Mister Chairman, Minister for Trade, Industry and President’s Special Initiatives of Ghana
Madame Commissioner for Trade and Industry of the African Union
Mister Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa Ministers and Excellencies,
Mister Director-General of UNIDO
Distinguished representatives of donor agencies
Distinguished representatives of the youth groups of the MRU countries and Cote d’Ivoire
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I begin by congratulating you all, and in particular the organizers (UNIDO, the African Union, the YEN Secretariat and UNOWA) for convening this important meeting. Thank you for bringing us together to explore the practical measures needed to tackle the challenge of productive and decent work for youth in West Africa, and in particular in the countries of the Mano River Union.

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We at the ILO see this Meeting as a direct follow-up to the 2006 ECOSOC Ministerial Declaration on “Promoting Full Employment and Decent Work for All” which sets out how to coordinate action across the multilateral system on decent work. We also consider it as a practical step towards the implementation of the UN system efforts to deliver “as one”. We believe that the exchange and outcome of this Meeting could provide useful inputs for expanded inter-agency work on youth
employment, in particular for the role and contribution of the UN specialized agencies and the donor community in the framework of the new Resident Coordinator system.

In the context of Africa, this meeting comes also as a contribution to the follow-up to the Extraordinary African Union Summit of Heads of State and Government on Employment and Poverty Alleviation, which took place in Ouagadougou in September 2004.

As recognized by the African Union Labour and Social Affairs Commission “Ouagadougou has brought back employment to the table of decision makers…It is clear that “labour” is no longer the preoccupation of only labour ministers…This can be illustrated from the various national initiatives in which pro-poor growth and employment creation policies have been mainstreamed into the development process”.

Since the Summit, the ILO – through its Regional Office and working closely with its tripartite constituents – governments, employers and workers – has intensified its cooperation with the African Union Commission to help Member States implement the Declaration and Plan of Action adopted at the Summit. As a result of the joint ILO-Africa Union Commission efforts, in May 2006 the African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Development reaffirmed “the centrality of employment for poverty reduction and employment”.

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The ILO’s work on productive and decent work for youth in Africa fits within this framework. Youth employment is mainstreamed in the Ouagadougou Plan of Action and features prominently in the Africa Youth Charter adopted by African Heads of State and Governments at the African Union Summit in Banjul in July 2006. The ILO mechanism for delivery on this commitment is the Decent Work Country Programmes functioning as an integral part of the unified and strengthened United Nations development framework.
How can we tackle this challenge? Let me share with you some lessons we have learned about good practices on employment and decent work policies in general and for young persons in particular.

In terms of employment policy-making good practice is to consider employment and decent work policies under an integrated approach. This means considering both, the demand side and the supply side, the macro policies as well as the micro level interventions and incentives, and the quantitative and qualitative dimensions. In practice this integrated approach means that all key ministries and agencies have to be involved. Not just Labour Ministries, that have of course a critical role to play, also Finance, Planning, Trade and Industry and Development Ministries have to explicitly recognize that their policies have important employment and decent work impacts.

A good practice is also to place employment and decent work in the main frameworks driving policy in the country, whether a development strategy, a poverty reduction strategy, or a UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). Including employment and Decent Work directly as objectives in these frameworks guarantees that they receive continued attention, and most important, resource allocations, by local economic and social authorities and by international institutions and donors.

In terms of policy interventions five key areas can be distinguished in the context of this integrated approach.

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Let me begin with interventions in an area which is central to the responsibilities of the Ministers of Trade and Industry gathered around this table. I share your concerns as I was myself a Minister of Trade in my own country – Costa Rica. This is the growth and productive transformation agenda to expand the demand for labour. Growth is an important engine for job creation, which means that aiming at high and sustained growth should be an important objective of employment and decent work strategies. But the pattern and quality of the growth process also matters. Effective employment policies should promote job-rich growth strategies and this leads necessarily to adopt a sectoral or structural approach. This does not mean picking
winners in the old sense of industrial policy, but it does mean having clarity about employment impacts of policies, and having policies that balance interventions and incentives across relevant sectors, (e.g. labour intensive vs capital intensive, formal vs informal, low productivity vs high productivity), so that there is a vision about the employment quality of growth in a context of accelerating technological change and productivity.

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Entrepreneurship and sustainable enterprise development is the second key area for policy interventions. It is important to recognize that in a market economy, the main challenge for governments is to create an enabling environment so that the private sector can develop its full potential and play a vital role in generating new investment and employment.

In countries where the informal economy is dominant, building the entrepreneurial culture is essential. Often the first step is to change cultural attitudes in schools towards entrepreneurship by promoting it as a career choice. Access to credit is of course critical and yet many existing programmes that aim to provide capital and micro-credit for business development do not target young people. What is needed is a comprehensive set of measures including business education and training, an enabling regulatory framework and business services, including credit, to make it easier for young people with potential to start and run a business.

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This leads me to the third key area. We need to ensure that young people have the skills and competencies that are needed and useful in the labour market. By now we know that education makes a young person trainable, training makes them employable and attitude and continuous learning keeps them employed. Skills development and young people’s employability can be fostered in many ways, including by working closely with the private sector to provide skills that are in demand in the marketplace, promoting apprenticeships and internships in private companies, developing training not only on technical skills but also in so-called life skills or core work skills, etc.
The fourth critical area is labour market policies and institutions. Wages and labour legislation are key elements of government policies aimed at ensuring efficiency and equity in the labour market. The key question is how to get the best forms of protection for our young people, without inhibiting firms from investing in new hires.

Institutions such as Public Employment Services and National Youth Employment Agencies set up in several West African countries perform an important function in terms of matching the supply of young labour to demand, providing career guidance and counselling to young job seekers and offering targeted packages of services that meet young people’s needs.

In all of this, good practice is also to avoid fragmented and isolated interventions and adopt integrated approaches. For instance, some of the most successful Youth Employment programmes and projects around the world combine a package that provides training in specific vocational or technical skills, such as information technology, with life and job-seeking skills, and job placement services in enterprises. This is the case of Entra 21 in Latin America, promoted by the Inter-American Development Bank and the International Youth Foundation. Some youth employment programmes combine this with wage subsidies or fiscal incentives to companies that hire youth in order to help first-time jobseekers to enter the labour market. The new government of Mexico is about to launch a major initiative in this direction.

My fifth and final point is on good governance, coalitions for change and social dialogue.

This brief overview of critical policy intervention areas, suggests that implementing full employment and decent work policies requires a highly complex collective effort involving many actors at the national and local levels. The right and coherent mix of policies, priorities and sequencing can only be determined at the national and local levels based on social dialogue and deep understanding of local conditions. And this is the challenge national governments and international cooperation agencies face: to
design and implement interventions which are appropriate for the specific conditions of each country.

This complex collective effort is difficult to trigger and sustain in contexts characterized by weak public institutions, weak employer’s and worker’s organizations, or weak civil societies, or conflicting relations between these major players, as is the case in some countries of West Africa. In countries recently emerging from conflicts, the social fabric in communities has been severely affected and there is a need to rebuild - especially among young people – the trust and confidence that are necessary to achieve good results. A major challenge is therefore to strengthen representative organizations and processes to mobilize social actors and find agreeable solutions to youth employment problems. This is why the first order of business to promote youth employment is strengthening public institutions, employers and workers’ organizations and other civil society institutions, especially youth organizations, around a common vision, and set of priorities.

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Interventions in these five policy areas are relevant also in the Mano River Union countries and Cote d’Ivoire. However, as the Secretary General of the Mano River Union, Mr. Diallo, pointed out yesterday these countries are not in “regular” situations. They are coming out of conflict and providing young people with decent jobs in the short term is critical in the reconstruction and recovery process. Business as usual won’t work.

The work of the ILO in countries like Mozambique and Rwanda provides useful lessons that can be applied in this sub-region. But more recently the experience in Liberia, one of the Mano River Union countries, is particularly relevant as the different UN agencies have come together to deliver as one. In so doing, the UN is responding to national priorities identified by the Government and people of Liberia.

In this context, the ILO has been working to increase employment opportunities, with an emphasis on decent work, particularly for youth and women. To translate this approach into action, in July 2006 the Government launched the Liberia Emergency Employment Programme. Some of the expected results in the short term include
engaging more than 17,000 young people in quick employment projects, a national public works programme and the revival of agriculture production to facilitate the re-integration of 100,000 ex-combatants. In the longer term, the Liberia Employment Action Plan will address some of the structural constraints with a view to fostering an enabling environment for job creation by focusing on areas such as skills training, SME development and informal economy upgrading, strengthening of labour market information and institutions, and promoting social dialogue.

Regardless of how successful interventions can be at the country level, the commonality of the youth employment problems that Mano River Union Countries and Cote d’Ivoire face call for an integrated sub-regional approach. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Director General of UNIDO who yesterday very effectively facilitated a meeting which for the first time in the UN Reform Process brought together UN Resident Coordinators of the Mano River Union and Cote d’Ivoire, several UN and other international agencies as part of the process towards common action at the sub-regional level.

It is encouraging to see that in the outcome document of yesterday’s meeting entitled “Delivering as one on productive employment and decent jobs for youth: A regional initiative for the Mano River Union and Cote d’Ivoire” agreement was reached on modalities to work together, scale up interventions, address youth employment challenges and urgently strengthen the MRU Secretariat.

Mr. Chairman, Madame Commissioner, Mr. Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa, distinguished Ministers,

The ILO is committed to support you in this process and looks forward to the outcome of this High-Level Consultative Meeting as an important step towards a multi-stakeholder approach to promote productive and decent work for young people in the Mano River Union countries and Core d’Ivoire.

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I thank you for your attention.