

# **Tripartite Conference on Forced Labour, Human Trafficking and Slavery-like Practices**

## **Opening session**

### **Speech by Hans Hofmeijer, Acting ILO Regional Director for Africa**

Honourable Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you today on behalf of ILO to this important meeting.

The ILO's Constitution, declares that "labour is not a commodity". Forced labour is the complete negation of that fundamental principle. It reduces labour to a commodity and it deprives people of their human dignity. One of the ILO's earliest Conventions, the Forced Labour Convention adopted in 1930, clearly states that the use of forced labour should be eliminated within the shortest period of time. And yet, the fact that we meet here today reminds us that we still have a long way to go to put into practice the aspirations of our predecessors who created the ILO almost a century ago.

More than 80 years after the adoption of the Forced Labour Convention, the ILO estimates that at least 21 million women, men and children are trapped in forced labour, many of them in the informal economy. This number was a wake-up call for ILO constituents. They have decided to put the issue on the agenda of the International Labour Conference next year with the objective to strengthen international standards in this area. It is against this background that the ILO is organizing tripartite conferences such as this one around the world. The conference today and tomorrow will help us acknowledge the many challenges and opportunities related to the elimination of forced labour and prepare for the debate that will take place in Geneva next year.

What do we know about forced labour in Africa?

What good practices are emerging in Africa that can be shared with other regions?

How can we strengthen cooperation and learning so that we can finally make real and lasting progress in the fight against forced labour?

What is the special contribution that you, the representatives of ministries of labour, workers and employers organizations, can make?

These are the questions that we will be discussing over the next two days.

According to ILO estimates, there are almost 4 million victims of forced labour in Africa. Many of them toil away on plantations, in mines, small sweatshops, private households or are sex workers. An estimated 10 per cent are enslaved by rebel army groups or forced to work against their will by state authorities. The illegal profits of those exacting forced labour are vast. The ILO estimates that the “cost of coercion” in terms of lost income and illegal recruitment fees is as high as 1.5 billion US Dollars in Africa alone. This is money that could and should be used to help lift families out of poverty, promote decent employment and develop communities.

The scale of the problem and its stubborn persistence call for innovative solutions:

Those who benefit from exploitation need to be swiftly punished.

Those who suffer abuse and coercion need to be empowered to raise their voice.

Strong preventive measures, including measures to strengthen labour law, to provide access to skills, information and training, in particular for women and girls are also needed.

Forced labour is often linked to migration and labour mobility is a reality in Africa as much as elsewhere. With it comes an increased risk of trafficking, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable. The answer however is not to stop people from looking for decent jobs

elsewhere. Rather, the answer should be to strengthen migration and labour market governance, including labour inspection, employment services and social dialogue.

The adoption of the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the UN Palermo Protocol on Trafficking has spurred legislative action in many countries in Africa. There are other positive signs of change as well: people and societies have become more aware of the problem while more and more victims take their perpetrators to court and demand a fair share of their labour. They need our support.

It is for these reasons that we are meeting here today. We will discuss not only how to strengthen victim protection, but more importantly how to prevent forced labour in the first place. For as long as forced labour and other unacceptable forms of work keep individuals, families and entire communities in abject poverty we will fail to promote inclusive growth and development. The elimination of forced labour is therefore an urgent task for us all.