



ILO NEWSLETTER

Extraordinary Summit of the African Union On Employment and Poverty Reduction

Placing Employment at the Heart of the fight against Poverty

Ouagadougou, Sept. 4, 2004 – Africa and its international partners, in particular ILO, the Geneva-based International Labour Office, will during the coming week come up with a Plan of Action and a follow-up mechanism stressing on employment and its essential role in the fight against poverty.

Meeting in Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso, the social partners (on Sept. 3-4), Ministers of the African Union's Executive Council (Sept. 5-6), and then Heads of State and Government of the Pan-African Organisation, will study ways and means of placing jobs creation at the heart of their countries' development strategies and invite a stronger commitment by donor institutions and countries to help Africa find its place in the train of globalisation.

Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré, host of the first-ever Extraordinary Summit on employment, stressed the importance of the Ouagadougou Conference when he addressed his African peers meeting last July in Addis Ababa within the framework of the African Union. He stressed that an analysis of the employment situation in the continent "reveals the precarious existence of certain African populations, for lack of sufficiently remunerated activities."

In a document presented in December 2003 to a meeting in Addis Ababa on "decent jobs" in Africa, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and its executive body, the International Labour Office headed by Juan Somavia of Chile, highlighted a set of dramatic figures concerning unemployment and poverty: nearly three billion people in the world, including 500 million in Africa, barely survive with less than \$2 per day. And around 320 million Africans live in extreme poverty with no more than \$1 per day.

Unemployment, which has stricken 180 million people in the world, is gaining ground, notably in Africa, where the majority of the population relies on agriculture and the informal sector in the cities. Young people and women are the most vulnerable groups. The jobless rate for youth in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated by ILO at an average of 21 percent. But in some countries of the region, 60 percent of the jobless are youth.

The VIH/AIDS epidemic is an aggravating factor. Most of those affected are workers in the 15 to 49 year age bracket, the most productive age group.

Juan Somavia in a statement on his arrival in Ouagadougou on Friday asserted that job creation is a sustainable remedy for poverty. The international community in 2000 agreed on the objective of halving world poverty by 2015 as part of the Millennium Development Goals. But UN Secretary General Kofi Annan now fears this target may not be attained.

The ILO Director General, who welcomed the participation in the Summit of the IMF's new Managing Director, Rodrigo de Rato, said decent jobs constitute an instrument of development that is often forgotten in the strategies worked out by rich and poor countries.

Somavia, who is in favour of a "different approach" to globalisation, recognised that this process "has opened up opportunities and holds enormous potential." However, he said, its "biggest failure... has been its inability to deliver decent jobs that people need and want." He stressed that "we need a different approach."

The central theme of the Social Partners Forum was precisely "Decent jobs in the service of the development of Africa." This forum brought together 80 representatives of the Pan-African Employers Confederation (PEC), the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATU), the African Regional Organisation (ICFTU-AFRO) and the Democratic Organisation of African Workers' Trade Union (DOAWTU) as well as observers from about a score of non governmental organisations (NGOs).

OATU Secretary General Hassan Sunmonu said that "The workers stress for African governments to break away from the neo Liberal policies of the past and promote pro-poor and employment-intensive development policies."

The employers also emphasise the importance of social dialogue. "This is an asset for Africa," Antonio Penalosa, Secretary General of the International Employers' Organisation, told the forum. He insisted on the double need to respect workers' social rights while at the same time developing an environment favourable to the creation of enterprises.

Participants issued an appeal for the institutionalisation of the Social Partners Forum which has the merit of bringing together employers and workers as well as their partners in order to contribute to reflection and action concerning the major problems facing the continent.

The African ministers, meeting in the Executive Council of the African Union, will be preparing the agenda of the Heads of State and Government. About 20 African leaders are expected to arrive in Ouagadougou next Thursday, including Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo, acting chairman of the UA, his South African and Senegalese opposite numbers Thabo Mbeki and Adoulaye Wade, as well as African Commission President Alpha Oumar Konaré.