

Remarks by Mary Robinson

98th Session of the International Labour Conference

Thematic Dialogue 4:

The Role of International Labour Standards in Crisis Response: The Standards Package

Geneva, 4 June 2009

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to have been invited to address the International Labour Conference and a particular pleasure to be able to pay tribute to the ILO as you celebrate this year the organization's 90th anniversary.

Allow me to thank my friend Juan Somavia for the invitation to be with you today. Under the Director General's leadership, the ILO has made important strides in adapting and revitalizing its work to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. I believe the Decent Work agenda, encompassing employment generation, social protection, social dialogue and implementation of fundamental rights at work, is the most significant of the many achievements Juan has played a central role in bringing about during his tenure.

The Decent Work agenda is not only at the heart of the ILO's activities, but now has the potential to fundamentally reshape the broader economic and social development discourse globally, if we are able to build a truly international alliance behind it. I say 'if' because that challenge still faces the ILO Secretariat, your

constituency and all of your allies, including my own organization Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative. And it is of relevance to the topic of this session. I am convinced we can achieve far more when an ever-growing number of people around the world understand the relevance and potential of applying stronger normative frameworks and standards to their own work-life realities.

Ninety years after its founding, the ILO and the international labour rights framework is needed more than ever. As your own latest studies have warned, we face an unprecedented increase in unemployment around the world this year, and risk seeing many millions of working poor plunged into poverty in the time ahead - unless we take effective action.

We now know how truly intertwined our economies, our societies and our fates are. Financial turmoil that began in a handful of nations has turned into a global economic and jobs crisis impacting individuals, families, and societies across the globe. To make matters worse, the crisis is set against the seemingly intractable problems of chronic poverty, increasing income inequalities, precarious employment and environmental degradation.

Your decision to focus this session of the International Labour Conference on the employment and social policy consequences of the global economic and financial crisis is critical. We know such dialogue is needed. Think about the economic analysis we read daily in our newspapers. A great deal of attention continues to focus on indicators like the rise and fall of the Dow Jones index, interest rates, and aggregate stimulus spending. These things matter, but so too do

indicators and policy responses focused on jobs – and not just any jobs, but decent jobs which meet basic labour standards.

After all, for the vast majority of the world’s people, the health of the economy is gauged not by the stock market, but by how well they are able to provide for themselves and their family.

As the ILO has stressed, fiscal stimulus measures announced by governments do not focus sufficiently on employment and social protection. For example, only a handful of countries have announced labour market initiatives; and many infrastructure programs do not adequately take into account the need to reinforce the existing capacity of businesses and skills supply – so they might not result in higher production and more jobs. Your commitment to drawing attention to these areas will help put the global economy on a more sound and sustainable path for the future.

Protecting workers from the worst impacts of the crisis, rather than setting them up for bitter competition, must be at the center of national and global policy responses. The ILO’s Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and a range of other key ILO instruments, provide clear benchmarks and obligations which must be realized.

Yet we know these standards too often continue to be marginalized. I have seen this around the world travelling for the work of my own organization, Realizing Rights. We’ve witnessed how people working within global supply chains - rubber plantation workers in Liberia, pineapple farmers in Ghana, and cashew factory workers in

Tanzania, just to name a few examples - work hard, but face low earnings and unstable and insecure conditions of work.

A prevalent view holds that protecting labour rights doesn't always make good financial sense, particularly in the midst of an economic downturn. The good news is that such views are being increasingly challenged. Results of initiatives like the ILO-IFC sponsored Better Work program have shown that countries which respect labour rights are actually better positioned to build up more sustainable growth, development and exports. Companies themselves also increasingly acknowledge that they have a responsibility to respect all human rights, including fundamental labour standards, irrespective of local contexts and government capacities. It is becoming clearer that "beggar-thy-neighbor" policies will only feed the current economic crisis further.

Just this week, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Business and Human Rights, John Ruggie, stressed to the UN Human Rights Council here in Geneva that, and I quote:

"Human rights are most at risk in times of crisis...any gains governments believe can be had by lowering human rights standards for businesses are illusory...no sustainable recovery can be built on so flimsy a foundation."

He added that, "...progress on this front directly contributes to the transition we all seek toward more inclusive and sustainable economic growth..."

Similarly, at the UNCTAD symposium that concluded here recently, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of employment and called for a global jobs pact to underpin a balanced and inclusive process of globalization.

These calls are encouraging but the reality is we must do a better job of working together to demonstrate the efficacy of labour and human rights standards in practice. We in the human rights community haven't engaged with the Decent Work agenda effectively enough. And I think it is also fair to say that labour rights advocates haven't done enough to make connections with the broader international human rights framework which has been built up over the past 60 years.

Under international human rights treaties, governments have voluntarily committed themselves to progressively realizing rights at work and a decent standard of living, including access to health care, food and adequate housing among other fundamental economic and social rights. These commitments clearly reinforce the international labour rights framework. Our task is to make those links more evident and to build up a broader alliance dedicated to developing effective and mutually reinforcing implementation strategies.

Who needs to be part of this broader alliance? For a start, we must do more to include those who are most vulnerable. If the idea of Decent Work is to truly resonate around the world, it must embrace not only salaried and waged workers, but all workers and their organizations. We know why this is so. Informal employment in many developing countries includes up to 90% of the total workforce.

In today's world of work, the formal employment relationship is often disguised or ambiguous. Informal wage employment often makes it difficult to actually identify an employer. Above all, the informal economy in most countries lies outside of the governance mechanisms that make economies function most efficiently.

In a policy brief Realizing Rights is releasing this week with India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the global WIEGO network, we point out that the informal economy is too often wrongly assumed to be a cushion for formal workers who lose their jobs. The fact is that as more workers crowd into the informal economy, the net result is a growing number of firms and individuals competing for smaller pieces of the informal 'pie'.

To change this, governments must place decent work at the center of economic policy-making. That means rethinking the mainstream economic approach to the informal economy as well. We know that much of the global workforce in export manufacturing is informal, including wage workers without legal or social protection in factories and small workshops, as well as industrial outworkers producing for export and being paid by the piece.

Those who work in the informal economy need to be visible in economic statistics and policies. They need to have their voices heard in economic decision-making, and they must be seen as legitimate economic agents and targets of economic policies. Crucially, these workers need stronger and wider enforcement of global standards.

Over three decades ago, an important study by the ILO focusing on Kenya recommended ‘a major shift in government policies concerning the informal sector – a shift towards active encouragement and support.’ It called for positive new policies for promoting the informal sector and linking it with the formal sector.

Today, the informal economy is an important part of the ILO’s work. Yet it is painfully evident that none of us at the international level have effectively tackled these challenges. Raising the productivity of informal sector workers will require a comprehensive strategy, including supporting micro-enterprises to increase their incomes and assisting workers in protecting their health and improving their working conditions.

I believe the ILO should commit to leading a new international effort to tackle challenges associated with the informal economy, building on the report of the high level Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor – *Making the Law Work for Everyone*. Nothing could be more important to protecting the human rights of millions of people around the world. Such an effort will require the enormous strengths of all parts of the ILO’s tripartite membership. But it will also bring new supporters to your door. Civil society advocates for social justice, women’s empowerment and human rights groups, as well as major foundations and others would all see such an initiative as supporting those most in need, and directly addressing the many challenges relating to poverty which continue.

We must also give far more attention to supporting developing country governments committed to the Decent Work agenda. My experience with the GAVI alliance for child immunization and other efforts to strengthen national health systems convinces me that what is needed today is nothing less than a similar effort linked to the world of work. Greatly expanded financing of institutional capacity-building assistance to countries that enables them to strengthen their key labour ministry functions must be given higher priority.

I wish to add my voice to those calling for significant increases in ILO assistance to support countries in these efforts. This should of course include support for effective implementation of labour standards. As you know, the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization adopted last June directs the secretariat to develop a plan to strengthen its capacity to help countries improve information about their progress on the main parameters of Decent Work. Of vital importance are activities such as developing effective labour ministries, including labour law inspection and enforcement capacity; building capacity to remedy problems identified by the ILO's supervisory bodies; and establishing basic social insurance systems.

To give just one practical example, Realizing Rights has been supporting the Ministry of Labour in Liberia, in concert with the ILO, as it lays the foundations for the country's first Decent Work Country Plan, in cooperation with workers representatives, private sector actors and others from civil society. It has completed a draft of a new labour code which is going through consultations around the country using Liberian law students as rapporteurs and facilitators.

Such efforts must be complemented by good laws that are broadly applied and monitored by government authorities. Advisory and capacity-building services have long been part of the ILO's work, yet it is evident that the limited resources in this area should be significantly increased.

The same can be said of efforts to support countries wishing to establish or expand their social insurance programs. The ILO's own research indicates that basic social security packages could be established at a cost of 1 to 2 percent of GDP, or 5 to 10 percent of national budgets. I'm convinced that a shared commitment to realizing such benefits over the coming five years would make a huge contribution to attacking chronic poverty and meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

The ILO should be a central part of any new facility to ensure that decisions on funding are coordinated and consistent with international labour standards. This requires working effectively with the World Bank, regional development banks and others to achieve these goals.

There are encouraging signs that international financial institutions are increasingly recognizing that taking labour and human rights fully into account is not simply a growing demand of activists, but is essential to fulfilling their mandates. We must build on that recognition and be open to new and more effective forms of cooperation. It is part of the increased international policy coherence that continues to be so desperately needed.

Before I conclude, I also would like to highlight the importance of 2009 as the tenth anniversary of the ILO's Gender Equality Action Plan. When standards are weak or unenforced, when the rules are 'bent' as a response to crisis, it is the most vulnerable who are affected most – and too often this is women workers. A sharp and lasting focus on gender issues across the Decent Work agenda will enable gender issues to be addressed adequately, and will strengthen the alliances we need to make it a reality.

Indeed, a significant victory was won just last week that reinforces this dimension of the Decent Work agenda and illustrates how important legal standards are. In Colombia, a network of mostly women waste collectors, working with the NGO CIVISOL, won a case in court they have been fighting for years - with the help of the WIEGO, SEWA and many others. The court decision will enable these micro-level enterprises to compete on a level playing field with the large companies who were going to be granted all rights to the profits from urban waste collection.

In conclusion, I believe we have, in this time of crisis, an opportunity to make the objectives of the Decent Work agenda an integral part of a new multilateral framework to reform global economic governance. Our challenge is to seize this moment, and not miss the opportunity to shape a more sustainable and fairer globalization for all people.

I thank you once again for inviting me to be with you today. I look forward to our discussion.

Thank you.