



THIRD ITEM ON THE AGENDA

**Report and conclusions of the Thirteenth
Asian Regional Meeting
(Bangkok, 28-31 August 2001)**

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Introduction

1. The Thirteenth Asian Regional Meeting of the ILO was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 28 to 31 August 2001.
2. The Meeting was attended by 194 delegates and advisers from 30 member States and territories. These included 108 Government representatives, 43 Employer representatives and 43 Worker representatives. Sixteen ministers or vice-ministers attended the Meeting. The Meeting was also attended by representatives of eight intergovernmental and six non-governmental international organizations.
3. The Meeting set up a Working Party to consider conclusions for submission to the plenary, and it appointed a Credentials Committee, in accordance with the Rules for Regional Meetings.
4. The Conference unanimously elected as its Chairperson Mr. Alavi Mowlana, Minister of Labour and Acting Minister of Muslim Affairs of Sri Lanka, and as its Vice-Chairpersons Mr. Farhat Hussain (Government delegate, Pakistan), Mr. Khalifa Khamiss Mattar (Employer, United Arab Emirates), and Mr. Sukesada Ito (Worker, Japan). Prior to the opening of the discussion in plenary, the Meeting heard addresses by the Secretary-General and by Ms. Ladawan Wongsriwong, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare speaking on behalf of H.E. Dej Boonlong, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour of Thailand. The Deputy Secretary-General replied to the plenary discussions at the close of the Meeting.
5. In his opening remarks the Chairperson, Mr. Mowlana, congratulated the Director General and the ILO for a most timely and incisive report on *Decent Work in Asia*, which brings out many facets of the complex ILO mandate in a manner relevant to the challenges and opportunities the region will face in the twenty-first century. He hoped that the report may facilitate a constructive debate and would lead to forward-looking conclusions to address the adverse effects of globalization.
6. The Secretary-General, Mr. Juan Somavia, in his inaugural address, expressed his strong conviction that Asia is central to the future direction and sustainability of the global economy. The Asia-Pacific region has tremendous dynamism, energy and resilience, even in the midst of social tensions and unresolved development problems. Therefore, Asia's potential ability to influence the course of globalization is enormous.
7. The challenge of creating decent work in Asia must be founded on the promotion and realization of shared values within the community of people and a community of nations. Decent work is a development strategy. It is a goal and not a standard. It does not offer a "one size fits all" solution. It is a personal goal for individuals and families, and a development goal for countries. Decent work is a package, an integrated policy agenda which includes rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue. It is a common commitment of all ILO constituents, inextricably linked to practical policy terms and the lives of the people.
8. The Secretary-General recalled his Report entitled *Reducing the Decent Work Deficit: A global challenge* to the International Labour Conference in June 2001, in which he had emphasized the need to reduce the decent work deficit, since all countries, even the most developed ones, must continuously pursue decent work as a goal to be reached. Decent work is a tool, he underlined, that must respond to specific country circumstances, and should be shaped by each country according to national needs. It also provides a further

platform for encompassing development objectives embraced by the Asian Development Bank and other multilateral partners in the region.

9. He further indicated that the way to move forward is to identify priorities for action, to address decent work deficits and to develop an integrated policy framework and practical programmes at the national level. The Meeting offered a good opportunity to map out the regional priorities and to give the International Labour Office guidance to support them.
10. The Secretary-General stressed that in the global economy it must be a basic principle that every person who works has rights at work. These rights are intrinsic even when the economic conditions are inconvenient, and valid in all countries at whatever stage of development. The promotion of rights needs to be linked to sustained and sustainable economic growth and rising productivity, and to an enabling environment for investment and enterprise. This is because without work there are no workers' rights.
11. He underscored the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis which not only exposed enormous social and economic risks linked to speculation and financial volatility, but also hurt the poorest and most vulnerable more immediately and deeply. It hit women harder than men. Clearly serious problems lie ahead in the global economy. Against this backdrop, he drew the attention of the Meeting to the loss of dynamism or even stagnation of the major economies that have traditionally been the engines of economic growth. Hence it is necessary to accelerate effort to realize decent work in Asia and reorient the governance of globalization so that it benefits the poor and excluded. Globalization with equity is the major commitment.
12. In this regard, the ILO has a unique understanding of the complexities of the production process, taking account of the policy-making function of governments, investment by employers, and the labour contributed by workers. In order to tap this potential, the ILO needs to forge a strong and cohesive partnership through enhancing social dialogue, and finding the will to respect the voice of "the other", and to find solutions that represent a genuine consensus based on shared interests. This is crucial in the face of looming uncertainties of the global economy. In conclusion, the Secretary-General expressed a strong belief in the strength of Asian society, in the capacity of its constituent members to understand, work and grow together.
13. Following Mr. Somavia, Ms. Ladawan Wongsriwong, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, welcomed the participants on behalf of the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, a committed founding member State of the ILO. She recalled the Asian financial crisis and its extraordinarily painful effects, especially on the most vulnerable people. She added that recovering lost ground has been hard work, and that moving forward has not been as fast or easy as had been anticipated, as growth rates have not been high enough.
14. She indicated that, in constantly facing major challenges, Thailand must look for new ways to improve people's livelihoods and security, and harmonize them with new models in the face of global competition, new technology and innovation. Sustainable growth and poverty alleviation, as spelled out in the decent work concept of the ILO, must be kept at the forefront of the national agenda in Thailand. She underscored the importance of ensuring that people have employment which is not exploitative and that working people and their families live in dignity. In Thailand, the family is right at the heart of the value system and of the society itself, and where they are able to meet their basic needs, strong families emerge to build a strong society.
15. She emphasized that competitiveness is the key to successful participation in a global economy. Education and training will play a vital role to provide young workers with skills and knowledge to compete in the environment of today. She said that in Thailand there is a

need to build on existing strengths by developing medium-sized enterprises, and without confining this development only to the big cities. The ILO has been supportive in these endeavours. For every country trying to come to grips with the global economy, it must deal with the most essential factor in growth. “That factor is people. People produce growth and people are the reason for that growth,” she concluded.

I. Discussion of the Report of the Director-General

16. The general discussion was preceded by a video presentation on *Decent Work in Asia: Balancing the Decent Work Deficit*, and a briefing on the Report of the Director-General by Mr. Ian Chambers, Director of the Bangkok ILO Area Office and Multidisciplinary Advisory Team. Mr. Chambers indicated a range of issues, related to the four strategic objectives on which the Report was based and on which delegates may wish to guide the Office in planning its programme in the forthcoming years, not least the matter of integrating the components of the programme into a national decent work agenda.
17. Mr. T. Suzuki, in his capacity as the Chairperson of the Employers’ group, pointed out that decent work is a relative concept, affected by differing conditions in each country. The ILO is attempting to identify shortfalls in the achievement of decent work, and encouraging constituents to achieve it through giving effect to the ILO’s strategic objectives. However, it needed to consider the question of implementation. Decent work depends on the creation of productive work, which must therefore have priority. Only healthy enterprises can contribute to a sustainable social agenda. Social protection is important, but has to be affordable. The ILO has given too much emphasis to a very institutionalized form of social dialogue. Dialogue is just as effective in other forms. Decent work should lead to better living and working conditions for individual workers, and better human relations at the workplace. The ILO’s priorities in this respect should be determined locally. Autonomy for employers and workers at the enterprise level should be protected.
18. Mr. Z. Rampak spoke as Chairperson of the Workers’ group. He identified a greater need to promote respect for labour standards and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Speaking first on workers’ rights, he noted that the ratification record of the fundamental Conventions of countries in the region is not impressive. Implementation, too, needs to be improved with ILO assistance. In particular, the right to organize is still restricted in a number of countries and in particular in export processing zones (EPZs). Much remains to be done to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, discrimination and also forced labour. Turning to employment, he insisted that macroeconomic policies and development planning should include sustainable employment strategies. Employment strategies should also ensure that education and training are available and sensitive to changing circumstances. It is important to bring non-formal work into the formal work arena. Migration issues need to be taken into account in policy formulation. On social protection, he pointed out that it is the duty of the State to provide social protection to its citizens. Conditions of work should be improved in all sectors and areas. With regard to social dialogue, this contributes to democratic governance, to building resilient labour market institutions and to long-term social and economic stability and peace. Much remains to be done in Asia to utilize fully the potential of social dialogue. Finally, Mr. Rampak felt that a thorough assessment should have been made of the implementation of the conclusions reached at the Twelfth Asian Regional Meeting. He urged the Office to implement fully the conclusions to be reached at this Meeting and to provide an assessment thereof at the next, Fourteenth, Asian Regional Meeting.

19. The discussion continued with contributions, both verbal and written, from 54 delegates representing member Governments, Employers and Workers. There was strongly evident consensus amongst them on a range of issues. Firstly, deep concern was expressed about the weak recovery from the 1997 crisis, with the prospect of stagnation or even the emergence of a new crisis, with attendant adverse social consequences. As noted by Ms. P. Santo Tomas (Government, Philippines), the economic downturn is already being felt by the more prosperous countries in the region and the impact must certainly be harder for the weaker economies. The experience of 1997 points to the urgent need for timely preventive action. This calls for urgent implementation of the components of the decent work concept in an integrated manner, taking proper account of the regional context.
20. The strongest agreement was on the need to focus on employment creation and promotion for generating growth with equity, and as the only sustainable solution to reducing poverty, which was still prevalent after the crisis. Of particular importance was the high rate of youth unemployment. A number of suggestions were made for employment generation, emphasizing a special role for small enterprises, which account for the bulk of employment in the region, fostering an enterprise-friendly environment and encouraging investment. Macroeconomic policy for employment generation was recognized as an essential tool. To this end, the ILO was encouraged to collaborate with the international financial institutions notably the Bretton Woods institutions and the Asian Development Bank, to prioritize action plans for employment in the macro policy agenda. A number of delegates emphasized in particular the crucial link between increasing productivity and competitiveness, given the impact of globalization in the region. It was pointed out that workers with multiple skills were the least affected by the crisis. A number of Worker representatives drew attention to the need for vastly improved training to increase productivity. Ms. C. Nohno (Government, Japan), related a poignant example from as long as 130 years ago when a poor Japanese community received a 100 bags of rice from their neighbours and chose, rather than to feed the households, to invest in the schooling of their children.
21. There was also widespread recognition of the problems of an expanding informal sector in many parts of the region, accounting for much of the employed labour force, especially in South Asia. Again the sector was seen to be subject to low investment, low productivity and competitiveness, leading to weak links with the formal sector and low incomes. A number of alleviating schemes were suggested for the informal sector, including microcredit, training, and expanding its marketing links. Mr. K. Ahmed (Worker, Pakistan), drew the attention of the Meeting to the complexities of the Asian continent, housing more than half of the world's population, with the largest number of the poor, and the scourge of child labour. He urged that special attention be focused on the economic and social upliftment of the rural poor, both through the political will of national governments, as well as by efforts of international organizations like the ILO in its future programme and activities within the framework of the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), and the Rural Workers' Organisations Convention, 1975 (No. 141).
22. The need to address the complex issues of rights in the region attracted a strong consensus. The Vice-Ministers for Labour from the Republic of Korea and Malaysia were emphatic, as were many Employer and Worker representatives, that not only should employment be generated but that there should be growing recognition and implementation of fundamental principles and rights at work. The issue of forced labour in Myanmar was a grim reminder of the considerable work to be done.
23. An especially significant aspect of the decent work deficit is evident in the conditions faced by women workers. Ms. Halimah (Worker, Singapore) highlighted the increasing and disproportionate share of women amongst the working poor in the region and their concentration in the informal sector. They, together with their children, thus become

extremely vulnerable to trafficking and the problems of child labour, bonded labour and even HIV/AIDS. These problems have been exacerbated by the 1997 financial crisis. Delegates emphasized the need for a strong voice for women and advocated mainstreaming this issue, with the development of a time-bound programme for gender.

24. There was widespread consensus amongst the constituents that social dialogue, as a basic value of ILO, must play a central role in the relationship between workers, employers and governments. Social dialogue played a very strong economic and socially stabilizing role for the economies beleaguered by the 1997 crisis. In the face of looming recession, there will be a need to help countries to reinforce their internal capacities for social dialogue to find solutions which reflect common interests and true compromise.
25. The IPEC programme was viewed by all constituents as an important plank of the ILO for children's rights, for their protection, and their development. The ultimate aim was the elimination of child labour, starting with its worst forms, in line with the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). The time-bound programme for elimination of child labour received attention from the delegates as a particularly efficient instrument of the programme, which could be usefully expanded.
26. A number of issues gave rise to noticeable diversity of opinion. Amongst these was the provision of increased levels of social protection. Mr. S. Jatiya (Government, India) pointed out the enormous challenge of raising social security coverage from its current poor level of around 9 per cent of the total labour force. On the other hand, a number of Employer representatives emphasized the need to give priority (over increased expenditure on social security) to the speedy creation and maintenance of jobs, recognizing the importance of quality work and arguing that without work there can be no decent work. The ILO must move from a document-oriented towards a more action-oriented approach. There was an undeniable sentiment that while nobody present would disagree with decent work, the many millions of the unemployed across the region desperately seek work of any kind on almost any terms. Decent work therefore presents a challenge which must be taken up by each country in its own way. Given the wide economic, social and cultural diversity across Asia, there can be no "one size fits all" approach to the achievement of decent work. Decent work must recognize and reflect that diversity.
27. Several Government and Workers' delegates drew attention to urgent issues of occupational safety and health, especially the need to reduce the rates of work fatalities. Rates of work injury are seen to be particularly high in small enterprises in the unregistered, informal sector and amongst working children. Mr. E. Chandraprasert (Government, Thailand), espoused as a model his Government's programme to improve safety and health in the workplace. Mr. M. Gammampila (Government, Sri Lanka) noted a further approach through the development of a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.
28. Further shades of opinion emerged in the discussion on globalization. For many delegates, the crisis of 1997 crystallized a "dark side" to globalization with attendant vulnerabilities to violent fluctuations in growth, employment and incomes. However, Mr. B. Noakes (Employer, Australia) noted that the counterpart to the dark side is a "bright side". He wished to see instead a stronger emphasis on the positive impact of globalization on the growth of employment and the reduction of poverty. He also said that if decent work was to be a goal developed by individual countries, difficulties would be created by attempts to identify universal criteria.
29. Migration was viewed from the points of view of both the sending countries and the receiving countries. Sending-country delegates and indeed many receiving-country delegates were concerned foremost about the rights of migrant workers to organize, their

extreme vulnerability to downturns in terms of job and income security, and the problems of undocumented migrants. The provision of appropriate social security coverage across national borders presents peculiar difficulties. Recipient country delegates from a number of Arab States wished to emphasize that migrant workers may well find themselves in a humane environment, easily able to repatriate their hard-earned incomes, but that there is a considerable need for better management of migrant labour flows by both sending and receiving countries.

30. A number of conflicts continue in the region. Political considerations aside, these undeniably have adverse consequences in the world of work. The most vulnerable groups include those exposed to exacerbated levels of unemployment, cross-border workers and children who may be involved in combat situations. Several delegates from the Arab States referred to the effects of the sanctions on Iraq which were reducing job opportunities, increasing unemployment and bringing to a halt development programmes and human resource development. The plight of Palestinian workers in the occupied territories and the impact of the current crisis on employment and poverty due to border closures was raised by several delegates. The Office was urged to continue the implementation of technical assistance programmes in the region.
31. The discussions were given a forward-looking dimension by a number of recommendations to the Office, including Government delegates from Australia, France and New Zealand. Specific suggestions included the need for the Asian Regional Meeting to formulate a clear plan of action to be implemented by the Office over the period to the next Asian Regional Meeting. Strong emphasis was placed on the need for observable progress to be measured against indicators and targets through decent work programmes which could be ensured by enhanced communication and responsiveness between the Office and the constituents.

II. Tripartite panel discussion on standards, rights at work, and social dialogue

32. Mr. T. Jamasevi (Government, Thailand) opened the discussion by pointing out that the decent work concept provided broad guidelines for policy formulation on labour standards and social dialogue. Furthermore, he was convinced of the importance of the fundamental principles and rights at work, which carry a strong impact on the success of social dialogue in the region.
33. The ILO supervisory mechanisms require transparency and objectivity. Issues such as the criteria for the selection of members of the supervisory bodies, the criteria and process for the selection of individual cases in the Committee on the Application of Standards of the International Labour Conference, and the interpretation of compliance with ratified Conventions should be addressed in the same spirit. Other delegates reiterated that the evaluation of the application of standards should observe fairness, and take into account a broad range of issues, without being confined to the fundamental Conventions.
34. The second panellist, Mr. B. Noakes (Employer, Australia) stressed that standards should be relevant to workplace needs, flexible to accommodate the diversity of national characteristics, capable of being ratified by a large majority of member States, and in a form which can be fully and properly implemented. He indicated that employers are committed to, and supportive of, the Declaration since it meets these criteria. Turning to social dialogue, he mentioned that this can only be meaningful if it is initiated and conducted between employers and employees at the workplace level. This will provide a foundation for its success in representative forms and at the regional, sectoral, national and international levels.

35. The third panellist, Mr. K. Ahmed (Worker, Pakistan) pointed out that with increasing globalization and liberalization, there is an urgent need to put in place standards to ensure social justice and equity. He expressed concern at the poor record of ratification of Conventions, and the lack of implementation of standards in the region, because rights at work represent an important element in social development. He urged ratification and implementation of the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155). He drew attention to implementation difficulties in various areas, including child labour, forced labour, discrimination against women and migrant workers, and in EPZs. He stated that social dialogue cannot be achieved without representative trade union organizations able to work in conformity with the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98). Good governance, transparency, and sharing of information are necessary prerequisites for effective social dialogue at national, subregional and regional level. He urged that social dialogue can only be meaningful if it is participated in by top representatives of the government and social partners. Social dialogue must encompass all critical social and economic issues. The ILO must strengthen the institutional framework for social dialogue with more resources at all levels.
36. Many speakers pointed out that although the ratification of international labour standards is important, more emphasis should be placed on their implementation and application. It is necessary for member States to undertake adequate preparation prior to ratification of Conventions, with an emphasis on the methods by which they would implement their Conventions. This would reduce shortcomings and pitfalls in compliance. The role of labour inspection and labour administration in the region needs to be enhanced and strengthened, to facilitate and support better implementation of standards.
37. The ongoing reform of standard setting was welcomed by some delegates. They noted that considerable progress has been made in this process, and a degree of understanding and consensus has been reached among the tripartite constituents.
38. Some delegates referred to the dilemma of balancing the priorities of developing countries to alleviate poverty and generate employment while recognizing the universality and immutability of fundamental principles and rights at work. This dilemma is most pressing in the informal sector, which comprise the bulk of the workforce in a number of Asian member States.
39. Many speakers observed that social dialogue was becoming increasingly important and that the institutions of social dialogue were pivotal for enhancing the quality of decisions, building trust, and securing consensus in relation to policy reform. To ensure the effectiveness of social dialogue, governments must play a facilitative and supportive role. Ratification of the Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (No. 144) can play an instrumental role in this process. Reference was also made to informal mechanisms of social dialogue, which could prove very effective in reducing the backlog of cases pending before the labour courts in Punjab, India, as mentioned by Mr. I.P. Anand (Employer, India).
40. Recognizing the importance of freedom of association and collective bargaining as the fundamental foundations for constructive social dialogue, some Governments and Workers' delegates urged member States to ratify and fully implement Conventions Nos. 87 and 98. The delegates acknowledged that social dialogue has been instrumental in minimizing the social costs during the Asian financial crisis. In the light of looming global economic downturn, the delegates therefore urged the ILO to provide timely technical assistance to member States in strengthening the capacity of social partners to engage in constructive dialogue and in improving social dialogue mechanisms at all levels.

III. Tripartite panel discussion on employment and social protection

41. The panel discussion opened with a presentation by Mr. M. Li (Government, China) on recent employment policies in China. He estimated that of a labour force of 711 million, the urban unemployed number 6 million, another 6.6 million had been laid off in the urban areas through restructuring of state-owned enterprises, while rural surplus labour is estimated to amount to around 150 million. To address this overwhelming problem of unemployment, an employment policy has been built on several planks. These include a macro plan to ensure employment growth in economic development, attracting foreign direct investment, incentives for small and medium-sized enterprise development and a community-based jobs training programme, employment services and social protection for the most vulnerable.
42. The second panellist, Mr. V.T. Nathan (Employer, Malaysia), expanded on the theme of the dependence of employment and social protection on enterprise development. He argued that employment growth and enterprise growth were both dependent on increasing enterprise efficiency as measured by total factor productivity. Moreover, the endeavour should be to increase this total factor productivity based on input productivity rather than input growth. Human resource development is perhaps the single most important factor in raising productivity.
43. The third panellist, Mr. B. Mansfield (Worker, Australia), listed some priorities amongst the employment concerns of the Workers' group. The declared position of the group was that employment should be available for all those who seek it. The provision of such employment depends critically on growth; the gains from growth should be shared between labour and capital based on dialogue between them. Macro policy was seen as an important enabling condition for sustainable economic growth. Coordination between the ILO and international financial institutions must be seen as essential to prioritize employment in the macro policy agenda.
44. Many speakers expressed concern about the high and even rising levels of poverty in the region, and a strong consensus emerged that employment represents the only sustainable route out of poverty. Mr. T. Suzuki, the Chairperson of the Employers' group, wished to dispel the misconception that unemployment is typically imported as a result of globalization. On the contrary, he emphasized the role of domestic demand as the predominant base for employment in the region. Many Government delegates endorsed the panellists' view that employment generation must be linked to productivity increases, which themselves required investment; policy incentives may be required to attract capital. Several delegates stressed the importance of education and training on increasing productivity.
45. A number of Workers' delegates expressed concern that while to a large degree the recovery in employment, for example in the Republic of Korea, has focused on non-standard forms such as daily and casual work, subcontract and home-based work; this is highly insecure, and difficult to protect through formal social security schemes.
46. Regarding social security, the first panellist Mr. Li noted the importance of developing effective "social safety nets". He emphasized the particular needs of women and disabled workers. The training needs of disabled workers were equally emphasized by other speakers, including the Government delegate from Bahrain.
47. Mr. Nathan expanded on the theme of social protection. He stressed the need to ensure that employers are not asked to take over from government a financial burden which could damage competitiveness.

48. The third panellist, Mr. Mansfield, reiterated the view of the Workers' group that a higher level of priority should be accorded to social security. Within that context, it is essential that social security systems must be comprehensive and directed to all those in need, and moreover that schemes should be publicly funded. It was felt amongst the Worker representatives in general that for Asian countries, in contrast to, say, those of Europe, schemes based on public funding will potentially be more successful than those based mainly on contributions from employment income. The ILO should endeavour to make available adequate resources to address these issues, but since those resources are inevitably limited, they should be concentrated on the substantive reform of systems, rather than piecemeal programmes devoted to relatively small, and perhaps privileged, groups.
49. Several contributors to the ensuing discussion noted that there remains a role for the traditional means of social protection through extended family and kinship relationships. However, at the national level, the government in each country is and will necessarily remain the guarantor of the country's social security system. The discussion of social security at the 89th Session of the International Labour Conference in 2001 demonstrated the increasing importance of this subject for the ILO. A particular emphasis stands to be placed on matters of governance, involving together all of the social partners and not least local administrations and community groups.
50. The 1997 Asian financial crisis demonstrated that countries which had built up appropriate systems of social protection in advance, in particular protecting those who lost their jobs in such circumstances, gained a major advantage in their subsequent recovery. However, few schemes in the region make any provision for unemployment benefits at present. An awareness of these issues, expressed in many countries through proposals to develop "social safety nets", is growing in the region.
51. A number of countries have taken steps to review their social protection systems in the light of current needs and realities. These include Pakistan, where a task force has been established and will report shortly, and Sri Lanka where studies and consultations have been carried out into the possibility of developing a national pension scheme alongside or in partial replacement of the existing provident fund system. In each case, however, the implications for enterprise competitiveness and job creation of the costs of any extension of social protection must be clearly recognized. Mr. Suzuki pointed out that, in particular, domestic demand and production is crucially important to maintaining viable enterprises. Ultimately, as noted by Mr. V. Vaish (Government, India), access to a job may be seen as the most important means of social security, in the broadest sense, for any able-bodied individual.
52. Several delegates remarked, however, on the difficulties of making suitable social security provisions for the ever-increasing numbers of workers – over 90 per cent of the workforce in many Asian countries – working in the informal or unorganized sectors, or whose work is increasingly carried out on a casual basis. The Worker representative from Thailand, winding up the discussion, suggested that the ILO should consider the possibility of developing new standards in this area.
53. On occupational safety and health, the first panellist, Mr. Li, emphasized that employment policies should include adequate measures of occupational safety and health. The second panellist, Mr. Nathan, remarked on the fact that employers had continued to ensure compliance with the relevant laws, even at the height of the 1997 crisis, and had played a full role in workplace safety committees. Finally, Mr. Mansfield commented that there was much work to do in many countries to improve occupational safety and health standards.
54. In the subsequent discussion, several delegates pointed out that there are numerous work-related health and safety problems prevailing in the region. Workers engaged in hazardous

jobs, or vulnerable groups of workers such as women suffer most. The need to formulate and implement safety and health measures workable in the local context were emphasized in order to make positive changes. The different cultural and socio-economic climates of individual countries require due attention if occupational safety and health programmes are to be successful.

55. The roles of government in improving occupational safety and health standards and enforcing relevant legislation were stressed. For example, Thailand had enacted the Labour Protection Law in 1998; this covers various issues of occupational safety and health. The ILO was requested to provide assistance to governments in establishing feasible measures to enforce legislation.
56. Employers are encouraged to support occupational safety and health programmes because of the potential for enhanced productivity. Mr. Nathan noted that employers have a vested interest in safety and health in their establishments if they are to enjoy the benefit of improved productivity and profitability. Safety and health activities such as the zero accident programmes in Malaysia, or safety and health committees, contributed to such success. Workable models and best practices formulated in the region would provide clear ideas for employers to improve safety and health. The ILO was asked to provide technical assistance in this regard.

IV. Discussion on activities of the ILO in Asia, 1997-2000

57. In his statement, Mr. I.P. Anand (Employer, India), speaking on behalf of the Employers' group, observed the importance of qualitative assessment of ILO activities, and stressed that in the future there will be a need for the ILO to develop integrated socio-economic policies, reflecting a shared national vision that goes beyond a political agenda. While certain parts of Asia were affected by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the whole of Asia now faces an economic downturn. Therefore, it is important for member States not only to counter the negative impact of the crisis, but also to design a preventive self-reliance strategy, as proposed by the Director-General.
58. He emphasized that poverty eradication and employment generation are at the heart of the ILO mandate and that this needed to be reflected in the quality of the debate and the conclusions, pointing the way to decisive and speedy action. In view of the pervasive unemployment, underemployment and poverty in the region, the way forward for the future is through employment creation, a lifelong skills and knowledge development culture, and creation of competitive and sound enterprises. The appropriate means for addressing economic problems and finding solutions jointly lies in social dialogue. This has been demonstrated positively by countries which were most successful in addressing the earlier financial crisis. Therefore, the ILO must strengthen the capacities of the employers and other social partners, which will put effective social dialogue institutions and facilitate employment generation at the forefront of the ILO's future programmes.
59. Mr. Rampak (Worker, Malaysia), speaking on behalf of the Workers' group, reaffirmed the suggestion made by the Employers that there should be a qualitative impact analysis of ILO activities in the region to measure progress towards attainment of the objectives of the decent work agenda. He proposed the setting up of a Working Party to assess the implementation of the conclusions emanating from Regional Meetings in Asia. Furthermore, he proposed that in order to meet the challenges posed by globalization in regard to social justice and equity, more effort should be extended in assisting countries. In this regard, he urged the ILO to speed up the process of filling vacancies in multi-disciplinary teams and project personnel at country levels.

60. He also encouraged governments to engage promptly in the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Full compliance with the principles enshrined by the Declaration would further alleviate the erosion of workers' rights posed by trade agreements such as the Asian Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), and help prevent the violations of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining in EPZs.
61. A majority of the speakers underscored that, in the years to come, employment generation must be placed at the forefront of ILO technical cooperation, in view of the pervasive unemployment and poverty, accentuated by the informalization of the economies in the region. They urged the ILO to intensify assistance, as part of an integrated policy package, in human resource development, occupational safety and health, social protection, labour market information, enterprise development and cooperatives, strengthening social dialogue mechanisms and the capacities of the social partners.
62. Some delegates noted that the management of migration flows, both documented and undocumented, and the adoption of credible migration policies was a major challenge in the region. Although migration could have positive aspects, more systematic and organized measures should be adopted in collaboration between the sending and receiving countries. It was recommended that member States should be encouraged to ratify the Migration for Employment Convention, 1949 (No. 97), and the Migrant Workers Convention, 1975 (No. 143).
63. Several speakers pointed out that a time-bound programme on gender equality should be seriously considered for implementation in the near future. This proposal was inspired by the example of the time-bound programme to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, launched under IPEC.
64. It was suggested by a number of delegates, including India, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore, that for a more effective delivery of ILO technical cooperation activities, a clear identification of countries' specific needs must be accompanied by a recognition of the ILO's capacity to address these needs. This can be achieved through clear formulation of indicators and targets, in the context of the ILO's four strategic objectives, leading crucially towards an integrated policy agenda
65. Interactive dialogue should form an important component of Regional Meetings, which in turn should benefit from the feedback obtained from informal meetings at subregional level. Region-based research on existing and emerging issues, documentation of best practices, dissemination of qualitative assessments, and increased budget allocations will further contribute to more effective and coherent ILO assistance.
66. In response to the debate, Mr. I.P. Anand, speaking for the Employers' group, stated that the discussion on future ILO activities had not generated adequate attention to the requisite priorities in programmes the ILO should undertake to promote diversified employment generation towards poverty eradication. This is particularly necessary in the context of persisting poverty and the deteriorating economic situation. He hoped that an appropriate specific message in this regard will go to the Governing Body.

V. Consideration and adoption of the report of the Credentials Committee

67. The Meeting took note of and adopted the report of the Credentials Committee.

VI. Adoption of the conclusions and report of the Meeting

68. Mr. Suzuki, Chairperson of the Employers' group said that in the light of the protracted discussions by the Working Party on Conclusions, the Employers' group was satisfied that the draft conclusions, comprising 21 paragraphs which he reviewed in sequence, could be adopted with the proviso that the Meeting delete the sentence: "The formation of a Confederation of Asia-Pacific Employers (CAPE) is welcomed as a counterpart to ICFTU-APRO".
69. Mr. Rampak, Chairperson of the Workers' group, also commended the work of the tripartite Working Party on Conclusions, and stated that the Workers' group, although preferring to see the adoption of the draft in its entirety, would agree to the modification proposed by the Employers' group, and adopt the conclusions in that form.
70. The Labour Minister of Iraq, supported by the Government delegate of Jordan, proposed an amendment to the conclusions; this was not supported by the Employers' and the Workers' groups, who confirmed that the conclusions should be adopted as agreed, noting the Minister's reservation.
71. The conclusions were then adopted by the Meeting, subject to the agreed modification, the reservation entered by the Government delegate of Iraq and the approval of the Governing Body.
72. Several delegates submitted amendments which were incorporated in the final version of the report. The report was then adopted, subject to the approval of the Governing Body.

Closing of the Meeting

73. The Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Nodera, presented the response of the Director-General to the discussions in the Meeting. He noted that the discussion has embraced all aspects of decent work, with a view to putting these into practice effectively in the region. He picked out a number of comments which had framed the discussions in the Meeting which will guide the decent work agenda in the region within an integrated policy framework: that there can be no decent work without work; that unemployment is the greatest exploiter of labour; that employment is the best antidote to poverty; that there can be no decent work without equality of rights and opportunities between women and men; that social protection must accompany employment and that social dialogue plays the fundamental role in times of crisis. Finally he looked forward to increased consultations with the constituents across the region, for guidance in the implementation of the decent work agenda at the national level.
74. The Chairperson, the Vice Chairpersons, the Chairpersons of the Employers' group and the Workers' group and the Regional Director all thanked the delegates for their contributions to the Meeting.
75. *The Governing Body may wish to request the Director-General:*
 - (a) *to draw the attention of the governments of member States of the Asia-Pacific region and, through them, that of their national employers' and workers' organizations, to the conclusions adopted by the Meeting;*
 - (b) *to bear the conclusions in mind in executing ongoing programmes and in preparing future programme and budget proposals;*

(c) to transmit the text of the conclusions:

- (i) to the governments of all member States, and through them, to national employers' and workers' organizations;*
- (ii) to the international organizations concerned, including the non-governmental international organizations having consultative status.*

Geneva, 26 September 2001.

Points for decision: Paragraph 75.

Appendix

Conclusions

1. The delegates at the Thirteenth Asian Regional Meeting of the ILO endorse the general purport of the Report of the Director-General, *Decent Work in Asia*.
2. The delegates urge all member States in the region to define, through a tripartite process, a national plan of action for decent work, that integrates fundamental rights at work, greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent work, social protection, including occupational safety and health standards, for the greatest possible number of workers, as well as increased social dialogue.
3. The delegates call attention to the fact that globalization can have positive as well as negative impacts. In light of the current global economic downturn, which is already causing lower economic growth in many countries of the region, the delegates request the Director-General, as a matter of urgency, to prepare, in consultation with the tripartite constituents of the region, guidelines and proposed programmes aimed at preventing, or at least significantly attenuating, the negative impacts of the current economic slowdown, as well as programmes aimed to assist member States to participate successfully in the global economy to achieve sustainable economic growth.
4. The delegates recall that respect for international labour standards is fundamentally important for reduction of the decent work deficit in their countries. The ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work will provide a positive framework within which to fashion more adequate responses to social problems and structural changes which may result from economic fluctuation and globalization. The delegates call on all member States to bring their legislation into conformity with the principles of the fundamental Conventions and to take steps to ratify these Conventions, if they have not done so, and to apply them fully. The delegates note the disparity between ratification and implementation of fundamental Conventions and urge that measures be taken to address this issue.
5. The delegates welcome the ongoing review of standards policy. In order to facilitate the process it would be useful to follow a more systematic approach focusing on the revisions of existing standards, as well as the development of relevant new standards. Delegates also call on the Office to provide assistance to constituents both in preparing for ratification and in applying ratified standards.
6. The delegates take note of the significant expansion of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) in the region and of the remarkable results achieved in some countries. They express the hope that IPEC will extend its activities to appropriate countries in the region in the course of the next biennium. While urging IPEC to deploy every possible effort to eliminate child labour, in particular in its worst forms, the delegates encourage it to devote particular attention to combating trafficking of children and to bonded labour.
7. The delegates wish to stress the importance of employment generation as the central element in the decent work agenda and as the principal means to reduce poverty. They call on the Director-General to give priority to this issue in the ILO programme in both the Asia-Pacific region and the Arab States. The delegates urge the Office to work with constituents to enable member States to establish development plans and training programmes to alleviate the problem of unemployment. They call on the ILO to assist countries to identify their needs, undertake research, and develop, in consultation with them, an employment framework in accordance with the decent work agenda. Delegates note the significant increase in flexible work arrangements – subcontracting, casual, fixed-term, part-time, temporary and home-based work. The delegates stress the need both for the creation of decent work and the establishment and maintenance of a policy framework favourable to economic growth and to the development and expansion of both large and small enterprises and to provide appropriate training, credit and other support services, especially to small enterprises. The delegates note the importance of raising productivity, increasing competitiveness of enterprises and establishing a conducive environment for investment, job creation and improved quality of life.

8. The delegates consider that it is important to promote policy integration for employment through better cooperation among government agencies as well as with social partners. By giving high priority to employment issues in the overall policy agenda, it is hoped that forward-looking strategies may be developed to avert and mitigate the social repercussions of economic downturns on employment and income in the region. In order to promote employment the delegates stress the importance of partnerships among the ILO, relevant international agencies and international and regional financial institutions.
9. The delegates note that there are still many countries in the region where equality between women and men in employment, education and training, remuneration, social security entitlements, facilities to establish their own enterprises and other aspects of work, has not yet been achieved. Delegates also note that women account for a disproportionately large group of the working poor. They stress that gender issues should not be marginalized. Gender mainstreaming should be a priority item on the employment agenda and should be monitored regularly to determine whether concrete progress has been made. The ILO, in consultation with constituents, should also assist member States to introduce time-bound programmes for gender equality.
10. Multiskilling, skills training and upgrading are crucial to enhancing access to employment and improving productivity and competitiveness in the global economy. The rapidly increasing reliance on information and communication technology and a general trend towards knowledge-based economies require a more educated, skilled and adaptable workforce. The delegates note that education systems and skills training should be linked to market demand through improved labour market information and labour market analysis.
11. The delegates note that migration, as a manifestation of the globalizing world, cannot in most cases be conceived as favouring the sending country alone, but as benefiting also many receiving countries by providing much needed workers. Migrant workers are often the least protected. Irregular migration and trafficking expose workers to the worst forms of abuse and exploitation. Even legally admitted workers do not enjoy the same rights and level of social protection as the national workforce in most countries. Recognizing that bilateral and multilateral approaches are prerequisite for safeguarding the least protected, the delegates request the Office to take a lead in developing and facilitating appropriate policy measures for migrant workers within the framework of decent work. It is suggested that the respective ILO Regional Offices carry out activities on labour migration and provide a forum to discuss migration issues. The delegates note that the ratification and full implementation of the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) constitute a positive step towards ensuring decent work for migrant workers.
12. The delegates note the importance of providing appropriate training and productive employment opportunities for members of vulnerable groups, including disabled persons, indigenous people, women, older workers and unemployed youth. Of particular concern is the high level of youth unemployment.
13. The delegates note that social protection must complement national employment policies. They note with concern that limited social protection is one of the greatest decent work deficits in the region. Of particular concern is the widespread absence of social protection for workers in informal employment – both rural and urban. Recognizing the high social cost of the Asian crisis of 1997 and relatively low public spending on social protection in the region, the delegates call upon the ILO to support the development of comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable social protection programmes. The delegates note that social protection is the responsibility of the State in order to achieve effective redistribution of national resources through both contribution-based social insurance and public-financed social assistance programmes.
14. Considering the conclusions of the general discussion on social security at the 89th Session of the International Labour Conference, the delegates stress the importance of building the ILO research and knowledge base about the extension of social security benefits to more workers. In this regard, the delegates urge the Office to allocate adequate resources to assist constituents in the region to address these issues.

15. Delegates note that although governments need to play a major role in implementing and improving the framework for occupational safety and health, it is also the role of the social partners to ensure that occupational safety and health is addressed as a priority in the workplace. In this regard, the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), the ILO Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems, as well as the newly adopted code of practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work should be promoted.
16. Recognizing the importance of the right of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as the foundations for social dialogue, the delegates urge all member States to implement fully the rights set out in the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98) throughout their national territory. The delegates acknowledge that social dialogue has been instrumental in attenuating negative social impacts during the Asian financial crisis. In the light of looming global economic downturn, the delegates urge the ILO to provide timely technical assistance to member States for strengthening the capacity of social partners to engage in dialogue and improve social dialogue mechanisms at all levels. The delegates further call upon all member States to take steps to ratify the Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (No. 144). While taking note of the great diversity of institutional arrangements for social dialogue at all levels in member States, the delegates request the Office to make the provision of assistance to strengthen dialogue at the level of the work place a priority.
17. The delegates reiterate that the most effective way to define and implement a national policy to reduce the decent work deficit is through tripartite social dialogue and that such dialogue is only possible when the participants are equal partners. The delegates call upon the ILO to play a more effective role in strengthening the social partners through research and training.
18. While expressing concern at the lack of information on, and evaluation of, the follow-up to the conclusions of previous Regional Meetings, the delegates urge each member State of the Asia-Pacific region to establish, through tripartite discussion and consensus, a national plan of action for decent work, which should define, within the overall framework of the ILO decent work agenda, national priorities, a timetable for implementation and a set of indicators for the purposes of regular tripartite monitoring and evaluation. The delegates request the Office to provide such assistance to the tripartite constituents in the design of these national plans of action as they may consider necessary.
19. The delegates request the Office to give priority to assisting, where necessary and requested, the tripartite constituents to implement the national plan of action for decent work. In this regard, ILO capacity in the region should be strengthened. Further, the delegates express the hope that other member States in the region will respond positively to requests for technical assistance and advice to replicate or adapt their own best practices for the benefit of less advanced countries.
20. To facilitate the design, implementation and monitoring of national plans of action for decent work, the delegates request the Office to establish a regularly updated website which reflects actions and activities undertaken in each country in pursuit of the decent work agenda, both by the Office and the constituents. In this connection, the delegates call upon the Office to design, as soon as possible, appropriate measures for collecting information annually and disseminating this to all constituents, including qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of ILO activities in the region.
21. As regards elements of the decent work agenda which are most appropriately dealt with at the subregional and regional levels, the delegates invite the tripartite constituents to consider the establishment of corresponding subregional or regional forums to design and implement appropriate programmes. The Office should include information on such programmes in the website mentioned above.