

Closing Remarks by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, General Secretary of ITUC-Africa at ILO African Regional meeting towards Global Summit on COVID-19, July 2, 2020.

Africa -building back better

I would like to appreciate the ILO for living up to its mandate by convening this meeting as part of the effort to help shape the global response to the crisis of COVID-19. It cannot be overemphasized that this crisis has had a devastating impact on the health and economic fortunes of people, especially in the world of work. We talk about the ILO living up to its mandate by recalling the fact that the ILO itself was born out of a global crisis and that its constitution which underlined its commitment to social justice was adopted at the Versailles Peace Treaty at the end of the First World War in April 1919. The ILO again affirmed its mandate for social justice with the Philadelphia Declaration in 1944 when the end of the Second World War was already in sight. Among other things, that Declaration underlined the fact that *poverty anywhere constituted a danger to prosperity everywhere*.

The adoption last year of the Centenary Declaration on the future of work that underscored the need for a new social contract seems to have anticipated the current crisis of COVID-19 and its impact on the world of work. Since the crisis the ILO has worked hard to develop a framework for responding to the crisis. The elements of this framework are: -

Stimulating the economy and employment;

Supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes;

Protecting workers in the work place; and

Relying on social dialogue for solutions -

These are all elements that participants in this meeting have fully identified and supported and many of us in our different countries are already striving to implement measures that align to these elements that are contained in the ILO's framework for response.

One of the most essential of these elements is that of relying on social dialogue for solutions. From the discussion these past few hours, it would appear that many of our governments are committed to it and are actually making use of social dialogue in responding to the crisis. We know, however, that this is not the case. Some speakers in this meeting mentioned that it is time for action and that we tend to talk but do not necessarily act. It is time to act and to walk our talk. It is necessary to demonstrate practical commitment at home to the values we espouse in meetings such as this. If we are to add value to meetings of this nature then it should not only present the occasion to exchange experiences of what we claim to be doing in our different countries and organisations. Such meetings must also be the occasion to assess what we are doing. Given the character of the ILO as an institution that sets standards we should be ready to

subject ourselves and what we do in our countries and organisations to common standards. Therefore, in the matter of social dialogue as a key element of the strategy for responding to the crisis, for example, we should be able to subject country performances to review. We should have a supervisory mechanism that holds us to account and a process for peer review that assesses performance and can support countries in the direction of achievement which we all appear to cherish.

It has also come up strongly that social dialogue requires strong and viable social partners. We look to the support of the ILO in helping us to develop as strong and capable partners for social dialogue.

I turn to the issue of public investments and public services which have also come up during the discussions. Even for those who push for the centrality of the private sector in economic development they can attest to the fact that when there are critical challenges to the entire economy it is to the public sector that everyone turns. In the face of the devastating impact on public health and economies wreaked by COVID-19 it is to the public sector that everyone is turning for support. It is to the public sector that we are turning for stimulating the economy and to support for enterprises, jobs and incomes.

We underline the importance of the needed fiscal space for the public sector to be able to play the role expected of it. We thus express our support for the initiative and campaign for debt cancellation and relief for African countries that was mentioned in the course of this meeting.

We also call for the needed public investments and strengthening of public services in health, sanitation, water and social protection which were all mentioned as important aspects of responding to the crisis.

Finally, we draw attention to the need for restructuring Africa's economies and to promote regional integration that has also come up in the discussions of this meeting. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of Africa's situation and the danger of abject dependence on others for basic needs like food and medical supplies. When the pandemic broke out and lockdowns occurred, borders were closed worldwide and virtually every nation had to rely primarily on what it could produce locally to feed itself and meet its most basic medical needs. This has shown that food security is essential for African countries and also that we need to pay attention to the provision of basic medical supplies for ourselves.

We need to make every effort to learn the lessons provided by the current crisis and to make use of the opportunities offered by the crisis. When people say that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world those who want to change it for the better must seize the opportunity to do things better, and re-commit to the values of social justice that we cherish and for which the ILO was established.

Let us work together to achieve a better African and world coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.