

## Opening address by Gilbert F. Hougbo Director-General

(Monday 5 June 2023)

Minister Ali bin Samikh al Marri, President of the Conference,  
Madam State Secretary Corina Ajder, Vice-President of the Conference,  
Mr Henrik Munthe, Vice-President of the Conference,  
Mr Zahoor Awan, Vice-President of the Conference,  
delegates,  
ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this 111th Session of the International Labour Conference.

I would like to begin by congratulating the Officers on their election to steer the work of this Conference.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We are meeting again in person at a pivotal time for the labour market. A time when technological and scientific progress is continuing to shape new forms of work and is generating thousands of jobs, not to mention productivity gains.

At the same time, all countries, without exception, are continuing their efforts to recoup the economic and social benefits lost as a result of COVID-19, even though it is clear that these efforts are being undermined by the numerous crises which are leaving the world of today in a state of upheaval.

These structural labour market transformations will undoubtedly continue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although it is true that several countries are now facing skills shortages and feeling the impact of demographic changes on the labour market, other Member States are confronting economic migration and in some cases the brain drain and are seeking to develop the skills of their national workforce so as to meet the needs of their own labour markets.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although it is true that high-income countries have, in an overall sense, returned to their pre-COVID-19 levels in terms of social and economic development, the outlook is not so rosy for all low-income countries. Accordingly, the *ILO Monitor on the world of work*, published last week, estimates that global unemployment is at about 191 million people, just below the pre-crisis level.

Low-income countries are facing a jobs gap at a rate of 21.5 per cent, as opposed to 8.2 per cent for high-income countries. The situation is of even greater concern for those low-income countries that are also in debt distress: for these countries, the jobs gap rate is at more

like 25.7 per cent, reflecting the problems caused by the fiscal space and debt distress on the labour market.

Although the labour market is now characterized by young people who are increasingly dynamic and better trained, it is nevertheless true that one young person in five is unemployed and is outside the education and training system. This has a broad but negative impact on the problem of the informal economy, the situation in respect of which has unfortunately deteriorated since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the efforts of governments and also of central bankers to curb this rampant inflation (which should remain at around 7 per cent in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund), the overall increase in wages has remained well below the rise in prices, thus generating an almost constant loss of purchasing power, especially for the most vulnerable sectors of our society.

Although the productivity gains are welcome in terms of their positive economic impact, we should also remember the ever-growing divide between productivity growth on the one hand and wage growth on the other, as well as the very large number of micro and small enterprises which create jobs but are obliged to file bankruptcy petitions.

Excellencies, delegates,

My message is simple. No one should bury their head in the sand. The benefits derived from the fourth industrial revolution, which promises a radical transformation of production methods, demographic upheavals and the overriding need to decarbonize the economy, rightly constitute opportunities for a brighter future for us all. At the same time, deep-seated inequalities continue to exist – it is absurd to point out that currently 4 billion of our fellow citizens have no social protection and 214 million workers have an income that is below the poverty threshold. How can we explain that women are still earning, on average, 20 per cent less per hour than their male colleagues?

I fundamentally believe that we cannot stand by and watch the resurgence of child labour and forced labour and we cannot remain passive when faced with the risks of discrimination, in any form, or the risks of exclusion, and violence and harassment.

In short, we need to continue to push harder on this accelerator of social justice. Social justice which, need we recall, is and remains the cornerstone and the main *raison d'être* of our Organization. It has also underpinned the social agenda of the United Nations since its establishment.

The initiative to establish a Global Coalition for Social Justice is intended to bring together all stakeholders acting in good faith from the world of work, but also from the United Nations system, international financial institutions, multilateral development banks, the private sector, civil society and academia, in order to galvanize our efforts towards greater social justice.

In the short term, we would like to elevate the political debate on the need to mainstream the social agenda in all major international, regional and local meetings. Together, by the end of this year, we hope to identify the main thematic areas on which we must focus these additional efforts. The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, launched by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, with my predecessor Guy Ryder, is a good example of what I am talking about.

The fight against inequality and informality and access for all to education and learning are other examples, as is the integration of human rights and labour rights into trade agreements and supply chains.

The Global Coalition for Social Justice is aimed at accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by mobilizing stakeholders in the multilateral system to better align their actions on social justice objectives.

Building on the ILO's social justice mandate, the Coalition seeks to balance environmental, economic and social considerations in the global conversation, including in the reform of the international financial architecture.

We want to advocate policy coherence and investment in social protection and decent work.

We also want to deepen the discourse on overhauling the financial system to better support the real economy and decent jobs and ensure a human-centred approach.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

**Since taking office, I have had the opportunity to visit several Member States.** I have seen first-hand the adverse effects of successive crises, growing inequality and the burning cost-of-living issue, to name but a few of these challenges.

However, I have also witnessed the determination of many governments and the social partners to face these challenges, as well as these emerging issues.

Fortunately, there is a real willingness to tackle the structural barriers to economic and social progress. I am talking about a commitment to ensure that new technologies create decent jobs, to provide the skills and support needed for just transition so that workers and enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, can benefit from the new low-carbon economy, and to support social protection in ever fairer, more cohesive and more resilient societies.

**It is for all these reasons that my first report to the Conference focuses on "Advancing social justice".**

I also wish to warmly thank the Heads of State and Government, the representatives of employers' and workers' organizations, colleagues from the agencies of the multilateral system, and the other officials who have agreed to participate in the **World of Work Summit: Social Justice for All.**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In this context, we must strengthen our commitment to effective multilateralism. Both within the ILO and beyond our organization, this should take the form of constructive engagement and the quest for joint and consensus-based solutions.

**Faced with the threat of division, faced with the threat of entrenchment and faced with the threat of a polarization of opinions,** we have a duty – I would say that it is a moral obligation – to prioritize the use of diplomacy to reconcile the views of the various groups. In short, at a time when – let us say it – multilateralism is actually being undermined, we must do all we can to ensure the supremacy of the force of international diplomacy over the diplomacy of force.

We must endeavour to understand each other's point of view, find common ground and facilitate inclusion.

At the ILO, this also means promoting the ratification of the Instrument of Amendment to the ILO Constitution, 1986, to enable us to move forward with democratizing the governance structure of our Organization.

It is my duty, as Director-General, to raise an unfortunate matter with you. Because, in fact, there is an unfortunate matter. Two thirds of Member States, 125 countries, have ratified the Amendment. Yet its implementation remains elusive and blocked by eight of the ten Member States of chief industrial importance. This state of affairs is at odds with our values of democracy and social justice.

Excellencies, delegates,

Let us keep all our tripartite bargaining experience in mind over the coming two weeks to enable us to reach consensus in the various Conference committees.

First, in addition to the usual work of the **Committee on the Application of Standards**, I am looking forward to the discussion of the General Survey on achieving gender equality at work.

Second, the **Standard-Setting Committee on Apprenticeships** will consider the crucial need to promote quality apprenticeships in the framework of suitable policies.

Third, the **Recurrent Discussion Committee on Labour Protection** will indicate to us future priorities regarding strengthening labour institutions in the spirit of the ILO Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work, 2019, and I can only welcome the importance that all the participants attach to this issue.

Fourth, in the face of the challenges of climate change, the **General Discussion Committee on a Just Transition** will consider the effects on the world of work of the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Fifth, the conclusions of the **General Affairs Committee** are eagerly awaited this year.

Lastly, the work of the **Finance Committee** will focus on the adoption of the Programme and Budget for 2024–25. The adoption of the budget is essential to provide us with the necessary resources to implement appropriate and human-centred solutions and to advance social justice.

During this session of the Conference, you will also have the opportunity to consider **my report on the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories**. It is a report that unfortunately confirms harsh labour market conditions, high unemployment and an increased poverty rate, particularly in Gaza, where the poverty rate has risen from 59 to 65 per cent. The ILO will continue to provide its technical assistance to the Palestinian Authority, and to workers and employers in Palestine.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us take this Conference as an opportunity to build a fairer and more stable world, with just transitions, quality apprenticeships that support the skills and employment potential of young people, inclusive and effective labour protection and, above all, more decent work.

Thank you.