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OPINION ARTICLE

Realizing Decent Work in Asia

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BUSAN -- The 21st Century is widely spoken of as the Asian century. Asia's four billion people now live in the region with the most rapid economic growth in the world. Growth has been more than double the global average since 1995 and labour productivity has risen by about 41 per cent, towering over the rest of the world.

But this dynamic economic picture is incomplete. Huge growth hasn't been matched by an equivalent growth in the number of jobs. It has not adequately improved working conditions or wages for many of the region's 1.9 billion working women and men.

What's more, conventional unemployment is only part of the problem. Underemployment, insecurity, poor working conditions and a shortage of marketable skills remain widespread. The lack of social protection, especially among workers in agriculture and the urban informal economy, is serious. And despite significant progress in reducing poverty, some one billion people are still "working poor".

Last year, in his Foreword to a flagship publication of the Asian Development Bank, President Haruhiko Hiroda warned that if the "policy agenda of the region's economy is not geared to meeting the objectives of full, productive and decent employment, it is easy to conceive a region, say 25 years from now, which despite growth, will still harbour most of the world's poor."

All this creates underlying tensions that demand our attention. I have no doubt that Asian countries have the capacity to address and solve these problems. This is a region of initiative and entrepreneurship, of opportunity and challenge. It is a place where resilience, energy and dynamism abound.

Today, Asia - from the Arab States in West Asia to the Pacific - is facing what I call a "decent work challenge." To understand what this means to ordinary people, consider the following:

- In 2005, some 84 per cent of workers in South Asia, 58 per cent in South-East Asia, 47 per cent in East Asia and 36 per cent in the Arab States did not earn enough to lift themselves and their families above the US$2 a day poverty line.

- Informal employment as a share of non-agricultural employment ranges from 83 per cent in India, 78 per cent in Indonesia, and 72 per cent in the Philippines, to 51 per cent in Thailand and 42 per cent in the Syrian Arab Republic.

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- In 2005 Asia had more than 48 per cent, or 41.6 million, of the world's young people without work. Young people are at least three times more likely than adults to be unemployed. Youth underemployment is also a major concern.

- Some 1 million workers die annually in Asia due to work-related accidents and diseases.

- Despite progress towards observing key international labour standards Asia has the lowest level of ratifications of the two ILO Conventions relating to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining of any region in the world.

- If people cannot find work at home they look elsewhere. Over the past two decades gross emigration of labour rose at an annual rate of 6 per cent in the Asian region - twice the growth rate of the labour forces of the sending countries.

A major reduction in these decent work deficits in this region is possible, as the overall reduction of poverty has shown. It would be a tremendous boost to the quality of life and the security of many individuals, families and communities. Different countries, given their national realities, cultures and development levels, can strive in different ways to achieve this goal. What are some of the major policy challenges?

First, promote economic growth that translates into the creation of decent jobs and encourages investment and entrepreneurship, skill development, proper labour standards and sustainable livelihoods. Facilitating enterprise creation is key.

Second, respect, promote and realize fundamental principles and rights at work, namely freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to organize and bargain collectively, the elimination of all forms of forced and/or compulsory labour, and the effective elimination of child labour and discrimination in respect of employment and occupations, including the promotion of gender equality.

Third, extend social protection and increase its effectiveness, particularly for workers in agriculture and the informal economy who are in practice often not covered by labour legislation.

And fourth, support institutions and systems that strengthen labour market governance, including frameworks that encourage social dialogue and help resolve workplace disputes. Social dialogue, involving strong and independent workers' and employers' organizations, plays a pivotal role in increasing productivity and building cohesive societies. It is the best road towards flexibility and security for both employers and workers. Experience has shown that lack of dialogue weakens development potential.

At the ILO we call this the "decent work agenda". And from the United Nations World Summit in 2005 to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in July 2006, the global community has made full and productive employment and decent work a central objective of national development policies. This is today an international consensus.

The next ten years will be critical ones in Asia. If the dramatic growth rates it has enjoyed are to continue in a stable social framework, the benefits need to be felt by all through improvements to their lives and livelihoods – in other words, decent work.

And Asia is searching for ways to ensure that economic success linked to globalization does not bring with it such high social costs that undermine the life of families and communities. Through various means, the search for balanced, harmonious, equitable societies is underway in so many countries.

This is another opportunity for Asia - whose progress has astonished the world - to set a global example. By promoting the decent work agenda it will not only improve the lives of the people in this region, but also exercise global policy leadership and give a tremendous boost to the realization of decent work worldwide. *[986 words]*