

Opening Statement by Regional Director for Africa, Ms Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished Representatives of Employers' and Workers' organizations;

Esteemed Partners and Colleagues,

In Africa, COVID-19 continues to spread with unprecedented consequences. Beyond the deaths and morbidity, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) projects that the average GDP growth could decline from 3.2 percent to 1.8 percent by the end of the year, due to COVID-19. This is a great setback! The continent needs growth to support job creation.

Furthermore, the effects of COVID-19 demonstrate that this crisis is coming on top of the pre-existing labour market crises in Africa. Growing informal economy, very limited social protection coverage, gender disparities, declining membership of trade unions and employers' organizations, high levels of unemployment and under-employment as well as many labour market institutions struggling to be fit for purpose. These have implications beyond the labour market by eroding cohesion and destabilizing countries. Our latest ILO Monitor shows that covid19 jobs crisis has deepened and women are disproportionately affected. More specifically,

- a. The share of those employed in countries with workplace closures in Africa has reached 56 percent, translating into 265 million workers;
- b. Total working-hour losses in the second quarter of 2020 is estimated at 12.1% or 45 million full-time-equivalent jobs;
- c. The youth informality rate in Africa is 93.4%. 70.1% of these young people are in self-employment reducing their chances to escape poverty.
- d. Relative poverty rates for informal workers was projected to increase from 21 percent before COVID-19 to 83 percent. Moreover that social protection coverage is 17.8%.

This is sobering news!

It is quite reassuring that the ILO Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work and the 2019 Abidjan Declaration remain great tools for addressing these challenges. The good news is also that the ILO is in the forefront of ensuring effective support to Governments, Employers and Workers in Africa. A few examples of ILO support include:

Strengthened national labour market information systems, especially through the widespread socio-economic impact assessments supported in many African countries for policy relevant data.

Innovative social protection initiatives in a number of countries; including the collaboration with the World Bank, UNICEF and WFP, for ILO assistance to the Government of Mozambique, for income support to vulnerable families; including those in the informal economy. The horizontal expansion of the non-contributory part ensures that cash transfers help to strengthen social protections systems and promote sustainable decent jobs.

In several countries, the ILO supports enterprises, notably SMEs to use digital tools to develop and implement Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) as well as user-friendly dashboards, which help businesses.

Beyond the general support to protect workers, there are the targeted interventions in areas like Expanded Public Works Programs, construction and fishing sectors; addressing the special needs of migrant workers as well as persons with disabilities. At the continental level, ILO supports the **AUDA-NEPAD** towards the establishment of African Union Expert Advisory Group on Occupational Health and Safety.

In addition to the direct support provided to several employers and trade union organisations, the Office supports social dialogue institutional capacities relating to wages, new working arrangements and working conditions.

Considering the huge size of Africa's informal economy and the significant impacts of covid19, growing levels of poverty and inequalities, the ILO is supporting many countries to transform the informal economy.

As I close, it is important to be clear on what we mean by building back better.

It means that we reimagine a "better normal" where there is **renewed vigour and urgency to address the underlying crises**, earlier referenced, which have exacerbated the impact of COVID 19. It means human centred economic stimulus packages. Building back better means supporting enterprises to recover and that **labour market institutions are fit for purpose**. Just as the killing of George Floyd a few weeks ago has led to the very urgent global demand and actions to end racism, building back better means that we must fully use the opportunity provided by the pandemic to ensure that 'no one is left behind'. It is a call to make social protection for all a key national development goal! It means envisioning the informal economy as a critical asset; supported to create decent jobs and become engines of economic growth and sustainable development.

I'll end with the recent statement by the UN Secretary General, Mr Antonio Gueteres: "It is time for a coordinated effort to create decent work for all as the foundation of a green, inclusive and resilient recovery."

Thank you