



**Remarks by Juan Somavia,
Director-General of the International Labour Office
at the
Council of Ministers of the African Union
(Maputo, Mozambique, 8 July 2003)**

The following text was delivered in Portuguese:

"Mr. President and my friend Dr. Simao,
Dear Amara,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Dear friends,

Allow me to begin by thanking our hosts, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Government, and the people of Mozambique.

Minister Simao, please convey to His Excellency President Chissano how very pleased I am to be in a nation that was able to achieve peace through dialogue, democracy and unity.

Mozambique is truly showing her people the way towards a better future."

The following text was delivered in French:

"Mr. President,

I also want to express my gratitude to all of you. Thank you for the motion of support in Durban and for Africa's unanimous support for my re-election last March. I will never forget this honour. Please convey my deepest gratitude to your respective Heads of State and Government.

Let me also thank my friend Amara Essy for his confidence in the ILO and for the close links we have forged in helping to facilitate the transition from the OAU to the African Union. Thank you Amara and, once again, bravo for your remarkable work".

Mr. Chairperson,

Just after my re-election, I attended the African Union Labour and Social Affairs Commission meeting in Mauritius. I want to salute your efforts to preserve the tripartite dimension of that Commission - to strengthen social dialogue - and to ensure that the voice of workers and employers, the real actors of the economy, remain an integral part of the African Union.

I pledge the ILO's continued commitment on the operational side, including assistance for African Union restructuring - and on the conceptual side, for the development of a Social Policy Framework.

My support for your efforts runs deep. It is a part of my lifelong commitment and love for Africa - and to the goals and values that define the African Union: home-grown solutions, people-centred reform, promoting the unity and dignity of your great continent.

Last year, you met in the light of a new dawn. I expressed my conviction that the historic launching of the African Union would contribute to shaping a fair, rules-based international system inspired by your traditional values of respect, solidarity and dialogue. One year later, you are further down the road of African integration.

But one year later, the need for unity and solidarity is greater, as well. The current path of the global economy is not stopping the growth of unemployment and poverty in Africa. It is making it more difficult to cope with the breakdown of families. Instability in communities. More workers confronting HIV/AIDS. Children at work. Unrest and unfairness all around.

Rising poverty is bringing a rising chorus of concerns. The voice of African workers - particularly the hardworking women of Africa - who seek dignity and income but find themselves driven to the informal economy without legislative protection. The voice of African employers who tell me they want to compete, but the international trade and financial rules are not fair to newcomers. The voice of Africa's farmers - faced not only with droughts and floods, but also the flood of commodities and subsidies in the world market. The voice of young people who take a hard look around them and say what kind of world are you leaving us?

I know how strongly these issues are shaping your agenda. I see it, for example, in the forceful way President Mkapa of Tanzania co-chairs our Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization. Or as President Compaore of Burkina Faso and other leaders are striving to mobilize collective efforts to make employment a key element in tackling the poverty challenge in Africa.

This truly is the biggest social challenge and the biggest economic opportunity that we face today - working out of poverty. It was in fact the very subject of my Report to the International Labour Conference last month in Geneva. A Conference that was strongly influenced by African Ministers of Labour, business and worker leaders. Vice-President Wamalwa of Kenya served as the President of the Conference. President Mbeki of South Africa gave the keynote speech. As he said, we must "ensure that no human being anywhere in the world, regardless of nationality, race, colour, gender, age or ability, has to bear the indignity, the pain and humiliation of unemployment, hunger and deprivation."

That is the goal.

If you ask people living in poverty what they need, it's a decent job. But if you look at international policies to fight poverty, employment isn't there. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are a vital and important step forward. But there is an African proverb that says: "Fine words do not produce food."

There are many fine words and objectives in the PRSPs, but, too often, "job creation" and "enterprise development" are not among them. They are the missing links in the global strategy to wipe out poverty. But we know that's what will produce food on the table of African families, a roof over their heads, education for their children, health care protection, sustainable livelihoods, decent work.

How do we make it happen?

First, let's not mince words. We must recognize as things stand, the Millennium Development poverty reduction goal will not be reached. And we better say it now. If we want a 50 per cent reduction in poverty, international and national policies need a 100 per cent commitment to jobs.

Second, focus on the local economy. We have put enormous emphasis on the opportunities of globalization. But we have to focus on what I would call 'localization'. Local community development. Micro, small and medium enterprises. Labour intensive investment. Mobilization of national resources and capacities.

If we look at the challenge through the eyes of people, we know those living in poverty have enormous reserves of courage, persistence and ingenuity. They are the ultimate entrepreneurs. People in poverty go through each day with the will to survive, but without the support and possibilities to move up the ladder of opportunity. Our common responsibility is to help put these things in place - and to help them move from survival to sustainable livelihoods.

Third, ownership. NEPAD has the potential to reinforce the national capacity to defend one's interests. The best way forward is for NEPAD to put employment and income generation activities into the picture.

I'm bringing this issue to you, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, because linking poverty with employment creation is a key political issue on the international cooperation agenda which will shape the 21st century for our children. You are the political advocates of Africa in the international community. And you know better than anyone else that if we don't solve these problems, we will see a continuing erosion of trust in the international system, in governments, in those with power and authority to change things for the better.

After all, growth without jobs leads to policies without legitimacy and ultimately democracy without delivery. The lack of Decent Work is the greatest security threat that the world faces.

It's time for the international financial institutions, the entire UN system, and bilateral cooperation to focus energies on job creation in Africa which we know is so fundamental to peace, security and unity. It's time to put jobs back into the picture.

Peace, stability, unleashing the talents of the people of Africa. That is our common goal. Thank you for leading the way. And on this journey for social justice, the ILO is on your side and at your service in every stage of the struggle.