



**Remarks of ILO Director General Juan Somavia
35th Session of the Arab Labour Conference
Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt
23 February 2008**

Minister of Manpower and Migration of Egypt, Excellency Aisha Abdel Hadi,
Minister of Labour and Social Affairs of Iraq, Excellency Al-Sheikh Radi,
Minister of Labour and Social Affairs of Syria, Excellency Dyala Haj Aref,
Director-General of the Arab Labour Organization, Excellency Ahmed Luqman,
Excellency Salem Al Muhairi, Executive Bureau, Gulf Cooperation Council,
Representative of the Arab League, Mr. Al-Tuwaijri,
Ministers and Government Officials and representatives of Workers and Employers,
Secretary-General, International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, Hassan Djemam,
Representative of the Secretary- General, General Union of Trade, Industry and Agriculture in
the Arab States, Mrs. Nahed Nomani,
Director-General of the International Organization of Migration, Brunson McKinley,
Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Council of West Asia, Bader al Dafa,
Members of the Governing Body of the ILO,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Director-General Luqman, dear friends, thank you for your invitation.

As you know, I am here as a friend. It is an honour to be with you at the ALO once again.

To our hosts, the Egyptian government, the Minister of Manpower and Migration, our social partners, thank you for your hospitality and warm welcome.

I am particularly delighted to be back in Egypt - a historic centre of the Arab world, uplifted by a cultural legacy that dates back thousands of years and that is renewed every day.

In fact, I want to congratulate Egypt on your newest treasure—the 2008 Africa Football Cup of Nations!

The Arab world is a crossroads. A crossroads of continents and cultures. A crossroads of ideas and exchange. It is a region that has enlightened humanity through the ages.

And it is a place that I have turned to again and again in my international life to tap into your vast reservoir of knowledge and experience. But also to profit from your perspectives, the way you see things, your view of the world of today.

Whenever I am with all of you, what comes through loud and clear is the profound sense of pride in the shared values of your own identities and the common commitment to promoting opportunity and economic and social justice for the women and men of the Arab region that you represent.

My good friend, Ahmed Luqman, in your new responsibilities, let me enthusiastically welcome you to the multilateral family of labour that you know so well.

As you commemorate the end of your first year in this position, I am excited to have this opportunity to deepen our understanding and cooperation with the Arab Labour Organization.

We have embarked on a new era of relations, an era of further concrete and practical action together, based on the Memorandum of Understanding we signed recently and developed through a detailed plan of joint activities for 2008-09 at the service of our tripartite constituents of governments, employers and workers.

I would also like to take this opportunity to extend a special welcome to Mr. Salem Al Muhairi, the new head of the Executive Bureau of the Gulf Cooperation Council Ministers of Labour. I am pleased that we are signing a framework agreement on activities for the next two years.

Dear friends,

We meet at a moment when the global alarm is sounding. This current model of globalization is not delivering enough for ordinary people. We are seeing disparities growing, discontent rising, and enemies of human security in every society fanning the flames of discord.

A major new study found that worldwide more than three out of five women and men believe the benefits of globalization have not been fairly shared.

We are working hard for our families, they say, but globalization is not working for us. Socially, we know about the fallout, challenges and tensions. And it's jobs that people care about.

That is what brings us here.

It can perhaps best be summed up in the powerful message of Director General Luqman's report to this meeting.

Unemployment is a "scourge which spares no country". It is a "threat to social peace, hampering the efforts made to alleviate poverty and destitution, nullifying any attempt at economic, political, or social reform."

As Mr. Luqman has so eloquently surmised, the employment challenge cuts across generations, nations, regions, institutions, all of the dividing lines of this world.

Thus, one of the biggest political questions of our time is: How are we going to create decent work for all through a fair globalization?

Our agenda cuts to the heart of the question. Decent work is an agenda for empowerment and social mobility. It begins with poverty elimination, but it doesn't stop there. It cannot stop there.

In that sense I have said the Millenium Development Goals are really ‘minimum development goals’. People are not aiming for mere survival, but for full lives that harness all of their talents and energies.

On this basis, we have discussed with the Director General of the ALO an initiative for working together on a major project to address the great challenge of reducing poverty through employment creation. This should contribute to further consolidating your common regional approaches and greater policy coherence among countries.

Here in this region, this is an urgent question. Projections indicate that the Arab region will need to create about 100 million jobs over the next 20 years.

You are experiencing the fastest labour force growth of any part of the world, making the challenge of creating decent and productive employment opportunities for young people especially critical.

From Concept to Concrete

In this context, let me congratulate all of you because in so many areas you have been tackling this challenge through concrete action.

And the task is enormous -- work with dignity. Fairness. Non-discrimination. Protection. And voice for all, based on investment for employment creation

We have been proud to accompany you in a spirit of respect for regional identities and specificities.

We have been at your service mobilizing know-how, facilitating dialogue, and providing technical advice. But we can and will do more to respond to your needs and demands to deepen respect for workers’ rights, to promote enterprise and entrepreneurship and to strengthen ministries and building the capacity of our social partners.

I see many efforts underway in many countries.

You are putting the emphasis on tripartism as a basis for solutions. You are working for more open and representative processes.

You are developing the principles and practice of social dialogue in a true revival of traditional customs of listening and consulting.

This has included progress in establishing trade unions, workers’ committees and tripartite institutions. And more and more, the fundamental issues of freedom of association and collective bargaining are being seen not just as ends in themselves, but also as means to harness growth, equity and harmony.

Throughout the region, you are revising your labour laws, beefing-up labour inspection and giving effect to fundamental principles and rights at work, particularly concerning the fight against discrimination at work, child labour and forced labour.

You are also promoting entrepreneurship, competitiveness and productivity and encouraging small enterprises to start up, grow and create jobs.

You are confronting the challenge of migration and finding balance between economic needs and protection of the rights of expatriate workers alongside those of your own.

You are developing comprehensive employment strategies and national action plans with a focus on inclusion—addressing the expectations of young people through education and skills, expanding job opportunities for women, investing in sustainable enterprises, and upgrading the informal economy.

And we are partnering with you as you implement new and improved social security legislation to protect vulnerable workers—and advancing innovative industry level commitments for better conditions at work for all.

In the midst of all this, you have had to deal with the complexities of socio-economic rehabilitation in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Somalia.

All of these needs are enormous. Have you solved all your problems? Of course not. But you are certainly trying to move forward.

Let me assure you from the ILO side we can and will do more to respond to your legitimate demands. This is the mandate that our Regional Director for Arab States, Nada Al-Nashif, is carrying out. Thank you for the support you are giving her.

Let me also say again I am with you for the Palestinian people as I affirmed during the special event on Palestine organized during the last International Labour Conference.

We will continue to report on the collective punishment and suffering of the Palestinian people. And we will continue to work with all of you on programmes of support that will make a real difference in the lives of Palestinian women and men.

It is precisely because we stand for solidarity and dignity that we stand with you and the Palestinian people in their struggle.

Mobilizing for an Arab Employment Forum

As we look ahead and seek to build on your record, I want to highlight a new practical initiative to deepen our cooperation and advance our common agenda in the coming years.

As a follow-up to the Asian Regional Meeting in Busan, we are beginning the process with you to convene an Arab Employment Forum on Growth, Employment and Decent Work later this year. A similar meeting was recently held in Beijing.

The objective is to allow for an in-depth exchange of policy experiences in the Arab region with the goal of framing a tripartite engagement to progressively implement national decent work strategies according to the realities and priorities of each of your countries.

Some of you are already doing this through Decent Work Country Programmes. We count on Arab knowledge and expertise as this process unfolds and will rely on your own internal dialogue for guidance in our themes.

Dear friends, as we survey the varied challenges facing this very diverse region, one common element for success comes through. Dialogue.

Dialogue to formulate policies. Dialogue to resolve conflicts. Dialogue to consolidate common interests. Dialogue to achieve decent work and a fair globalization.

Let me reaffirm my personal commitment to listen and to work together in the richness of your diversity and in the variety of opportunities you need to create in your societies. It is crucial to alleviating poverty, diminishing security risks, sharing prosperity and reducing inequality.

To be sure, your aspiration to deliver decent work for your people faces many challenges. But I feel in all of you a determination to keep aiming higher, working harder, reaching farther.

I can assure you: If that is your resolve, that will be our mandate.

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