



**Address by Juan Somavia
Director-General of the International Labour Office
at the opening session of the
ILO's Tenth African Regional Meeting
(Addis Ababa, 2 December 2003)**

Mr. Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,
Mr. Chairman of the Commission of the African Union,
Mr. Chairman of our Tenth ILO African Regional Meeting,
Mr. Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa,
Dear Ministers,
Dear Representatives of Employers and Workers of Africa,
Dear Guests,
Dear Friends,

Mr. Prime Minister, let me begin by saying what a privilege it is to be in your great nation, with its rich diversity, its natural beauty, its noble history, and its long record of independence and Pan Africanism. We are delighted to be here. Thank you for your vision and leadership.

Ethiopia is home to the cradle of humanity, but it is also home to a new Organization of promise. For the people of Africa, African Union spells hope. President Konare, you symbolize this hope. Thank you for leading the way with such energy and conviction.

As demonstrated by your Labour and Social Affairs Commission, the African Union and the ILO share the same commitment to tripartism.

And I have come today to thank all of you – representatives of governments, employer's organizations and trade unions of Africa – for your support and direction.

I thank you for the role you played during the International Labour Conference last June. It was a success led by Africa.

The vision and eloquence of our special guest, South African President, Thabo Mbeki, speaking as Chairperson of the African Union.

The good humour and determined leadership of our Conference President, that great human being, Vice-President of Kenya, the late Michael Wamalwa.

And the compelling call of African tripartite delegates, that work, is the way out of poverty.

We are gathered here to carry that forward – building on Africa's talents and fostering home-grown solutions based on African interests, culture and values.

This Model of Globalization is Not Delivering for Africa

I am here to receive your guidance.

I am here as a believer, as someone whose love and commitment for Africa runs deep and comes from way back. And I am here to speak plainly, in practical terms, about the challenges we face together in our increasingly interdependent world.

Let me begin with a simple truth: The present model of globalization is not delivering for Africa. It is not stopping the growth of unemployment, poverty and the informal economy in this great continent.

There is unprecedented wealth in the world. Path-breaking technologies. New ways of bringing people together. Yet, something fundamental is missing. People look around and feel a loss of security, an absence of human values, a global economy without a moral compass.

The world community set a goal to reduce extreme poverty by half by the year 2015. And we all know that goal is off track in Africa and other regions.

So policy changes are necessary. To begin with, we have to break out of the logic that locks us into the one-size-fits-all worldview of the so-called Washington Consensus.

We need a different organizing factor for economic and social policies.

We naturally prefer open societies and open economies provided that the rules are fair, we can organize, speak out and influence events and social justice is not a distant dream.

It's not about abandoning sound macro-economic policies; it's about grounding them in sound macro-social policies. It's about investing in employment-intensive activities and enterprises that can bring income and food to the table of working families.

Why is this key? Because we believe work is more than subsistence – and workers are not commodities. Work is dignity. Work is a source of self-worth. Work is a source of family stability and peace in the community.

No politician can go to elections in any country without addressing the issue of more and better jobs. For economic policies to be perceived as legitimate, they must respond to basic social needs. My conclusion: The extensive policy advice given to Africa needs a reality check – a wake-up call. Work is at the heart of the economic, political and social concerns of people. So let's make decent work in all countries the new organizing factor for a globalization that works for all.

Decent Work for Africa

The ILO's African tripartite constituents started down that road four years ago in Abidjan. You began by observing the reality around you:

- Three out of four Africans surviving on less than US\$2 a day. As much as 90 per cent of the workforce in many countries of Africa, working in the informal economy – largely without social protection and the defence of their rights;
- conflicts taking a heavy human toll;

- obstacles to opportunity for women far too high;
- employment and hope for young people far too low; and meanwhile,
- HIV/AIDS continuing its devastating death march across Africa.

And you responded by shaping the decent work approach for Africa and putting HIV/AIDS at the top of the ILO agenda. Decent work was assumed as an African responsibility – a responsibility to deal with the real problems as perceived by individuals, families and communities.

Since then, we rooted our activities around our four strategic objectives of employment and enterprise creation, rights at work, basic social protection and social dialogue. I want to pay tribute to your tripartite efforts to make decent work an African goal.

But there is still a long way to go, as our reports to this conference set out.

Some have said that decent work for Africa is an impossible dream. I do not think so. That would be selling the hopes of the people of Africa short.

It won't happen overnight, but if we are serious about tackling poverty, then we must fight for jobs, sustainable livelihoods, income-generating activities, quality self-employment. We need employers who have the freedom to develop their enterprises. We need trade unions with the freedom to organize. We need real opportunities that give people freedom of choice.

And it is possible. In every one of your countries, there are many examples of African success stories:

- Concrete ways to create micro, small, and medium enterprises;
- practical action to improve working conditions and productivity;
- a targeted focus on what I call localization – because there is no national development without local development. That means creating employment where people live – beginning, as Prime Minister Zenawi has stressed, by making activities in agriculture and food security an engine of decent job creation. Through cooperatives, community-based enterprises, labour-intensive investments, skills development, capacity building;
- extending social protection to the informal sector;
- fighting child labour;
- promoting hope and opportunity for Africa's youth; and
- expanding opportunities for women. Because when you empower women, you empower Africa.

We have experiences in all these fields, but they need to be scaled up and mainstreamed into economic policies for them to become sustainable development instruments.

And in this context, I wish to pay homage to the decision by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union when they supported President Campaoré's proposal to convene an Extraordinary Summit on Employment Creation and Poverty Alleviation.

I see it as a key political engagement with the people of Africa and a clear message to Africa's development partners.

The African Union specifically called on the ILO to collaborate with this landmark event.

Let me assure you, President Konare, of our readiness to put the ILO's tripartite network at the service of the African Union to contribute to the Summit in any way you find appropriate.

Tomorrow we will all have the honour of listening to President Campaoré, the driving force behind this initiative.

Connecting International Policies with People's Priorities

We are now at a key moment for Africa and the international community.

Through the African Union, Africa is developing a new vision and institution to tackle collectively its challenges. Through NEPAD, Africa is calling for new types of partnership. Through the Extraordinary Summit on Employment and Poverty, Africa is shaping its own priorities that connect with people's immediate needs.

That creativity and commitment should be matched at the global level. It is time for a new generation of policies for international cooperation. It is essential to build a better globalization based on fair rules and fair outcomes.

Conclusion

Dear Friends, I look around and I see the potential of Africa – the know-how to build enterprises – the commitment to lift worker's lives – the capacity of governments to craft policies that can change societies for the better. This is what cohesive and forward-looking tripartism is all about.

Thanks to your efforts, the decent work message is rising to the top of the political agenda.

I see all of this, coming together, to make Africa an unstoppable force for a just and decent world.

Thank you for your leadership, your vision and values. Keep blazing the forward path. And I make this pledge: I'll be with you every step of the way.
