



**47th Annual Meeting of CIS Centres**  
(Geneva, 22-23 October 2009, ILO, Room XI, R2 South)

Statement by  
**Assane Diop**  
Executive Director, Social Protection Sector,  
International Labour Office, Geneva

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Dear Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dr Al-Tuwaijri,  
Mr Sandi,

Thank you for attending this very special Meeting in such large numbers. This is the eighth time that I have had the privilege of opening your deliberations.

It is a privilege for three reasons:

- First, you come from all around the world to work together to improve the collection, treatment and dissemination of occupational safety and health information through your membership of this important network, and the Centre you work for.
- Second, you have the heavy responsibility in your various countries of providing people who have safety and health responsibilities in the workplace and elsewhere, as well as those at the highest political level, with the right kind of information when it comes to preventing occupational hazards. In doing so, you help the general public to be sensitized to OSH issues; and you assist in ensuring that OSH is high on the national agenda. We often say in the ILO that knowing how to do things is not enough; it is also important to enable people worldwide to acquire and use that knowledge. This is why I am honoured to play a part in the work that you do.
- Last, but not least, it is a privilege because this is a very special time for CIS: it is your golden anniversary, your fiftieth. This is an important milestone in the life of any person or organization. It is a time to take stock of one's achievements and reflect on how to spend the next fifty years.

At the risk of repeating myself – but some facts can never be repeated enough – I shall recall that 2.3 million people lose their lives every year to occupational accidents and diseases. That is one avoidable death every 15 seconds. Over the next five minutes, in the time I take to talk to you, some 20 people will die from work-related causes.

Knowing as we do that most of these deaths are avoidable, we cannot stand idly by. Occupational fatalities are an awful tragedy: in addition to the waste of a human life, they represent a devastating loss to the victim's family, to the enterprise and to society in general. Even when the accident or disease does not result in death, sick leave and disability cause a great deal of suffering and will entail a large economic cost.

In the informal economy, which is close to my heart, and where we find the poorest of all workers, the situation is even more serious. When these workers fall victim to an accident or a disease, their families lose their livelihood, and they may also need to spend the little money they have on health care and medication. This is why effective action is necessary: we have to be able to supply good information to workers in all sectors of the economy: information that is

- free of charge,
- in a language that people understand, and
- in an appropriate format.

Illiteracy is still widespread in many parts of the world so, even when the information is in the local language, it may not be accessible if it exists only in printed form.

No country, no continent is free from occupational accidents and diseases. We have a moral obligation to provide information on how to prevent them to all who need it – whether they are workers, employers or government agencies.

Now, in this anniversary year, let me say a few words in memory of Marcel Robert, founder of CIS, who passed away in 2007. An engineer by training, who graduated from the Swiss Federal Polytechnic in Zurich, he had such a fervent belief in the need for OSH information that he left his post as director of the ILO's Safety and Health Department (today SafeWork) to devote his energies to setting up and running CIS. We honour his memory, and recall

that after retirement he continued to provide intellectual support to CIS's work well into his eighties.

I would like to pay tribute to his successors, in particular Michèle Nahmias and Emmert Clevensine, both invited to be with us today.

I also salute all the "silent soldiers", as Dr Al-Tuwaijri likes to call them: every one of you who through your work contribute to the noble task of CIS and its worldwide network. There is not time to name you all, but let me assure you: we consider your work vital; it contributes to the task of reducing suffering in the world.

Reaching the age of fifty is a sign of perseverance and maturity. This is a time to commemorate your achievements, and to ask what has made CIS the success it is.

At the top of the list, we should mention the fact that CIS has constantly innovated. It was, for instance, among the first units within the ILO to adopt electronic data processing, e-mail and the Internet. The newly published *History of CIS*, of which you all have a copy, retraces its wonderful history in more detail.

In addition, CIS has always concentrated on a clear primary purpose: the collection, treatment and dissemination of reliable and practical information on OSH, in whatever format is most convenient, to as many users as possible, whether workers, employers, governments or others. And, unlike many information services, it has been able to do this in all three official languages of the ILO.

Another of CIS's strengths is its ability to offer products that meet a need. Among others, the bibliographic database CISDOC, the collection of chemical data sheets that are part of the IPCS programme, and the Occupational Hazard Datasheets all evolved in response to a clearly expressed need among the ILO's constituents. Indeed, I understand that the Occupational Hazard Datasheets are being rejuvenated thanks to the special interest expressed by our Italian, Israeli and French colleagues. Nor should we forget the contribution CIS can make to the ILO *Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety*, whose updating is part of SafeWork's agenda for the coming years.

For CIS is very much part of SafeWork, and thus of the ILO's Social Protection Sector for which I have overall responsibility. CIS has an essential role in contributing OSH-related information to the work done by colleagues in SafeWork and elsewhere in the Office. This makes it a key element in the Decent Work Agenda to which our Organization is committed.

The proposed agenda for this Meeting covers a lot of ground. We will be listening closely to the presentations by the attending Centres, because they will help us determine our future activities. Your contributions to the Meeting will enable us to find the best ways to improve collaboration among the Centres, as well as between the Centres and CIS, and how to plan CIS's means of action.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr Al-Tuwaijri for organizing the first joint Meeting of WHO and CIS Centres, an initiative that will, I hope, be repeated in the future. Such a collaboration between the two lead UN agencies responsible for occupational safety and health can only improve the global OSH situation.

The wind of change is still blowing!

Thank you – and see you tonight for a well deserved reception and concert.