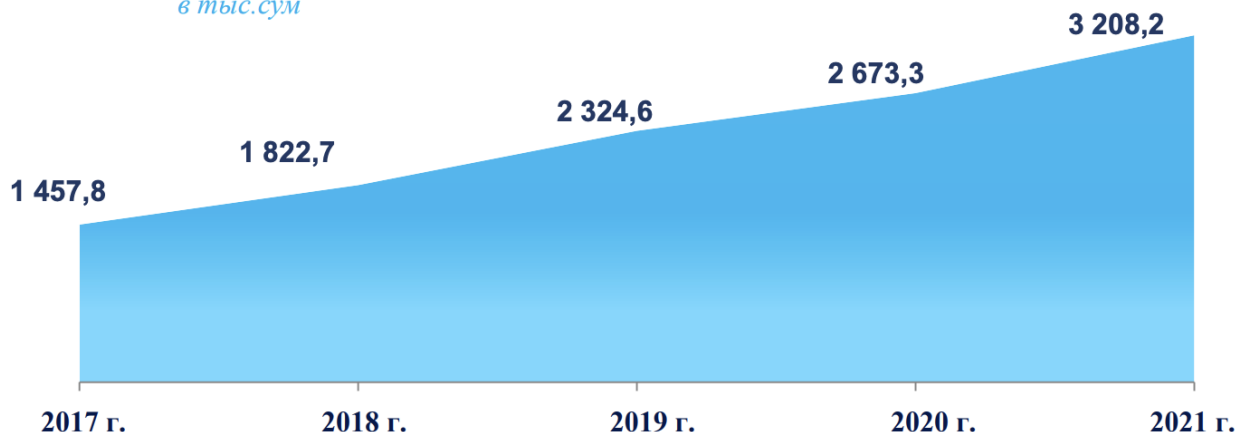
However, according to UNICEF (2020)'s presented data on survey; it can be concluded that the wages offered by local firms (the participant mentioned sewing enterprises in Samarkand) are too low to provide a decent standard of living. Due to this, many employees, especially women who might have additional cultural and familial duties, may decide it is more financially practical



to stay at home. The issue is made worse by other expenses related to the job, such as lunch and transportation fees, which even lessen the attractiveness of the low wage.

Динамика заработной платы

в тыс.сум



*Figure 5: Wage Dynamics (in thousand soums)*

Source: (Stat.uz -2,2021)

This highlights a wider issue of low wages and inadequate compensation in the labor market in Uzbekistan. There are many sustainability issues that might arise as a result of low wages and inadequate benefits in the labor market. For instance, low-income families may find it difficult to meet their fundamental needs, such as those for food, shelter, and healthcare, which can have a detrimental effect on their wellbeing and quality of life.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

In conclusion, the labor market and employment situation in Uzbekistan present a number of serious problems and concerns that make it difficult to achieve sustainable economic growth and development. These problems include a low income share of the labor force, an unfavorable employment environment, problems with youth employment, and skill development. Lack of formal contracts and employment stability may make it difficult for workers and their families to access social security programs like health insurance and pension schemes. The seasonality of the economy and a lack of job prospects are other factors that contribute to increased unemployment and inactivity.

To address these issues and ensure sustainable economic development for all members of society, the government must implement policies and programs that encourage inclusive growth, support job creation and entrepreneurship, increase access to education and training, and strengthen labor market intermediation. Promoting private sector growth is one strategy for addressing the low-income percentage of the workforce and the unsatisfactory employment structure. This can be accomplished by implementing policies that encourage entrepreneurship, lower entry barriers, and aid in the growth of small and medium-sized businesses. Improving the education system, particularly in rural areas, can help address the issue of youth unemployment and skill development. Creating and maintaining a comprehensive unemployment insurance program can offer jobless employees a safety net, reducing poverty and averting social unrest. While ensuring that the labor code's anti-discrimination provisions can promote a fair and equal job market, modernizing active labor market laws can also aid job seekers in their search for employment.

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