

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION  
Sectoral Activities Programme

## **Report on the proceedings**

**Global Dialogue forum on Vocational  
Education and Skills Development  
for Commerce Workers**

Geneva, 24–25 November 2008

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*First published 2009*

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Report on the proceedings: Global dialogue forum on vocational education and skills development for commerce workers: Geneva, 24-25 November 2008 / International Labour Office, Sectoral Activities Programme – Geneva, ILO, 2009

ISBN: 978-92-2-122228-6 (print)

ISBN: 978-92-2-122229-3 (web pdf)

International Labour Office and Sectoral Activities Programme; Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Skills Development for Commerce Workers (2008, Geneva, Switzerland).

Also available

in French: *Rapport sur les travaux: Forum de dialogue mondial sur la formation professionnelle et le perfectionnement des travailleurs du secteur du commerce*, ISBN: 978-92-2-222228-5; 978-92-2-222229-2 (web pdf) – Geneva, 2009,

in Spanish: *Informe sobre las labores: Foro de diálogo mundial sobre la formación profesional y el desarrollo de las calificaciones para los trabajadores del comercio*, ISBN: 978-92-2-322228-4; 978-92-2-322229-1 (web pdf) – Geneva, 2009.

conference report / vocational education / vocational training / skill / skill requirements / sales worker / commerce / developed countries / developing countries  
06.04

*ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data*

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Printed by the International Labour Office, Geneva, Switzerland

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## Report of the discussion

### Introduction

1. The Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Skills Development for Commerce Workers was held at the International Labour Office in Geneva from 24 to 25 November 2008. The Governing Body of the ILO had decided at its 298th Session (March 2007) that the Forum would be held in the 2008–09 biennium, and at its 300th Session (November 2007) that the purpose of the Forum would be to examine current and future skills needs in the commerce sector as a basis for designing skills development strategies and vocational education programmes for workers to support their employment prospects and employability, and to improve business productivity and competitiveness.
2. The Office had prepared an Issues paper<sup>1</sup> to serve as a basis for the Forum's deliberations. The paper examined consumer, business, regulatory and technological trends in commerce and how they were affecting current and future employment and skills requirements. It then examined approaches to forecasting skills needs in the commerce sector and how sectoral training funds had been used to enhance employability, productivity and competitiveness.
3. The Forum was moderated by Ms Elizabeth Thobejane, Acting Senior Executive Manager for Skills Development at the Department of Labour, Pretoria, South Africa. The spokesperson for the Employers' group was Mr Halajian and the spokesperson for the Workers' group was Mr Spaulding. The Secretary-General of the Forum was Mr Tayo Fashoyin, the Executive Secretary was Mr John Sendanyoye and the Clerk was Mr John Myers, all from the Social Dialogue, Labour Law and Labour Administration and Sectoral Activities Department.
4. The Forum was attended by Government representatives from Austria, Bahrain, Botswana, Cameroon, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Greece, Honduras, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Qatar, Rwanda, South Africa, Spain, Suriname, Switzerland, United Republic of Tanzania, Turkey, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Six Worker and six Employer representatives attended the Meeting and representatives from the following international non-governmental organizations also attended as observers: International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), International Organisation of Employers (IOE), Union Network International (UNI).
5. Following a welcome address by the Secretary-General and an introduction of the Issues paper by the Executive Secretary of the Forum, there was a presentation on radio frequency identification (RFID) technology now in use in a large hypermarket in Germany. Electronic reader scanning chips embedded in products allowed identification of information on every single product, and improved service to customers. Examples were given of different technologies being applied to enhance the shopping experience and product selection in various store departments, including sports, fresh food, fish and meat, cosmetics, wine and spirits, etc. With the RFID technology, widespread self-checkout would be possible. Testing was under way for wireless payments to be introduced in the

<sup>1</sup> *Vocational education and skills development for commerce workers: Issues paper*, Geneva, ILO, 2008 (vi +14 pp.).

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future, based on “near field” technology. New technology could benefit employees through improved management and service, health management and improved qualifications and customer satisfaction, designed among other goals to improve worker motivation, teamwork, a better working environment as well as customer relations. The technology helped considerably in supply chains and warehouse operations managing pallets of goods; it was being rolled out for box contents, but would take another 10–15 years to be extensively used at the individual item level.

6. The Chairperson summarized key points arising from the subsequent discussion:
- making a distinction between large corporations and SMEs;
  - looking at education with regard to how to position young people and develop key competencies, with information technology being one of the key areas;
  - health management, including health and safety;
  - the need to look at the potential impacts of changing technology and the need to train employees in the context of the commerce sector at large, particularly retail; and
  - how to maintain cooperation between governments, workers and employers in planning and delivering training, particularly related to technological change, and preventing job loss.
7. The Forum continued by addressing the four suggested points for discussion, which were as follows:
1. What kind of training should be provided to meet the evolving skills requirements of commerce enterprises and to enhance commerce workers’ employability in the context of ever more advanced retail technologies, taking into full account the current low-skills base and the high proportion of women workers and temporary and part-time workers in the sector?
  2. How can vocational training systems and their funding and management be improved to make them more responsive to the needs of commerce enterprises for better skilled staff, in line with the introduction of new technologies?
  3. What should be the key elements of national, enterprise and sectoral action plans to improve commerce workers’ skills and employability, and what should be the respective roles and responsibilities of the government, the enterprise, individual workers and worker representatives in ensuring that appropriate training is provided to meet the requirements of businesses with regard to enhanced skills and workers’ employability needs? How should the ILO support the constituents’ efforts in the process?
  4. How can the timeframe for the introduction of new retail technologies and the associated changes in skills requirements be accurately forecast as a basis for effective planning, organization and delivery of worker training and retraining?
8. As regards point 1, Worker, Employer and Government representatives from many countries spoke on their respective experience in meeting the evolving skills requirements of commerce enterprises. Comments included the following points. It was important to focus not only on training needs arising because of new technology, but also on needs arising from other issues such as employability. Regarding the effects of new technology on jobs, there would be changes in both quality and quantity of jobs. New technology did not always mean a reduction in the number of employees – it had led to an increase in jobs in certain areas. Technology had to complement, not substitute for services. Much of the

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new technology was simple to train for and it was far more important to train for customer service. Confidence was as important as IT skills and the educational system needed to encourage self-confidence in young people. It was important to keep in mind the changes to the workforce, particularly the increasing number of immigrants. The retail sector was often an entry point for these workers and it was important to take their needs into account when designing skills development strategies. The Issues paper for the Forum had focused particularly on developed economies, but the informal economy was key in many countries, where the majority of retailers were informal and had no access to training. It was important to take into account this disparity when considering training needs.

9. On point 2, it was imperative to differentiate between skills development programmes for current staff and for those to be employed in the future, and between training needs of large firms versus SMEs. The facilitation role of governments on skills development for the sector should include promoting a conducive framework, ensuring broad participation, encouraging impact assessment of the training and skills development programmes, and supporting SMEs, informal and vulnerable workers. Coordination between labour, education, trade and other ministries was a positive experience in many countries. Apprenticeship training programmes were useful, although there were some limitations and problems related to time, resources and financial incentives. Skills development programmes could also play a role in identifying training needs at an early stage and being a source of career advice for young people. It was important to engage all the social partners in setting the learning standards and frameworks. The current financial crisis actually increased the need for training, and technology could be used to aid such training. Governments should take a lead role with employers, trade unions and employees in a tripartite structure. Trainers needed competency-based and appropriate training materials that raised the skills of trainees according to occupational educational standards, yet that was rarely the case.
10. On point 3, action plans should be drafted within a tripartite framework; resources needed to be secured for their implementation; they ought to be harmonized at national, sectoral and enterprise levels; they should focus on young workers likely to risk long-term unemployment; and ILO technical support was needed to support their implementation. There was a need to strengthen the employability of disadvantaged groups.
11. On point 4, it was agreed that dialogue contributed to better designed research on needs assessment as employers' and workers' organizations in the sector were in a position to usefully inform the needs identification process. Governments needed to ensure the establishment and proper functioning of skills identification and forecasting systems nationally and sectorally, involving enterprises and tripartite dialogue. It was also important to collate occupations into job families as a way to strengthen learning and career pathways. To move the current process forward, more concrete work would be necessary, for example, research on what occupations were involved, dialogue with experts and at a tripartite level and specific research commissioned. Educational institutions also had a role to play from a technical perspective, for example, in the provision of technical inputs behind accurate skills identification and research.

## **Consideration and adoption of the points of consensus**

12. At the end of its second day, the Forum adopted a set of points of consensus, following detailed discussion of a draft prepared by the Office.

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# Points of consensus on Vocational Education and Skills Development for Commerce Workers

## General introduction

Government, Employer and Worker representatives attended the Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Skills Development for Commerce Workers, held at the ILO, Geneva, 24–25 November 2008. The Forum was called to develop consensus-based recommendations on the design of skills strategies and vocational education programmes for workers in the commerce sector, as a means of supporting their employment prospects and employability, while also improving business productivity and competitiveness. Social dialogue is important to cope with upcoming changes. The Forum developed consensus on the following.

## Points of consensus

### ***Point 1: Ensuring training meets the evolving skills requirements of large, small, medium-sized and informal commerce enterprises while enhancing commerce workers' employability***

1. The design of vocational educational and skills development strategies and programmes for commerce workers should take into account the sector's disparity, which ranges from large multinational firms, through small and medium-sized enterprises, to informal traders.
2. Given its complexity and the rapid pace of technological and other change in the sector, the industry should play the central role in identifying its own priority skills requirements, in determining the education, training and qualification systems that are most in line with its needs, and in designing the corresponding competency standards.
3. Training should also encompass the sector's need for a wide variety of skills to meet the job requirements of a multitude of occupations, including from entry level up to high-level management. Supply chain and distribution centre logistics, marketing, customer care and lower level shop-floor functions should also be accommodated.
4. Lifelong learning should be encouraged in the workplace at all levels, so that employees continue to learn, both for their own employability and to support enterprises' changing skills requirements.
5. Access to training should be provided to all employees, with particular attention to those with special needs.
6. National education systems need to be better aligned with labour market requirements, ensuring the promotion of basic numeracy, literacy, communications and information technology skills. Basic initial education should aim, among other things, at increasing young people's self-confidence, because such personal attributes are of similar importance in employees as their technological skills.
7. Education and vocational training systems should also be encouraged to establish synergies between practical and theoretical learning, because this can improve job opportunities for first-time labour market entrants. Furthermore, education and training should be complementary, and creating linkages between the education system and the commerce industry should enhance their relevance. This could be achieved, for example, through



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apprenticeships and other competence-based training approaches to facilitate mobility for workers into management positions.

8. Competence should be the key objective of education and vocational training, and be evident in the work of all training institutions, along with the recognition of qualifications. Competence development should also support the possibility of mobility – including at the international level.
9. Education curricula and the content of vocational training should reflect changes in skills requirements.
10. Training should not only take into account the skills requirements of new technologies and other change factors, but also extend to such other issues as health and safety management, and customer care.
11. There is a need to upgrade fundamental skills and to ensure that employees continue to learn in the workplace.
12. The design of training programmes should take account of workforce demographic changes, particularly the increasing number of migrant workers. In many countries, social exclusion tends to be particularly serious among the migrant population, and this calls for special attention to be given to integrating young people with a migrant background into public education systems. Governments play a critical role in enabling this.
13. Company training measures in the retail subsector should recognize the possible diversity of their workforce.

***Point 2: Improving vocational training systems and making them more responsive to the needs of commerce enterprises for better skilled staff***

14. Vocational and skills development for commerce workers need to address the sector's skills mismatch and to promote social and economic development, taking into account changing economic scenarios and emerging skills requirements.
15. Tripartite dialogue is essential to ensure that training is fully relevant to the needs of the sector. Better planning and social partner participation are essential for long-term sustainability of vocational education and skills development, the objectives of which should be to enhance employability and decent work; governments should therefore provide an effective platform for tripartite dialogue on training at all levels.
16. Several good practice models exist not just on vocational education and training, but also to impart competencies. Examples could be emulated by the social partners in cooperation with the competent authorities, to expand the possibility of international mobility of commerce workers.
17. SMEs, which have fewer resources than large firms, could overcome this constraint by pooling resources to jointly train their staff or by cooperating with larger firms. Governments should also provide them with appropriate support to assist in their staff training.

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**Point 3: Key elements of action plans to improve commerce workers' skills and employability**

18. National action plans for vocational education and skills development for commerce workers need to be flexible, taking into account the size, diversity and level of development of the sector in each country.
19. The sector may employ many millions of workers in one country, while providing jobs for only a few thousand in another. It is also highly modernized and consolidated in some countries, with jobs concentrated in a few large firms, while extremely fragmented in others. In view of such diversity, the role of governments and the social partners may also differ considerably, and national action programmes should be put in their specific economic and social contexts.
20. Notwithstanding these caveats, governments have a responsibility to ensure educational and skills development systems that support the needs of industry, its workers, citizens and society as a whole.
21. Among governments' fundamental roles should be overseeing the education and training "pipeline"; ensuring that education lays the foundation for basic skills, that workers leave school with qualifications, and that the vocational training system is fully aligned to industry and individual needs. Governments should ensure tripartite involvement in the design of the vocational education system and skills training programmes, including effective consultation with the social partners on the basic education required for future workers, and on the training needed by young and older workers and workers with learning disabilities.
22. Governments and industry must guard against the temptation of treating training as a discretionary expenditure, given its important contribution to economic and social objectives. Resources for vocational education and skills development should therefore be enhanced rather than reduced during economic crises.
23. There is a need to ensure an adequate resourcing system and a broad range of financial and other incentives for training, and a system that encourages industry to contribute sufficiently to skills development.
24. The apprenticeship and vocational education and training (VET) models, which cut across all ages and all worker groups, and which lead to the development of skills in high demand, are suitable for all occupations in many different countries; they should be actively promoted because they are particularly effective in integrating training and experience.
25. The ILO should undertake research to evaluate the effectiveness of existing vocational education and skills training systems and programmes for commerce workers implemented in different countries, and disseminate the findings to assist its constituents in the design of similar systems in their own countries.

**Point 4: Skills forecasting and skills identification systems**

26. Dialogue contributes to research on needs assessment, and employers and employees could inform the needs identification process. The ILO should support this effort and supplement it with small international tripartite forums such as this one, to facilitate the sharing of forecasting experiences. Existing regional forums could be used for discussion on the issue

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and to share best practices. Such forums require tripartite dialogue, with discussion kept open and flexible.

27. Forecasting about mobility within job families can strengthen learning and career pathways, to encourage lateral and horizontal career moves. It also enhances employability.
28. Governments should ensure the functioning of skills identification, skills adaptation and skills forecasting systems nationally and sectorally. Such systems, which should be subject to tripartite dialogue, should be linked to planning, and encourage inputs from educational institutions, which have a role from a technical perspective, for example, in adapting technical input about accurate skills identification and research.
29. More work by the ILO is necessary as regards commissioning research on which occupations are evolving, and promoting dialogue with experts and at the tripartite level on this research. Small sectoral dialogue forums on commerce would be the correct place to steer and commission research. Findings should be translated into more general skills development aims. The timeframe for forecasting [changing skills requirements] is variable from country to country and is difficult to assess, but should be adapted to national and sectoral conditions.

## Evaluation questionnaire

A questionnaire seeking participants' opinions on various aspects of the Forum was distributed before the end of the Forum. Their responses as well as some statistics concerning participation are provided hereunder.

### 1. How do you rate the Meeting as regards the following?

	5	4	3	2	1	Average score
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory	
The choice of agenda item (subject of Forum)	6	3				4.70
The points for discussion	3	6				4.30
The quality of the discussion	8	1				4.90
The Forum's benefits to the sector	2	7				4.20
The points of consensus	1	8				4.10
Opportunity for networking	2	7				4.20

### 2. How do you rate the quality of the draft points of consensus in terms of the following?

	5	4	3	2	1	Average score
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory	
Quality of content	6	3				4.70
Objectivity	2	7				4.20
Comprehensiveness of coverage	3	5	1			4.20
Presentation and readability	2	7				4.20
Amount and relevance of information	1	7	1			4.00

### 3. How do you consider the time allotted for discussion?

	Too much	Enough	Too little
Plenaries		9	
Group meetings		9	

### 4. How do you rate the practical and administrative arrangements (secretariat, document services, translation, interpretation)?

Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory	Average score
5	4				4.60

### 5. Respondents to the questionnaire

Government	Employers	Workers	Observers	Total	(Response rate: 20.45%)
9				9	

### 6. Participants at the Meeting

Government	Employers	Workers	Technical advisers	Observers	Total
21	6	4	13	0	44

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**List of participants**  
**Liste des participants**  
**Lista de participantes**



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Members representing Governments  
Membres représentant les gouvernements  
Miembros representantes de los gobiernos

**AUSTRIA AUTRICHE**

Ms Mag. Hermine Sperl, Leiterin der Abteilung II/3 (Kaufmännische Schulen), Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur, Wien

**BAHRAIN BAHRÉÏN BAHREIN**

Mr Fadhel Rabea, Deputy Director General Training, Bahrain Training Institute, Ministry of Labour, Bahrain  
*Adviser/Conseiller technique/Consejero técnico*

Mr Jaleel Talag, Manager, Planning of Development, Bahrain Training Institute, Ministry of Labour, Bahrain

**BOTSWANA**

Mr Mathaka Mmapatsi, Director, Quality Assurance, Botswana Training Authority, Gaborone

**CAMEROON CAMEROUN CAMERÚN**

S.E.M. Zacharie Perevet, ministre de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle, ministère de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle, Yaoundé

*Advisers/Conseillers techniques/Consejeros técnicos*

M. Francis Ngantcha, ministre conseiller, mission permanente du Cameroun à Genève

M. Samuel Inack Inack, Directeur des études et de la coopération, ministère de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle, Yaoundé

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC RÉPUBLIQUE DOMINICAINE REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA**

Sr. Idionis Pérez, Subdirector General, Instituto Nacional de Formación Técnico Profesional (INFOTEP), Santo Domingo

**ECUADOR EQUATEUR**

Mr Jorge Thullen, Asesor del Ministro, Misión Permanente del Ecuador en Ginebra

**EGYPT EGYPT EGIPTO**

Mr Mohamed Soliman Ibrahim, Director, Ministry of Manpower and Migration, Cairo

*Adviser/Conseiller technique/Consejero técnico*

Mr Mohamed El-Fateh Moussa, Adviser HRD, Ministry of Manpower and Migration, Dokki Giza

**GREECE GRÈCE GRECIA**

Ms Stella Karava, Head of Directorate for the Vocational Training of Adults, Greek Manpower Employment Organization (OAED), Athens

*Advisers/Conseillers techniques/Consejeros técnicos*

Mr Panayotis Kyriakoulis, Promotion of Employment and of the Fund for Employment and Vocational Training, Vocational Training SA, Athens

Ms Stavroula Lymperopoulou, Officer of Directorate for the Vocational Training of Adults, Greek Manpower Employment Organization (OAED), Athens

---

Mr Ioannis Nomikos, Member of the Department of Labour Market Studies, Directorate of Research and Studies, Employment Observatory Research – Informatics SA, Athens

**HONDURAS**

Sra. Gracibel Bu, Deputy Ambassador, Misión Permanente de Honduras en Ginebra

**LEBANON LIBAN LÍBANO**

Mr Hani Chaar, Adviser, Permanent Mission of Lebanon in Geneva

**MALAWI**

Mr Costings Kadzongwe, Assistant Chief Education Office (Vocational Training), Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Lilongwe

**MALAYSIA MALAISIE MALASIA**

Mr Aminuddin AB. Rahaman, Labour Attaché, Permanent Mission of Malaysia in Geneva

**MOROCCO MAROC MARRUECOS**

M. Khalid Saidi, chef de la Division de la formation en cours d'emploi, ministère de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle, Rabat

**NIGERIA NIGÉRIA**

Mr Bukar Sheriff Konduga, Deputy Director, Skills Development and Certification, Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity, Abuja

**QATAR**

M. Nasser Alanqawi, attaché commercial, Permanent Mission of Qatar in Geneva

**RWANDA**

M. Francis Mituzo Gisimba, chargé de la promotion de l'emploi, ministère de la Fonction publique et du Travail, Kigali

**SOUTH AFRICA AFRIQUE DU SUD SUDÁFRICA**

Ms Elizabeth Thobejane, Acting Senior Executive Manager, Skills Development, Department of Labour, Pretoria

**SPAIN ESPAGNE ESPAÑA**

Sr. Francisco Arnau Navarro, Consejero, Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales. Misión Permanente de España, Ginebra

**SURINAME**

Ms Danielle F. Boldewijn, Coordinator of Technology, Ministry of Labour, Technological Development and Environment, Paramaribo

**SWITZERLAND SUISSE SUIZA**

M. Johannes Mure, responsable de projet, Office fédéral de la formation professionnelle et de la technologie, Berne, Suisse



---

**UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA RÉPUBLIQUE-UNIE DE TANZANIE  
REPÚBLICA UNIDA DE TANZANÍA**

Mr Ernest K. Ndimbo, Director of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Youth Development, Dar Es Salaam

*Adviser/Conseiller technique/Consejera técnica*

Ms Joyce Shaidi, Director for Youth Development, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Youth Development, Dar es Salaam

**TURKEY TURQUIE TURQUÍA**

M. Erhan Batur, conseiller, mission permanente de Turquie à Genève

**BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA RÉPUBLIQUE BOLIVARIENNE DU VENEZUELA  
REPÚBLICA BOLIVARIANA DE VENEZUELA**

Sr. Félix Peña Ramos, Ministro Consejero, Misión Permanente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela en Ginebra

*Adviser/Conseiller technique/Consejero técnico*

Sr. Carlos Enrique Flores Torres, Agregado Laboral, Misión Permanente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela en Ginebra

**Members representing the Employers**

**Membres représentant les employeurs**

**Miembros representantes de los empleadores**

Ms Amanda Cox, Head of People – George, ASDA Stores Ltd, Leeds, United Kingdom

M. Dominique Michel, administrateur délégué, Fédération belge de la distribution (FEDIS), Bruxelles, Belgique

Mr Jens Rouben Halajian, Head of International HR Policies, Metro AG, Düsseldorf, Germany

Ms Natalie Kehl, Senior Human Resources Manager, The Foschini Retail Group, Cape Town, South Africa

Ms Ilaria Savoini, Manager, Social affairs, EuroCommerce, Brussels, Belgium

Mr Paul Willis, General Manager, Training and Workforce Development, National Retail Association (NRA), Fortitude Valley, Queensland, Australia

**Members representing the Workers**

**Membres représentant les travailleurs**

**Miembros representantes de los trabajadores**

Ms Liisa Aro, Lawyer, Service Union United Pam, Helsinki, Finland

Mr Muhamad Hakim, Association of Indonesian Trade Unions (Asosiasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia – ASPEK), Jakarta, Indonesia

*Adviser/Conseillers technique/Consejeros técnico*

Mr Kun Wardana Abyoto, Director, Union Network International – Asia Pacific, Jakarta, Indonesia

M<sup>me</sup> Joëlle Noldin, conseillère administrative, Carrefour, Sevran, France

Mr Alan Spaulding, Director, Global Strategies Department, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), Washington, DC, United States

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Representatives of non-governmental international organizations  
Représentants d'organisations internationales non gouvernementales  
Representantes de organizaciones internacionales no gubernamentales

**International Organisation of Employers (IOE)**  
**Organisation internationale des employeurs (OIE)**  
**Organización Internacional de Empleadores (OIE)**

M. Jean Dejardin, conseiller, Cointrin/Genève

**Union Network International Global Union (UNI)**

Mr Jan Furstenborg, Head of UNI Commerce, Union Network International, Nyon

Ms Alke Boessiger, Head of Department, Union Network International, Nyon

Mr D. Thiemann, Policy Officer, Union Network International, Nyon