

(Kyoto) These are unsettling times all across Asia and the Pacific. The economic malaise and debt crisis plaguing Europe and the high levels of unemployment and weak consumer confidence in the United States – our region's two main export markets – threaten Asia's economic security.

The rapid growth experienced in many countries has, in some ways, unhinged our societies. While notable progress has been made in reducing poverty, the increased prosperity reflected in GDP figures and the financial gains enjoyed by some are simply not being shared in ways that benefit the majority of small businesses, workers and their families. While productivity has improved in many countries, wages have not kept pace. We continue to see widening inequalities, persistent vulnerability, gender disparities and limited social protection.

Weak or non-existent worker representation, including restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, means that the voices of the majority are often not heard, or simply ignored.

This system of unbalanced growth cannot continue. It is an injustice and one that has serious consequences. The wave of political uprisings that started in North Africa earlier this year has now reached many parts of the Arab world. Demonstrations have also been seen in North America and Europe. The demands for change, led largely by frustrated and marginalised young people, demonstrates the universal need for decent jobs, basic rights and freedoms, and respect for human dignity. While there is no immediate indication that this social unrest will spread, we should heed this warning, and treat it not as a threat but as a call to action, an opportunity to create a more balanced and just future for everyone.

Policy-makers from governments, employers' and workers' organizations have an opportunity to do just that at the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 15th Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting which is being held in Kyoto, Japan, 4-7 December. Delegations from more than 40 member States, from Asia, the Pacific and the Arab States of West Asia, will discuss ways of creating a more balanced, just, sustainable future for the world of work.

Although the economic turbulence is not over some things are already clear; if Asia and the Pacific is to sustain its impressive growth it will need to place quality employment at the core of policy-making, rather than assuming it will follow as a by-product of economic expansion. It will also need to refocus on domestic demand - rather than export-led growth - and that means wages that reflect productivity improvements. Another way of supporting domestic demand, and protecting the most vulnerable - including the many millions in Asia's informal economy - is through a social protection floor that can even out income and demand fluctuations.

Just as important are respect for rights at work, strong and functional labour market institutions, and investment in human capital - skills and productivity - as well as machinery and technology.

In short, these are all components of what the ILO calls decent work.

Already, this region has made progress towards these decent work goals. Fairer wages are being seen in some countries along with better workplace and labour market systems, and steps to improve dialogue between workers and employers. Progress has also been made in eliminating some of the worst forms of child labour, and there is growing recognition that labour migration is not a problem to be solved but a process to be better managed.

But if we are to protect our economic and social future there is much more to be done. In many countries women are still underrepresented in the workforce, and often underpaid when they are in it. The region's huge informal economy means that millions of people remain extremely vulnerable to any shock or disruption.

The massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan and this year's severe flooding in Southeast Asia are reminders of this region's particular vulnerability to natural disasters. Ensuring that people can get back to work after such crises is a vital part of planning and response measures.

What is also clear is that the more effectively these policies can be integrated, the more countries can co-ordinate and work together, the more effective such policies will be. Cross-border issues like labour migration, human trafficking and climate change require cross-border solutions.

Asian countries also have much valuable expertise of their own to share on common issues such as building stronger social safety nets, developing skills and supporting small businesses. The ILO stands ready to assist, and is working increasingly in partnership with member States and other multilateral organizations to make this expertise available. To this end we already have formal partnerships with Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore.

We will also be launching a campaign to increase the ratification rate of ILO Conventions in Asia and the Pacific, particularly the core standards relating to discrimination, child and forced labour and freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Currently this region lags behind the rest of the world in signing up to these international standards. Some people have expressed concern that such commitments will undermine competitiveness and hinder a country's development. Let me be clear; they do not. They underpin it.

Asia has the potential and dynamism to lead the world in sustainable economic recovery. While there are challenges ahead, I am very optimistic that the region can rise to them and, with the right approaches, consolidate its position as an economic and social world leader, with policies that directly support both employment and equity – in other words, decent work.

In the ILO we have a saying; "a better world starts here". We have the opportunity to ensure that a better world for the working people of Asia starts in Kyoto.