

Key Note Address
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Mary Read,
Deputy Director, ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean

Labour Issues in the Global Arena, Lessons for the Caribbean

Salutations

Let me start by extending cordial greetings to this meeting on behalf of the Director General of the International Labour Office, Mr. Juan Somavia and the Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Mr. Jean Maninat. I also bring salutations from the Director of the ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean, Dr. Ana T. Romero, who was unable to be here today due to the convening of all ILO Directors in Geneva.

The International Labour Organization has been invited to address this meeting of the Council of Human and Social Development on the subject of "**Labour Issues in the Global Arena, Lessons for the Caribbean**". It is the ILO's task to provide you with information and fuel so that your discussions and deliberations are fruitful and so that you can take advantage of the deliberations held last week at the Tripartite Caribbean Employment Forum and the adoption of the "Tripartite Declaration and Plan of Action for realizing the Decent Work Agenda in the Caribbean" by that Forum. The ILO's constituents, which include representatives of governments, and employers' and workers' organizations, are placing great hope and expectations on the Declaration and the Plan Of Action that it can be used as a spring board forward and as a platform from which further momentum can be built.

Today, I will to focus on the following areas:

- Decent Work and the Tripartite Declaration and Plan of Action on Realizing the Decent Work Agenda in the Caribbean
- Fundamental principles and rights at work
- Employment and incomes
- Social protection
- Social dialogue
- Lessons learnt from other regions

Decent Work

The question many of you may be asking yourselves is: "What is Decent Work?" Very simply put, Decent Work is what all people strive for as regards their working lives. It is the primary goal of the ILO today.

More specifically, the objectives of decent work are four fold and include:

- giving effect to principles and rights at the workplace;
- accelerating growth and generating jobs by promoting and managing change in a socially-acceptable manner;
- improving the effectiveness of social protection as a means of increasing equity and making change acceptable; and,
- promoting social dialogue for participatory socio-economic and sustainable development.

Decent work represents the convergence of these four points into a coherent policy approach to manage economic growth and social development in a balanced way. It is important to note that these objectives reflect major themes in the international development agenda- namely respect

for human rights as part of human development, the need for people to benefit from economic growth, social inclusion, and strengthening participatory democracy. This involves stepping out of predefined roles in the line Ministries to ensure that actions taken in one part of government do not adversely effect employment or rights at work. Decent Work involves making quality job creation central to national and regional economic and social policies.

The Decent Work Agenda has been widely accepted and has high-level international endorsement as a development agenda. This support has been demonstrated through the conclusions adopted at the following fora:

- The **United Nations General Assembly**, which adopted a Resolution on policy coherence and employment for a fair globalization.
- The outcomes of the **UN's World Summit** in 2005, which specifically supported policies and programme to realize a fair globalization.
- The OAS's **Fourth Summit of the Americas** which adopted the "Declaration of Mar Del Plata" and "Plan of Action" on "Creating jobs to fight poverty and strengthen Democratic governance".
- The **EU summit** with Heads of Government from Latin American and Caribbean, which addressed issues of fair globalization and decent work.
- The ILO's **16th Americas Regional Meeting**, which adopted Conclusions and decided to celebrate a "Decade of Promoting Decent Work in the Americas". And finally
- The **UN Economic and Social Council** which adopted the UN Ministerial Declaration on Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work in July 2006.

It is also worth noting that the goals of decent work are included within the articles of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramus, specifically

- Article 70 on Macro-Economic Policies which provides for the promotion of economic development in CARICOM Member States "without prejudice to securing high-levels of employment"¹, and
- Article 73 on Industrial Relations. Paragraph (a) provides for the promotion of "objectives of full employment, improved living and working conditions; adequate social security policies and programmes; tripartite consultation among government, workers' and employers' organizations; and cross-border mobility of labour."² This Article also provides for COHSOD to consult with COTED to formulate proposals.

There is also CARICOM's Declaration on Labour and Industrial Relations Principles, which sets out the general labour policy to which the region aspires, as well as the CARICOM Charter of Civil Society.

All of these Treaties, Articles, Declarations and Charters speak to the need for comprehensive and coherent policies and actions that transcend the separations between Finance, Trade, Investments, Labour and Employment.

Decent Work was the subject of the recently concluded Tripartite Caribbean Employment Forum. The Forum brought together high-level representatives of governments, employers' organizations and trade unions from 13 countries and a number of the territories of the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, to discuss the various aspects of Decent Work and their realization in the context of regional integration in the Caribbean.

Fundamental principles and rights at work

The participants at the Forum identified a number of areas where success had been achieved as well as a number of areas where further efforts and actions were needed to achieve real

¹ Revised treaty of Chaguaramus.

² Revised Treaty of Chaguaramus.

advancement in the area of fundamental principles and rights at work. Let me start with the positive.

Almost all ILO member States in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean have ratified the ILO's eight core Labour Conventions under the Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. The fundamental principles and rights cover four areas which are now widely recognized as human rights. They are:

- Freedom of association and collective bargaining (C. 87 and C. 98)
- Elimination of forced and compulsory labour (C. 29 and C. 105)
- Elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation (C. 100 and C. 111) and
- Abolition of child labour. (C. 138 and C. 182)

Another positive point is that the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations has noted a number of cases where they have been able to express their satisfaction and/or to note with interest, measures taken by the Governments of the Caribbean in regard to various ratified ILO Conventions over the past 2 years, namely Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

On the other hand: Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines still have to ratify the ILO Convention on the minimum age for entry into employment and Suriname still has to ratify three of the eight core Conventions, namely the ILO Conventions on Minimum age, equal remuneration and on the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation.

As regards reporting on ratified Conventions, let me simply say that most other countries of the world do better.

Perhaps the most disturbing fact however is that there are still gaps and sometimes even major gaps, between the provisions of national laws and the actual application and enforcement of those laws.

The participants at the Forum identified the following areas that needed urgent attention and action:

- Raising awareness of and promoting respect for fundamental principles and rights at work as well as ratified ILO instruments;
- Conducting a thorough review of national legislation and policies in order to ensure that it is in accordance relevant ILO Conventions;
- Collaborating in efforts to harmonize labour legislation; and
- Improving compliance with national legislation, regulations and codes.

As one of the participants said at the Forum, "We not only must have a level playing field, we need to level the playing field up to the level of the best, rather than leveling it down".

Employment and incomes

Not surprisingly, the most of the discussion took place under the heading of "creating greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment and incomes".

As many of you are aware, per capita incomes in the region fall into two groups - either US\$9,000 and above, or US\$4,500 and below. Interestingly enough the lower income group of countries includes the three relatively populous mainland countries (**Belize, Guyana and Suriname**) and **Jamaica**. This means that most of the region's population lives in the US\$4,500 per capita income category.

As regards growth rates, during the period 2000-2004, most countries, except **Belize and Trinidad and Tobago**, experienced modest economic growth.

The labour force participation rates during the past ten years have increased very slightly to 61.5% . This rate, however, is still low compared to the world and Latin America, which enjoy labour force participation rates of around 66%.

A major issue of concern is the general decline in productivity and the erosion of competitiveness in the Caribbean, especially in the global environment of today.

Caribbean countries need to take major policy decisions, individually and collectively, in order to adapt to the unfolding realities of rapid liberalization and global competition. The policies need to address forcefully both the economic and social challenges so as to sustain and improve economic growth and promote full and productive employment and decent work.

Although the Caribbean has experienced modest growth since 2000, there has not been an equal increase in employment. Open unemployment rates remain in double-digit figures for the region as a whole. Women's unemployment rates continue to be higher and often substantially so, when compared to unemployment rates for men.

It is worth noting that young people have accounted for a significant share of the unemployed across the region since the early 1990s. Unemployment among youth is sometimes twice or three times higher than the national average.

Of particular interest, the participants at the Tripartite Caribbean Employment Forum identified a number of areas where advances could and indeed needed to be made. They are:

- Adopting employment-promoting macro-economic policies that foster conditions conducive to increased trade, investment, competitiveness and job opportunities
- Supporting economic diversification through strategic competitiveness and productivity enhancing measures.
- Developing policies and programmes to address the obstacles to decent and productive work faced by youth.
- Ensuring that decent work is adequately addressed in regional and bilateral trade agreements. and
- Developing integrated policies and programmes to address the challenges of the informal economy and facilitate the transition to the formal economy.

Of special note was the discussion that was held in relation to education and employment. There is widespread agreement that the populations of the countries of the Caribbean are much more highly educated than in the past. This has not however translated itself into a better, more productive and competitive workforce. Most employers heartily agree that the persons coming out of the formal education system are less qualified and less employable today than in the past. They require more basic skills training before becoming effective in the workplace. As one employer put it, the formal education system is teaching a generation of students how to pass exams.

This paradigm points to areas where the current systems of education are failing the population. More emphasis and importance needs to be placed on alternatives to the formal academic education being emphasized under current systems. It is our society's duty to provide people with alternatives to academic education so that they too can become productive members of society. This alternative can be provided through comprehensive skills training and vocational training.

Social protection

In the area of social protection, the participants again noted a few positive examples. Namely,

- Barbados with its unemployment benefits programme,
- The establishment of national HIV/AIDS committees in many countries that consider the world of work, and

- PANCAP Global fund programme.

Some of the main areas identified for urgent action were:

- The need to cover a larger part of the working population under social security schemes by extending the coverage to workers in the informal economy.
- The need to balance efficient labour markets with effective social protection.
- The need to reinforce/strengthen the national labour inspections services to cover better the formal economy as well as extend itself to the informal economy.
- The urgent need to develop, improve and implement HIV/AIDS workplace policies and programmes using the ILO's Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work.

In this regard I would like to highlight the existence of the "HIV/AIDS workplace policy for the Education Sector" as a tool already available to assist the education sector to develop appropriate HIV/AIDS workplace policies. I also recognize that a model HIV/AIDS workplace policy will soon be available through the efforts of the Caribbean Tripartite Council working with the PANCAP programme.

Strengthen tripartism and social dialogue

As regards social dialogue and tripartism, there are indeed a number of areas where the Caribbean is particularly strong.

- As stated earlier, all countries have ratified the basic ILO human rights Conventions as regards freedom of association and collective bargaining, and
- Most countries have established councils/committees/boards where tripartite discussions on ILO Conventions and national legislation can take place.

On the other hand, there remain a number of areas where more attention and action is needed and where mechanisms need to be strengthened.

- There is a pressing need to revitalize the mechanisms in place for social dialogue,
- There is a need to broaden the scope of the social dialogue mechanisms to ensure that the goals of decent work and full employment are not compromised in national economic and social-policy making.
- There is a need to strengthen the capacity of the social partners to take on the wider development role.
- There is a need to give effect to the 1995 CARICOM Declaration of Labour and Industrial Relations Principles and the 1997 Charter of **Civil Society**.

Lessons learnt from other regions

So what are some of the lessons learned by the ILO from the experiences of other regions that might now apply to the Caribbean? To mention but a few:

- There is a need to achieve economic growth that also includes employment growth. Without employment, the population of the Caribbean will always be at risk of social unrest as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
- A conscious decision has to be made to adopt full employment as a policy. Many countries are experiencing economic growth without the concomitant growth in jobs.
- Policies and programmes need to address the specific question of creating good jobs as opposed to jobs that are on the lower end of the skills and knowledge range.
- It is essential for the education sector to take into account the types of skills and the diversity of skills required so that the population can find and keep productive and competitive work.

- There is a pressing need to take into account the positions and advice of the workers' and employers' organizations in the education debate. They have valuable advice and legitimate concerns about the future of the workforce.
- There is a need to set priorities at the national and regional levels, to take action and actively collaborate with regional institutions such as the CARICOM and its bodies, the OECS and CDB, to mention but a few.

In conclusion, I would invite you to examine in detail the "Tripartite Declaration and Plan of Action for Realizing the Decent Work Agenda in the Caribbean". The ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean as well as the ILO headquarters is very interested in continuing and strengthening our technical collaboration with CARICOM on issues of mutual interest such as labour law harmonization, technical and vocational education and training and labour migration. We look forward to working with CARICOM to realize the goals of Decent Work in the Caribbean.

I would like to thank the CARICOM Secretariat for providing the ILO with the opportunity to address this Council and I wish you a productive and fruitful meeting over the next three days and look forward to working together with the CARICOM Member States and the Secretariat to ensure that Decent work receives the attention, and more importantly, the action that it so rightly deserves.