

Presidential Address:

I should begin by thanking the Americas group, in particular the Argentine delegates, for supporting my nomination to the extraordinarily important post of President of this session of the International Labour Conference. I would also like to thank the Government Members of the European Union, through the representative of the Government of the Netherlands and the representatives of the Employers and the Workers, for having, in turn, supported my candidacy. I would like to thank you all for appointing both myself and the Government of Panama to preside over this 97th Session of the International Labour Conference. I accept this important appointment on behalf of the Government, which is led by His Excellency Mr Martín Torrijos Espino. Our President lent his unfailing support to this candidacy, in order that Panama and the Americas as a whole be represented on what is a universal stage for worker-employer relations.

We also take up this role as a member of the Americas group. It is a shared responsibility and one we accept, firm in the belief that, together, we can achieve better conditions in terms of labour, health, education and social development.

I am certain that I can count on the support of all of you, Governments, Workers and Employers, representing, as you do, the social sector of labour in our society. I am sure that we will give due consideration to all the issues raised at this Conference, while working, in a spirit of good will, to achieve the objectives set out for this important international meeting.

This forum brings together the very highest authorities in labour, to discuss, analyse and resolve the most serious problems affecting working populations. We must address vital issues, such as the pro-motion of rural employment to reduce poverty, the increase of productivity, employment growth, economic and social development and, of course, the strengthening of the capabilities of the ILO's capacity.

The Government of Panama has adopted a political agenda which emphasizes social dialogue as a process of participation which involves all the social partners in order to achieve consensus and agreement. This process has proved indispensable in strengthening democracy and in the search for social peace in our country.

The Panamanian Government therefore considers that social dialogue is not just a method of dealing with sectoral problems and matters, which are certainly relevant, but that it is also a way of contributing to democratic governance, particularly at a time when we are moving forward with a series of changes. In this regard, Panama's new social dialogue agenda covers other subjects, such as labour market development, the eradication of child labour, gender equality, as well as integration into the workforce and increased opportunities for people with disabilities and young people (through youth employment projects). Vocational training and public employment services are also priorities for the Government, which aims to address productivity, competitiveness, investment and sustainable development.

We believe that it is of vital importance that "a new labour culture" be developed based on open and honest dialogue, particularly at a time when we are faced with the arduous task of widening the Panama Canal (a goal we hope to achieve within the boundaries of decent

work). Our Government has stated that all bids for this major project must include an undertaking from the relevant companies to support and respect the principles of decent work. The aim of this clause is, in principle, to contribute effectively to the protection of the rights of the 7,000 or so workers who will be involved in this enterprise.

We are aware of the significant efforts being made by the ILO to achieve the objectives set in terms of social development throughout the world. This work has given rise to a universal ILO agenda based on decent work. This is the best way towards strengthening social dialogue, not only as a means, but as an end in itself, and will allow us to maintain social stability. It also reflects the commitment we made to strengthen the legitimacy of the organizations of workers and employers.

One of the ILO's greatest achievements has been to maintain tripartism as a fair and efficient method of working, thus making this Organization a place where discussions are held on the basis of equality and fairness. Furthermore, I should like to add that there can be no tripartism without strong, legitimate organizations of employers with authority, without strong organizations of workers. There is no place in this process for governments, which suffer from weaknesses. Our governments must be based upon democratic governance. As a result, tripartism is more than worth its weight in gold.

We are certain, therefore, that, in important forums such as this one, we will have the opportunity to cooperate in the fight against the many scourges which afflict humanity, and which often prevent us from achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Finally, let us seek to ensure that organizations, employers, workers and the ILO have not only a past but also a long future. Thank you all.