Mr President,
Mr Chairperson,
Ministers,
Commissioner Gawanas,
Representatives of workers, employers and governments of Africa,
Dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me. We were here in Addis a year ago. It was a moment for African tripartism to examine and plan for the future.

It was based on the Ouagadougou Summit—that great event that Africa launched—not only in terms of its own objectives but also the enormous influence it had on all the other regions who followed on the notion that if you want to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development, you have to do it through productive and decent work.

We met here and you decided on the way forward and said: We want a Decent Work Decade to 2015. That is the mandate of the ILO today. I have come here to say one year later, we have advanced in the areas you identified while concentrating our efforts around Decent Work Country Programmes.

My simple message is that we are on the right track. You said in the context of the overall Decent Work Agenda, these are Africa’s priorities. This is what African tripartism wants. This is where we would like to see you: working with us. And that is what we are doing.

In mentioning last year’s meeting and the work with the region, let me have the pleasure of highlighting the role of Regina Amadi-Njoku [ILO Regional Director for Africa] over the years. She has been at the service of the region in a totally committed way in a manner that expresses her conviction for ILO issues, but also her African roots.

You have heard me say often that when you empower women, you empower Africa. She exemplifies that truth. I did not want to end my reference to the work we are doing in Africa without paying homage to the work that she has done for you in this region.

Dear friends, the most important thing I have to say to all of you is: Thank you.

Thank you for the permanent support that you have given to the work of the ILO, the permanent accompaniment and closeness that you have had with the work that I have been
doing as head of the ILO. I cannot make a substantive speech without also saying this touches me profoundly.

You know my relationship and linkage to Africa. I feel your history and issues so close to my heart—from your liberation struggles in terms of shaping my political beliefs, from your solidarity with Chile when we were going through problems and we had to fight a dictatorship.

From an ILO perspective, we gave the Decent Work Prize to Nelson Mandela last year. He sent us a video and said with a strong voice, “The ILO was there. The voice of the ILO pierced the walls of Robben Island and I knew that I was not alone.”

So I am also heir to a history. I am heir in my function to a tradition that continues today—in many fields, throughout the region where we have to be present with the values of the ILO. Let me add that we have just finished the study on the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories. Let me congratulate you for the resolution that you adopted on this issue. Again, there you see the ILO having to do its job and perform its function, telling it like it is.

I want to say for all these different things which are institutional and personal that I am honoured by your support. The last thing in my mind is to take something like that for granted.

Thank you very much. Your support is my commitment to making sure that I am in a situation to respond to your priorities, to your needs and to the manner in which you see that the ILO has to be at the service of Africa—and also occupy its space internationally.

I said your support is my commitment. We do not have the time to go into details, but let me briefly mention some key questions that I see in front of us.

We continue with the follow up to the Ouagadougou Summit, the Decent Work Decade, Decent Work Country Programmes—all that is clear. Let me emphasize that in this whole process reinforcing African tripartism has to be the priority.

We have to ensure that the Labour Ministers have the strength, capacity and resources to deliver. We have to make sure that workers’ and employers’ organizations have the space, and the voice, the competencies and the capacities to do their vital work.

It is not only because it is the mandate of the ILO. It is also because tripartism, social dialogue, the institutions that give us the capacity to organize and voice our opinion, are all an indispensable part of our own autonomy, of our own capacity to defend our own interests.

When I say I believe in tripartism, in social dialogue, in strengthening the organization and the voice of our own actors, it is because I think it is an essential foundation for our capacity to be autonomous.

And, if we do not do it, we should not fault anyone else. There are sometimes historical, serious reasons that make it difficult. Social dialogue is not easy. But in the end, it is our responsibility—and this is something about which I feel very deeply. It is not a matter of solely having an institutional framework or simply declaring that you are going to do it.

Social dialogue and tripartism are built on trust. You do not declare trust. You win it. Trust is won over time. This is probably one of the biggest challenges we have today.
In the next period we have ahead of us, reinforcing tripartism is essential. It is about reinforcing the voice of Africa—reinforcing the governments, workers and employers, the diversified voice we have within our own societies.

We must acknowledge this is not easy. But in the end, it is coming together that reinforces everybody. This is going to be an important challenge as we look to the future.

Let me mention another aspect. We are moving into turbulent times: the rise in food prices and the incredible financial crisis that keeps on expanding. Stability and progress in the world of work is threatened by instability and setbacks in the world of finance. Meanwhile, in the real economy, extreme poverty is declining for some, but still, four out of five people live in countries with widening inequality. Fortunately, we have a capacity to look at these challenges with an ILO lens.

For example, on the food crisis, we have on the agenda of this year’s [97th Session of the International Labour] Conference, [28 May-13 June 2008], rural employment. Of course, in the immediate future, in order to deal with the crisis, there is a need for more resources and international leaders are doing a fantastic job in making that understood.

At the same time we recognize this is largely a production problem. This is the area where the ILO comes in. We are the productive system within the United Nations because we include employers and the workers.

And we will have a discussion on this issue and on how we can contribute to solving the food challenge structurally on the ILO agenda in June. I am also going from here to a meeting of the UN Chief Executive Board. We will have a meeting with the Secretary-General and all the heads of the UN agencies to address this question.

Another challenge: the financial crisis. It is not up to the ILO or tripartism to say this is the way to solve the crisis. But that does not mean we should not analyze the problem.

One is that the financial system has taken over the production system and sort of created a world of its own, relegating the real economy to the side. This is having an enormous impact on the ILO view of things.

When that happens, the expectation placed on productive enterprises is to match the benefits of the financial system. But a productive company may have a medium and long-term perspective. It is looking beyond solely the next quarter. And of course, capital instead of being used for investment in productive enterprises is siphoned off towards this other side.

I put this issue in my Report to the Conference this year and I think we have to have a stance as an institution that has a productive vision of these problems.

The danger is that we only find stop-gap solutions to the immediate crisis. And we forget that that will only take us to where we were before. And where we were before was a globalization that was not delivering for many people—a globalization that might be reducing extreme poverty but is clearly increasing inequality.

In tandem with making sure that the Decent Work Agenda is realized locally, we also have to think in international terms. As you can imagine, there are many other issues I would like to touch upon the implications of climate change and green jobs, and cooperation with the UN family.
Let me mention one final issue. Next year is the 90th anniversary of the ILO. We are putting together the idea of having a high-level event in each country to celebrate the anniversary on the common agenda of social dialogue for decent work and a fair globalization.

The notion is to do it in a single week. We believe it can be high level because Presidents and Prime Ministers can be involved—but also because we can highlight activities we are undertaking and the impact that is making on the ground. If we do it at the same time, it could have a global effect.

This would be at a summit level, but it would happen locally. So maybe what we are in the process of inventing is a global summit at the local level.

Summit, yes, because the highest level officials of the country will be involved. Summit, yes, because examples of work at the grass-roots level can be shared globally. But local because it can be done at home and used to mobilize the Decent Work Agenda at home. This is the stage we are in—we have moved from putting decent work on the global agenda to making it a reality nationally.

Dear friends, thank you again. You know well that Africa has been, is, and will be in my heart—and I also want to be at the heart of being able to address and solve the problems of Africa.

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