



**21st World Congress of the
International Society of Labour and Social Security Law**

Opening remarks by:

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[Accolades]

- President of the International Society for Labour and Social Security Law, Mr Adrian Goldin,
- President of the South African Society for Labour Law, Mr Richard Maddern
- Government Representatives,
- Representatives of the ILO's Social Partners,
- Distinguished Participants,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by extending my warm appreciation to the International Society for Labour and Social Security Law for inviting me to speak at your 21st World Congress.

Let me also extend congratulations to the South African Society for Labour Law for successfully hosting the World Congress on African soil. I believe this is the first time the African region has had the honour of hosting the Congress. I am delighted and honoured to be associated with this event.

Your vision resonates closely with the mandate and objectives of the organization I proudly serve as Regional Director for Africa, the International Labour Organization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 21st World Congress of the International Society of Labour and Social Security Law represents a solid platform for stimulating discussion and reflection on the role of labour and social security law in advancing decent work, particularly in a global environment where prolonged economic and social uncertainty appears to be the “new normal”.

My own region, Africa, is an illustrative example.

To most observers Africa appears to have turned a corner. Growth is solid. Exports are growing. Foreign direct investment is flowing. Remittances continue to grow.

However, we know that below the surface of this growth optimism, the undercurrents are strong. Decent work deficits, strong inequalities, persistent poverty, increasing informality

and gender discrimination are some of the major challenges in the daily reality of African people.

Limited access to social protection mechanisms remains one of the main policy challenges in achieving sustainable growth, productive employment and decent work. Indeed, globally, an estimated 73 percent of the world's population have no access to comprehensive social security systems. About 90 percent of the African labour force, mainly those working in the informal economy, are not covered by existing social protection systems.

We are learning the hard way that the growth model developed over the last decades does not always serve the people of this world well.

This raises important questions.

As is so aptly raised in the concept note for this meeting:

How can labour law and social security adapt to our times and continue to serve the ends of regulation and equality in the workplace and advance social justice, both in developed and developing countries? How should traditional concepts and institutions evolve to take account of what may well be fundamental shifts in the world of work?

These questions are at the centre of this very Congress and will be explored by you in the coming days.

These questions are also crucial for the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, the relevance of which is only becoming more evident in today's globalized society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

How can organized labour law continue to serve the ends of social justice?

Some commentators argue that enforcement of labour regulation undermines economic efficiency and that it is an impediment to growth and prosperity.

In fact, research shows that the opposite is the truth.

Modern and socially progressive labour legislation has significant social and economic benefits for both employers and workers and society at large. Such legislation, if well administered, supports a fair, predictable and stable labour market, reduces industrial unrest and enables businesses to grow with confidence and create new and better jobs.

The primary challenge for labour law in the 21st century is not how to ensure more growth, but how to create circumstances in which growth fosters more inclusive societies. Strengthening growth and competitiveness can never be an end in itself, but a means to contribute to the well-being of individuals and the society as a whole. For the ILO, labour law is all about protecting efficiently individual and collective rights and promoting fundamental values. It should aim at promoting opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity.

In today's economy, international labour standards are essential components for ensuring that the growth of the global economy provides benefits to all.

The concept of decent work for a decent life – in Africa and worldwide – is crucial in this context. As the ILO defines it, decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

Distinguished participants,

Labour law will need to be part of the solution rather than being seen as a “barrier to growth”. This raises conceptual as well as institutional challenges. It means continuing the work of redefining the purposes of labour law that has unfolded in recent years. But it also means going further: re-examining established structures and mechanisms, and the rules that govern their operation, in order to assess their viability, the possibility of adapting them or the need to replace them.

Labour law must guarantee the full implementation of national legislation promoting equality in the labour market. Active labour market policies that are not discriminatory need to be promoted.

Labour law needs to be inclusive and not create further disaggregated labour markets. Reforms in employment should aim at improving rights for those in precarious employment, without reducing existing rights.

Labour law must be inclusive reaching all people active in the labour market, irrespective of their employment status.

Labour law must strengthen the role of labour inspection in its primary duty of protecting workers. Fundamental rights of all workers must be guaranteed.

These are the issues that this Congress is about to discuss.

I very much welcome the four themes selected for this World Congress:

- Collective bargaining and beyond;
- Equality and citizenship at work as conceptual foundations for labour law;
- Social security; and
- Labour law and development.

These themes are indeed mutually supportive and reflective of the ILO's own key priorities for the Africa region: Championing employment creation, particularly for youth; Fighting inequality by promoting social protection; Ensuring fair and regulated labour migration; and bringing principles of decent work to countries and societies that face various forms of fragility.

All of you, government officials, employers' and workers', academics, practitioners and students will undoubtedly bring your perspectives to the discussion.

Dear friends,

I learnt with deep sadness that one of the keynote speakers in this Congress, Professor Sir Bob Hepple, Emeritus Master of Clare College, Cambridge, recently passed away at the age

of 81. Professor Hepple, a South African national, was a “giant” in the field of labour law. Moreover, he was a respected freedom fighter and leading advocate for equality, who fled from apartheid in South Africa in 1963 to escape prison after working as Nelson Mandela’s lawyer. Professor Hepple embodied so many of the values we ourselves hold high and that will guide our reflections this week. Not least was he a staunch believer in the mandate of the ILO: “Equality is at the heart of the notion of decent work” according to Bob Hepple. He will be sorely missed.

Last but not least, let me reiterate the ILO’s continued strong support to the International Society for Labour and Social Security Law, which is indeed “housed” in the International Labour Office in Geneva. The Society remains the only global forum for reflection on the relationship between national systems of labour law, and on how international and national labour law can influence each other.

I wish you all a successful World Congress!