

OSLO CONFERENCE ON DECENT WORK
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African Trade Union Contribution to Decent Work Under Globalization

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I wish to begin by sincerely thanking the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway for the kind invitation to speak at this forum. I would like to commend the Minister, the President of the Norwegian Trade Union Confederation and the Director General of the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises for hosting this conference which is organized in cooperation with the Financial Times.

I would also like to acknowledge new Platform for an Integrated Africa Policy launched by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and appreciate the focus on promoting a strong and equitable multilateral trading system as well as building strong democracies and pan-African institutions.

An event such as this meeting on Decent Work and Globalization and another conference which Norway hosted last week on the African Green Revolution provide hope to some of us in this difficult world of globalization that there are some among the well placed who continue to care and acknowledge that the progress and well being of the poor will be the real evidence of the progress of humankind as a whole.

Already Norway and the Nordic welfare model present a powerful example to the world that it is possible to institute mechanisms for the equitable redistribution of created wealth and also for the provision of real equality of opportunity. The words of Minister Jonas Gahr Store in February this year, that Norwegians 'have a long history of economic, social and political engineering to make the market our servant, not our master' sums up this achievement.

The overriding lesson from the Nordic welfare model, which as I understand, draws its particular strength from social dialogue, from good faith engagement among social partners, each strong in their own right, is that 'where there is a will there is a way'. Strong unions in the context of high trade union density, organized employers and receptive government serve as necessary conditions for this kind of engagement, but they do us in the context of values which accept the raising of different voices and acknowledge that different tunes can be blended to produce harmony.

Norway and its sister countries of the Nordic welfare state model are all relatively small countries, each with possibly considerable ethnic and cultural homogeneity. But that cannot be the whole story, important as that may be. The real success, in my view, derives from the underlying value of conceding space and accommodation for varying interests and the acceptance by the people and their organizations of this value and their commitment to its pursuit.

The launch of the Decent Work Agenda by the ILO and its wide acceptability provides the world with the opportunity to learn from this model. To take this lesson forward is clearly possible in a world where over the last few decades there has been growing convergence, at least at the level of consciousness, around common values of gender equality, equity, non racialism, non discrimination, democracy, good governance, environmental sustainability, peace, etc. If the leaders of the world actually translate this consciousness into commitment and practice, social dialogue can become generalized and may well become the vital means by which we secure answers to the many questions that confront humankind in these difficult and troubled times.

Fafo's background work to this conference provides an excellent appraisal of globalization and the challenges that it presents. One of the critical conclusions drawn in the early part of the report is that "Growth in production has been faster than growth in population and overall poverty has declined. But regional and social differences remain enormous and growth has not lifted all equally".

While it is striking in the report that *developing countries increased their share of world output from 34 to 41 percent in the decade between 1995 and 2005* it is equally significant that this increase occurred in East Asia and the Pacific and in South Asia.

However, in a number of African countries economic growth has relatively been buoyant over the last few years. Yet, in those countries that have seen significant economic growth, such growth has not had an apparent impact on poverty and only a few countries in the region are likely to achieve the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving extreme poverty by 2015. In much of Africa today, formal employment is limited to about 10 per cent of the labour force, with most workers eking out a living in the smallholder or subsistence agricultural sector in the rural areas and in the urban informal economy, both characterized by low productivity, low incomes and low protection.

Unemployment is high, ranging between 20-40% depending on the country; underemployment is also very high and actually masks the scale of unemployment. Income inequalities are high and between 40 and 60% inhabitants subsist below the poverty line of one US dollar per day. Migration is widespread and drives the African youth. There is also considerable environmental degradation in Africa. The dangers posed to Africa by climate change have become more evident, among others, by the extremes of drought and floods that affect many African countries from one season or year to the next.

Out of 49 least developed countries 34 of them are in Africa and are characterised by low levels of human development. Africa's average literacy rate and medical cover are 40% and 50% respectively. Life expectancy in most African countries remains relatively low and has been driven further down over the last few years by the ravages of HIV and AIDS.

On the political front we acknowledge that from the beginning of the 1990s a combination of local national agitations and a global movement for democratization resulted in a wave of political liberalization and some structural reforms in a good

number of African countries. The constitutional reforms and opening-up introduced significant political pluralism, media pluralism and space for free expression, as well as a significant promise of respect for human rights to varying degrees in most countries. Very significantly, the new atmosphere therefore enabled a growth and proliferation of civil society movements. Among these was the founding or multiplication of non-governmental national or sub-regional human rights advocacy and defence groups, organisations and networks.

Out of the accompanying constitutional reforms many governments instituted state agencies or commissions for human rights with varying degrees of independence from governmental control.

It is worth recalling that in the early 1980s, at the height of the dark days of human rights abuses, the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) which came into force in 1986 with the establishment of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

In the 1990s and thereafter, this instrument and mechanism were strengthened by additional rights-promoting instruments and mechanisms, including significantly the establishment of sub-regional and regional courts, the ECOWAS Community Court and the African Court for example, and The African Peer Review Mechanism of the NEPAD.

The situation of human rights in Africa today, however, in spite of the initiatives to promote institutional mechanisms and instruments for progress, show many indications of serious set-backs, increasing impunity, widespread violations, and undermining (at least disrespect) of the same instruments and mechanisms the governments themselves have instituted and signed up to. The problems of violations occur as much in the realm of Civil and Political Rights as in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In terms of trade union rights, there are numerous violations of it in Africa and trade union independence continues to be an uphill struggle in many African countries. There is also a proliferation of trade unions in many of our countries in the name of pluralism.

The stories to celebrate for Africa are far and between and the decent work and decent life deficit is a huge one.

The Decent Work Agenda promoted by the ILO and its latest Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization with a focus on employment, social protection, social dialogue and rights at work provides for the African trade union movement an important framework and reference point for meeting the challenges that face Africa's working population.

ITUC-Africa's Strategic Direction

At its founding congress at the end of November 2007, ITUC-Africa adopted the main themes of the ITUC global programme that included changing globalisation fundamentally so that it works for working women and men, the unemployed, and the poor; meeting the challenges for working people of multinational business; defending and promoting trade union rights; fighting discrimination, achieving equality; ending child labour; assuring a decent future for young workers; making workplaces healthy and safe; making the ILO a global reference point; promoting peace, security and work of the United Nations; organising in the trade union movement; promoting the new trade union internationalism. We added additional themes to cover trade and economic integration, human resource development and utilisation, HIV/AIDS and the African Union. ITUC-Africa considered African regional integration as an important vehicle and complement to the pursuit of the trade union goals of organising, protecting and promoting rights, securing social protection and achieving effective social dialogue. This can be linked to the problem of internal coherence of the nation-states of Africa, an issue that requires that particular attention be paid to the development of pan-African institutions.

In order to translate the Programme into action, ITUC-Africa has developed five strategic objectives. Four of these derive directly from the Programme while the fifth relates to the instruments of service delivery. They are:

- Defending and promoting human and workers rights;
- Promoting equality and social protection;
- Strengthening organising;
- Strengthening economic and social policy intervention;
- Restructuring the administration, finance and general services.

All are relevant to the new ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization. Let me highlight in particular that we will be working to

- Secure the integration of human and fundamental workers' right issues into the agenda and processes of the African Union's institutions including the AU Labour and Social Affairs Commission, ECOSOC, NEPAD, Regional Economic Communities and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights.

These are to be realized through campaigning and engaging the African Union in constructive negotiations for the integration of ILO Core Labour Standards as a Social Clause in the NEPAD framework, lobbying national governments for the ratification and domestication of ILO Core Labour Standards and other relevant Fundamental Workers' Rights Conventions, provision of appropriate training on human and fundamental workers' rights to union leaders and activists, improving networking, and adopting a regional strategy that reflects the ITUC's global strategy on labour migration, the fight against forced labour, child labour and trafficking in persons.

I would also like to underline that ITUC-Africa's work on organizing to strengthen our affiliates as well as to promote equality and social protection is aimed at ensuring that we make decent work a reality for hundreds of millions of African workers. Decent work as an objective can only be achieved if workers are organized and are able to bargain collectively and stake their claims where appropriate. Trade unions organizing informal

economy workers aim to help position them to access schemes for social protection or develop their own schemes as well as to provide them with a vehicle for dealing with public authorities and other stakeholders.

Let me highlight finally that ITUC-Africa proposes to strengthen the capacity of affiliates to engage relevant institutions and bodies over economic and social issues with the objective of promoting pro-poor growth and socially balanced development as well as promoting trade union perspectives for decent work and decent life as a whole.

In broad outlines, these are the perspectives and plans of the African trade union movement in pursuing decent work under globalization in the coming period and the work for their achievement is one for which we shall welcome genuine partnership and support.

I thank you for your attention.