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Labour
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Promoting jobs,
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[The Director-General](#)

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Opening Address of the Director-General to the Sixth European Regional Meeting (Geneva, 12 December 2000)

Dear Friends, Ministers of Labour, Government, Employer and Worker Delegates:
Welcome to the Sixth European Regional Meeting.

First of all, I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Government of Switzerland - the ILO's host for so many years and the host of this important Meeting.

We are honoured by the presence of Mr. Couchepin, Federal Counsellor, an old and dear friend of the house who has been with us on many occasions. Having our Regional Meeting here in Geneva seems to me fitting in a year in which Geneva has hosted the Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations or Copenhagen +5 and the Geneva 2000 Forum organized by the Swiss Government. I cannot overemphasize how much the ILO, as part of the UN family, values Switzerland's constant support to the multilateral system. I must say that, in the UN, we are all looking forward to the moment when Switzerland becomes a full member of the organization and we salute the strong commitment of the Government to that end.

Today, we are also honoured to have with us Lord Russell Johnston, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His presence symbolizes the strengthening links between the ILO and the institutions of the European Union as we work together to advance shared social and labour objectives. Parliaments and parliamentarians in their individual political capacity, are key partners in advocating ILO values and in advancing their realization.

It is also my pleasure to be able to welcome the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as the most recent member State of the ILO and to welcome its tripartite delegation to this event.

We are happy that Mr. Elmiger is chairing this meeting for he has discharged this function most impressively on past occasions.

Let me say from the outset that I attach great importance to the regional dimension of our work. And in this forum you can give regional specificity to our [Decent Work](#) Agenda.

This is a considerable challenge for yours is a vast and heterogeneous region stretching from Iceland to the States of Central Asia. It

comprises 50 of our 175 member States with vastly different levels of development, needs and priorities. Some have enjoyed a half century of peace and stability. Others are just emerging from searing conflict.

But the region as a whole is united in change. A rigid dichotomy between a relatively stable and unchanging West and an East in perpetual turmoil is growing less and less tenable. Indeed, many States are making a transition to democracy and a market economy. But globalization and the information revolution define a common reference point. Also, work and workplaces are changing for those engaged in global or local competition, as well as for others, such as public administrations, which are not necessarily exposed to competition.

The ILO's roots are in Europe - 14 out of 42 of our founding Members were European States. The social and labour conditions and war in Europe were the impetus for the establishment of the Organization. Perhaps it is in Europe more than anywhere else that ILO goals and principles have been most widely translated into law, policy and reality - whether in terms of fundamental principles and rights at work, employment, social protection or social dialogue.

In addressing the many challenges before us, the meeting will benefit greatly from the experience of those among you who have lived by what has come to be described as the European social model, guided by the idea of social solidarity in a market economy. This "European" consensus has been somewhat jolted in recent times - it has been cited as an obstacle to competitiveness, to the dynamism and flexibility needed in the new economy. So, can the social institutions painstakingly constructed in Europe through dialogue and negotiation withstand the present forces of change? Europe faces the challenge of maintaining and realizing long-held values while modernizing and transforming its social infrastructure. This problem is one of the biggest challenges for your societies.

Europe's achievements cannot be taken for granted. Recently, Business Week focused on the growth in Western Europe of what was described in the article as a "modern slave trade". We see the trafficking of people for clandestine work. Their plight reminds us that poverty in one region or parts of a region is a threat to prosperity elsewhere.

It is similarly disturbing to see the emergence of [child labour](#) problems in the region. Even more worrying is the possible presence of child labour in several of its worst forms. But it has been tremendously heartening to witness the global mobilization and, more particularly, the regional mobilization around the cause of child labour. I am very pleased to report that the rate of ratification of the ILO's child labour Conventions accelerated during the past year. To date, 42 European and Central Asian States have ratified the Minimum Age Convention out of a total of 102 ratifications. Fourteen of the 52 ratifications of the Convention on the worst forms of child labour were from this region. And several more from this region are expected in the next few months.

I must say that, in many ways, the future of social development in the global economy is being played out in Europe. And the world is watching because it is now becoming increasingly clear that values cannot be excluded from economic decision making; that social sustainability is not subordinate to, but an integral part of economic sustainability. People worldwide want to see Europe succeed in this effort. They want to be able to say that countries with well-developed social protection systems as in Europe are more successful in terms of economic performance, productivity, trade and other indicators than those where such systems are less well-developed.

I need not remind this audience that our Decent Work Agenda is firmly set within such efforts to maintain and expand a model of socioeconomic development that combines economic growth and social justice. These are the values that link us to Europe.

The question before this meeting is the following: "Does Europe need the ILO ?"

What role is there for our global organization in a region experiencing the most advanced processes of economic and social integration, with the institutions to match, and in many cases with working conditions and levels of protection seemingly beyond the reach of others?

Europe has always shown its commitment to the ILO - European member States make extra-budgetary contributions to the ILO's activities

to promote decent work around the world. I thank them for it. Their motives are born from the basic impulse of solidarity which has been expressed in many fields of our activity.

But there is recognition as well that no region in the global economy is unaffected by what happens in all of the others. Financial crisis, civil strife, natural calamity, political upheaval, environmental degradation anywhere can all impact - sometimes painfully - on the European destiny. Their consequences are such that they cannot be left in the hands only of those directly affected. They are global concerns.

So, in Europe we can identify the ILO as a vehicle for expressing Europe's commitment to the developing world; the ILO as a platform for Europe in the global policy-making agenda. So far so good. But if our ambitions ended there, then they would fall short of the true universality of the ILO's mandate.

By this, I mean that the ILO can be - should be - an actor in the social and labour challenges confronting European societies themselves.

The report on activities before you reflects a record of achievement in the ILO's cooperation with what we have come to call our membership in transition in the east and centre of the region. The tasks of our teams in Budapest and in Moscow and our network of national correspondents remain crucial.

Some nations, either emerging from conflict, or still grappling with the basics of social and economic transformation face enormous problems and must remain particular priorities for the ILO. Others are well advanced and have their eyes fixed firmly on the goal of EU accession. Here, I think, the ILO's role is relatively clear: To help them attain the social acquis of the European Union.

But, it also seems clear that the major policy concerns of those of you in this room representing the region's most advanced economies are precisely those that make up the ILO's Decent Work Agenda:

Employment: How to generate the jobs on which sustained prosperity depends and which are the surest routes out of poverty and exclusion? What have we learned? What new approaches are necessary to reach the goal of full employment which the European Union has set?

Social protection: How to sustain the values at the heart of the European social model, in conditions of demographic change and intense global competition?

Social dialogue: How to generate consensus solutions which are just and practical, through the active participation of the groups represented in the ILO?

Labour standards: Formulating and applying the norms of minimum conditions, protections and rights at work, including the fundamental rights and principles proclaimed in the ILO's 1998 Declaration? This is also unfinished business in Europe.

These are clear areas for cooperation.

We believe that neither affluence, nor the complexities of the national situations concerned, nor the undoubted technical capacities of member States dispenses the ILO of its responsibilities to make its contribution in Europe, in the enlarged Europe present here. But we must be up to it. We must have the necessary competence.

The ILO should act, with realism certainly, but with ambition too, and with determination. By sharpening its own capacities, by putting

itself in the key policy arenas and by offering its services where its European constituents find them most useful.

I have seen this happening already in our interaction with international organizations, and, most recently and specifically, in our role at last month's meeting of G8 labour ministers in Turin. This was a very interesting experience - the Minister of Labour of Italy invited the ILO to present a number of documents and to be part of the dialogue. Similar developments are taking place with ministers of labour of the European Union.

The ILO is intent on strengthening its already cooperative relations with the European Commission. My meetings with Commissioner Diamantopolou have confirmed our common interest in this. The need now is to turn these encouraging beginnings into operational results, including through our close cooperation with successive EU presidencies.

At the same time, I have taken the ILO to the European social partners - attending both the ETUC Congress last year, and then the meeting of IOE European affiliates this year.

We are also exploring innovative joint activities with member States. For example, with France along the lines of what we call the "French reflection" which has brought the ILO together with constituents in a new dialogue to address "the new insecurities" in a developed country. Those involved have found this useful, and I think that others would be interested in developing similar analytical approaches to work.

Since arriving at the ILO I have been struck by the under-exploited opportunities offered by our European branch offices. And I would invite you to examine with us how we could move ahead to realise their full potential. A bit of creativity here could take us a long way forward.

In these remarks I would like to say a few words on decent work in the information economy. In focusing on this in the Report I wanted to deal with an issue at the heart of the new economy - with all its potential and possibilities. I wanted to take a clear look at the prospects for job creation as well as possible job destruction; to address the digital divide within and between countries, to see what could be done to overcome the problems. There is no going back in terms of the new technologies - we must adapt. But we have to find ways of expanding their benefits. Your guidance on how we should move forward on this subject will be invaluable, given the diverse perspectives that you bring to this meeting.

To conclude, I urge you to give us your guidance on how the ILO can be most useful to your own realities within the framework of what the International Labour Conference and the Governing Body have agreed upon in terms of the strategic objectives and decent work. Indicate the kinds of issues that you want us to focus on; the research and policy work in which we should engage. Tell us about the kind of ILO presence you would like to see on the ground.

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