



Eleventh (special) sitting

Friday, 10 June 2005, 3 p.m.

President: Mr. Alsalim

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY MR. OLUSEGUN
OBASANJO, PRESIDENT OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF
NIGERIA**

Original Arabic: The PRESIDENT

I am very happy to declare this eleventh (special) sitting of the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference open and to welcome, on behalf of the Conference, His Excellency Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, shall now give the floor to the Secretary-General, Mr. Somavia, to welcome our distinguished guest.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL

Mr. President, it is a privilege and an honour to welcome you to this international assembly of the world of work. We greet the President of Africa's most populous country, the Chairperson of the African Union, and Chairperson of the Implementation Committee of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (EPAD). We greet a global voice for empowerment and social justice, for unity and peace, but above all, we greet a friend. A friend of the values on which our Organization was founded.

Let me begin simply by recalling that in 1979 President Obasanjo entered history by presiding over Nigeria's voluntary transition to civil democratic rule. This is not something we are accustomed to see internationally. For his part he went back to the land and to farming, but he cultivated far more than crops. He developed strong linkages with civil society and founded the African Leadership Forum which focused on planting the seeds for Africa's renewal. Those seeds grew, new modern leaders emerged and the roots of democracy have become strong.

Mr. President, you also experienced the ups and downs of nascent democracies when you were jailed as a political prisoner. You gave the world a lesson in courage and dignity by emerging from your ordeal even stronger, leaving behind any spirit of revenge. Having had the honour of working with you on international issues at the time, it was for me particularly important to be part of an enormous global solidarity movement demanding your release. Twenty years after relinquishing power, you returned as the democratically elected leader of your great nation.

Over the years you have become a guiding figure on the international stage, calling attention to the deep and difficult challenges tugging at the world's

conscience. You have published numerous books and have been part of numerous boards and committees dealing with peace and development issues. You are a driver of practical political solutions, an advocate of finding African solutions to African challenges, and you have been on the ground, bringing leaders together, resolving conflicts, finding the difficult way for peace.

Mr. President, you have taken the lead in what is the greatest claim of ordinary people, not only in Africa but throughout the world: the opportunity for a fair chance at a decent job. As you said in your remarks at the "Copenhagen Plus 5" Summit in 2000, "Unemployment is the mother of almost all other social problems which face humanity today". You cannot have a stronger linkage with the issues that the ILO cares for.

You were the chair and the driving force of the African Union Extraordinary Summit on Employment and Poverty Alleviation in Africa, held in Ouagadougou last year. It was a moment when social partners came together at the Summit. Ouagadougou showed the strength of African tripartism. In Nigeria you developed the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), a homegrown action plan for job creation and sustainable development.

You have highlighted the critical role of African women in the development process, and you followed up by appointing women to key positions in your Government. One of your first acts as Chairperson of the African Union was to endorse the recommendations of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization.

Mr. President, with your ideas, your energy, and your example, you are shifting the development logic from just pursuing growth to pursuing growth that delivers employment and decent work. Thank you for your leadership and your voice. Too often, it seems that when the world chooses to turn to Africa, the focus is on the negatives. The leader we turn to today exemplifies a different spirit. One that shows how much the world can gain from Africa, how much all of us can benefit from the values of solidarity, of support, of sharing and giving, of creativity and courage that Africa brings to the world and our guest brings to our Conference. Mr. President we are honoured to have you here with us to benefit from your wisdom, draw from your experience and gather inspiration from your vision of a rising and self-assured Africa shaping a better world.

Let me thank the Director-General for his heart-warming remarks which I see as a challenge because all that he has said points in one direction and that is the direction of ever-increasing service to humanity.

I am particularly pleased to be here today to address this 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference for the reason that it affords me the opportunity to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the ILO to global progress and the evolution of a new equitable, humane, sustainable, responsive world order. I would like to express my gratitude once again to the Director-General, who has given the ILO proactive, visionary and dynamic leadership, for inviting me to address this august gathering.

The year 2005 is turning out to be a very important one for deliberations on development issues. Heads of State and Governments from around the world will be converging in New York in September to undertake a review of progress in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, five years after they were adopted. Similarly, the Commission for Africa, set up by Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, has released its report on what should be done to tackle poverty in Africa. I expect that he will be bringing the Commission's findings up for discussion at the G8 Summit taking place next month in Scotland. Equally significant is the fact that the leaders of the developing world will gather in Doha next week for the Second South Summit taking place five years after their first summit in Havana, where I was elected Chairperson.

There are, of course, those who will react to these various initiatives with some scepticism because they believe that they have seen it all before, and maybe, in a way, they are right. I nevertheless feel strongly that the various initiatives are useful, because they are keeping development issues at the centre of international discussion. These discussions are also looking beyond symptoms and generalities to address fundamental structural issues, as well as policy and institutional issues. Indeed, it cannot be otherwise, as many African countries continue to face several intertwined and related challenges to their desire to achieve sustainable growth and development and to participate actively in global economic activity. Some of these key challenges relate to the eradication of hunger and disease, poverty reduction, political and economic reform, stability, predictability and prosperity as well as to deriving benefits from globalization, and when talking about deriving benefits from globalization, I mean equitable benefits.

The recently released report of the United Nations Secretary-General, *In larger freedom*, clearly identifies African countries as lagging behind other developing regions in progress towards the attainment of all the Millennium Development Goals. The point has been made that, on current trends, the target of halving poverty in sub-Saharan Africa will not be met until the year 2150, I do not know how many of us will be alive then. This is a worrying scenario, but I would argue that it is not for want of trying. Indeed, as the Director-General of the ILO observed on a previous occasion, there is no poverty of effort in Africa, but rather a poverty of opportu-

nity. We must also bear in mind the fact that the Millennium Development Goals only form part of a wider development agenda, which is why many African countries, including Nigeria, are implementing ambitious but very desirable reforms.

I should emphasize, when speaking of reform in Africa, that it is usually a twin track consisting of political and economic reforms. We acknowledge the relationship between both, but more saliently we acknowledge the importance of the peace, stability, good governance, institutional reform and focused leadership required to consolidate, deepen and sustain the gains of reform. Thus, many African countries are taking remarkable steps to reform their economies as well as their political and social institutions. Over the last 15 years, several African countries have made a successful transition from military, one-party and racist minority rule to multi-party democracies and accountable governments. The important thing to note is, however, that these laudable changes are taking place against the background of economic reform programmes which, more often than not, involve costly and quite painful adjustments that also impact on political and social stability.

A key test facing many African States is therefore how reforms can help to eradicate poverty in a meaningful way. In Africa, we have come to realize that creating decent and productive employment is one beneficial and attractive way of achieving our desired objectives. This realization prompted African Heads of State and Government to convene an Extraordinary Summit on Employment and Poverty Reduction in Africa in September 2004. We recognized on that occasion that job creation has not always been considered as a major development objective and we agreed to make employment creation an explicit and central objective of our economic and social policies at all levels. I want to add that, in fact, it has become a matter of serious and significant political consideration. We decided, moreover, that initiatives on employment creation and poverty alleviation should be included among the indicators for the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative. It is understood that the jobs we are striving to create have to be meaningful and dignifying if they are to have the desired effect, and this is where the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organization becomes relevant. It was in recognition of this fact that the African Union leaders endorsed the call of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization to make decent work a global goal.

I wish to use this opportunity to express sincere gratitude to the members of the Commission for an excellent job. Despite coming from very diverse backgrounds, they showed through their report that dialogue is a very powerful tool for reconciling divergent views and interests. The two co-Chairs, President Mkapa of Tanzania and President Halonen of Finland, also deserve our special gratitude for giving such good leadership to the World Commission. As the World Commission report reminds us, all levels of government, from local to international, are important parts of the development effort. Its central theme, however, is that even the best of national efforts is conditioned by the international environment, which today is best defined by globalization. The present phase of globalization is truly remarkable for the benefits it can bring in the

areas of trade, finance, investment and technology, for those who are able to utilize the opportunities it provides, and I will say that again – it can bring benefits in the areas of trade, finance, investment and technology for those who are able to utilize the opportunities it provides. We cannot, however, deny that many others have been excluded from its benefits, especially as more than one billion people still find it difficult to meet their basic human needs, and up to 20,000 of them die daily from poverty. Reducing poverty, therefore, is the most critical challenge we face today.

As I have indicated, the nations of Africa are committed to including job creation and enterprise promotion in their poverty eradication policy; they have no choice but to do that. Our youth unemployment remains a major challenge, and unless we address this in a fundamental way our developmental goals may be undermined. The African Union, through NEPAD, has taken up this challenge by emphasizing skills, building, agriculture, the expansion of the private sector, small and medium-sized enterprise development, and retraining as ways of creating jobs for our unemployed youths and underemployed adults.

It is, however, obvious that we cannot achieve these objectives on our own alone, as the process is very much dependent on investment flows, trade, international migration, the increasing integration of international production systems, and the construction of productive partnerships. While the success of our efforts is, therefore, still very much dependent on the international environment, we have, on our own, initiated far-reaching socio-economic, political and institutional reforms that are designed to reposition the continent for peace, growth, development and democracy. Today we are better positioned to do business with the outside world, and have put in place the necessary incentives and policies. African countries have endeavoured to attract foreign direct investment, and in some cases have succeeded against all the odds.

It seems, however, that such efforts can easily be frustrated by the effect of global policies and the simplification of many technological processes. Worse still, stereotypes, misinformation and refusal to acknowledge ongoing changes in Africa have continued to negatively affect investment in Africa, save for a few countries. The effect of declining investment can be easily seen in the case of the closure of factories and job losses in some African countries, engendered by the expiration of the Multifibre Arrangement under the terms of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Textiles and Clothing. Such developments clearly do not fit into our expectations of the Decent Work Agenda.

The rapid increase in international migration is another feature of globalization that impacts on our desire to make decent work a global goal. While it is possible to maximize the contribution of migration to development, through remittances and skills acquisition by migrants from developing countries, we should also recognize that there are some shortcomings associated with this process. These include the differential treatment of migrant workers, the attendant violation of their human rights, and the fact that many of them are engaged in “3-D” jobs – dirty, dangerous and difficult – which hardly fit the definition of decent work. While the brain and brawn drain may have some benefits in remittances from abroad, it still deprives the home economy of

quality skills, leadership, experienced workers and an internal holistic capacity to promote overall development. At times we tend to get carried away with remittances and overlook the huge hole that the drain creates in our developmental agenda.

An equally worrying aspect of increased international migration for many African countries, including my own country, Nigeria, is the problem of human trafficking and child labour. This further highlights some of the social consequences of globalization, and has been described in some quarters as the modern equivalent of the slave trade. There can be no cultural rationalization for child labour, especially where children that ought to be in school – with ample opportunities for enjoying childhood – are being subjected to some of the most inhumane and inhuman working conditions. In Nigeria we have enacted a Child Rights Act to protect children from all forms of abuse, and we thank the ILO for its support for Nigeria and Africa in this area through the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour.

At this juncture, let me commend the ILO for setting aside today to commemorate International Children’s Day, which fell last week. I want to take this opportunity to express to the children of the world, but particularly children from developing countries, that for an Organization like the International Labour Organization to devote a day to their welfare and well-being is worthy of commendation.

I am pleased to note that in Nigeria we have ratified all the Conventions related to child labour. Protection of our children is the surest way to build a lasting foundation for peace and development. These and other challenges to meeting our decent work objectives are also manifest in the area of trade, especially poorly timed or unduly rapid liberalization, which has led in several countries to job losses, loss of specific assets, de-industrialization and political instability. To further compound the situation, existing trade rules, including in the area of agriculture and non-tariff measures, are unfair and unbalanced against the broad interests of developing countries.

Goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals makes a similar call, starting with the establishment of a rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory system of trade and financial rules. I would expect, therefore, that the Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference, taking place in Hong Kong in December 2005, will contribute to ensuring a true development outcome to the ongoing Doha round of multilateral trade negotiations.

Goal 8 also calls for international action on the debt problem of developing countries. As I have ceaselessly advocated on numerous occasions, meaningful, sustainable development in these nations will require significant debt reduction and total debt cancellation. Let me put it squarely as it is. There are many countries in Africa where, after their debt has been cancelled – complete 100 per cent cancellation – they will still need a lifeline to pull them up to the point of sustainable development. The debt overhang poses a direct challenge to peace and stability, development and progress. Let us not deceive ourselves. No matter what our efforts, we cannot run effectively when our hands and feet are bound together. We are serious about reform and about building new paths to growth and development, but, without debt relief, these will be impossible.

Even though debt relief will have the effect of freeing up much needed resources for development, it will still not provide the minimum financial outlay required to speed up progress towards the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. I urge our development partners to establish firm timetables for increasing their official development assistance (ODA) to the target of 0.7 per cent of GDP and also to give serious consideration to the various innovative proposals that have been made to increase the amount of resources available for development. Promises have been made in this regard again and again and the report of the United Kingdom Commission for Africa, which recommends 100 per cent debt relief for low income countries on the continent, is the latest along this line. What is needed now is the political will to move forward to implementation. There is nothing more to recommend, there is nothing more to study, there are no more workshops or seminars.

In addition to fairer global rules and a more inclusive process of globalization, it is also imperative to give the developing countries the policy space to determine their own priorities and national development strategies.

Let me say this, hard and tough as it may be: when people talk about globalization, I say, "Yes, globalization, as the name implies, may be good, but we want to know what is the structure and the content of it." We in Africa have been "globalized" before. So there is not much anybody has to tell us about globalization! If we had not been "globalized" we would not have our brothers and sisters in the Americas and in the Caribbean.

What I am saying is that this should also be matched by policy coherence, especially in relation to policies being articulated in various international forums like the ILO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization. Macroeconomic policies must take account of other policies to alleviate poverty, including public investment, more balanced growth and the goal of placing employment creation at the heart of development priorities. Globalization that talks of freeing capital to move without freedom of movement of persons is lopsided globalization. These are the considerable challenges that we face, but our response should be equally decorous.

The various initiatives being undertaken this year are part of the process, but we have to honour our international commitments and implement agreed policies for these efforts to yield meaningful results. I am confident that the ILO, with its proud history and the broad reach of its tripartite constituents, can continue to make a significant contribution to social and economic development through the articulation of international labour standards and the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda, including global social justice. I would therefore urge governments to play their part by ensuring that the ILO has the resources to carry out the programmes and activities with which it has been entrusted. It would also be desirable for the Millennium Plus Five Summit to follow the example of the African Union and seriously consider making decent work a global goal.

Before concluding my address, I would like to touch on the grave matter of HIV/AIDS. The ILO

has been doing sterling work in the very critical area of combating the HIV/AIDS scourge and raising awareness about the disease. The high prevalence of the disease in the nations of Africa has had the effect of vastly compounding the disease burden on these countries. I strongly believe that the international community needs to further intensify efforts on all fronts to stem the spread of this disease, which, if unchecked, has the potential to damage the fabric of society and undermine political, social and economic stability.

Let me leave you with the assurance that we are collectively building a new Africa that is based on democratic practice, dialogue, inclusion, tolerance, accountability, human rights, gender equality and social justice. We have to remember where we are coming from. What is important is that we have taken a step, in fact, more than one step, in the right direction. Stereotypes highlighting what happened in Africa in the past will not help. Africa is changing and has accepted that change is imperative.

We know that the struggle will be tough but we are not deterred as our resolve, unity and focus are firm. I call on you all and on our development partners to join hands with us in this march towards a new, peaceful, democratic, stable and prosperous Africa.

Let us agree that new, positive things are coming out of Africa. We have to consolidate, deepen, widen and sustain the progress being made. Let us disseminate and celebrate the good coming out of Africa.

Original Arabic: The PRESIDENT

I would like to thank you most warmly, Mr. President, for being here with us today in this sitting. Through your valuable statement, you have told us about so many important human issues that are being discussed now in Africa and which are important to all the countries of the world.

It is clear from your statement, Your Excellency, that you have a deep experience of your own country, Nigeria, which has seen very difficult circumstances. You have succeeded in steering your country, through these dire straits to a haven of peace after Nigeria emerged from a period of lack of freedom and violence. You have saved Nigeria from the problem of indebtedness which has been a drain on your country for many years.

The importance you attach to democracy and free elections and to freedom of expression is commendable, not only as far as Africa is concerned but also with regard to all the countries of the world, and we in the Arab world welcome this. The values you referred to are the same values which this Organization was created to defend – this Organization that is striving to promote these values throughout the world.

Your Excellency, I would like to thank you, personally and on behalf of the Director-General of the International Labour Office, as well as on behalf of our brothers and sisters who are taking part in the work of this Conference. We wish you every success in your efforts for the recovery of your country, as well as that of Africa as a whole.

I declare this 11th sitting closed.

(The Conference adjourned at 3.45 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Page

Eleventh (special sitting)

Address by His Excellency Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria	1
--	---

Speakers: the President, the Secretary-General, Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo