

**International Labour Conference High-Level Side Event**  
**“Better Protected Migrant Workers and Better Governed Labour Migration”**  
**Palais des Nations, Room XVI, Geneva, Switzerland, 5 June 2015, 13:00 – 14:30**

**Closing Remarks of ILO Director-General Mr Guy Ryder**

Good afternoon Sandra,<sup>1</sup> everybody, panellists and colleagues,

I am not going to try to summarise or conclude the debate. I am going to make a few general reflections and leave time for others to ask some questions and interact with the panellists.

The first thing I have to say is: Look at this room at lunch-time and halfway through an ILO conference. Your presence here is testimony to the urgency of the issues that we are discussing this afternoon; unfortunately also to the scale of the problems and to the importance of not just finding theoretical solutions, but moving to action to address situations of extraordinary drama.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the ILO’s responsibilities in respect of migration are as old as the ILO itself. Look at our constitution of 1919 and you will find this reference on the first page.

And in recent years, certainly in the two and a half years that I have been in this job, migration has gone up strongly in the priorities of the ILO. I have been gratified to hear some of the comments that have been made about the ILO’s contributions in these last two and a half years.

Last year, the report that I chose to present to conference was an Agenda for Fair Migration and, as Ambassador Rebong<sup>2</sup> said, it is not just a one-off discussion about fair migration. In the Programme and Budget that is to be, I hope, approved next week, Fair Migration figures as one of a very limited number of programme priorities. This issue is with us not for a day, but for the foreseeable future.

Now, here are the paradoxes and the problems that we have to wrestle with. Some of them have been outlined by my fellow panellists and I won’t repeat what they have said. We are in a world where we now can say we face a crisis of global proportions in the areas that we are discussing. One of a number of global crises that we face.

There is one thing that distinguishes this crisis from others. Everybody knows that you can’t solve the crisis of climate change by closing a border. Everybody knows you can’t solve the global financial crisis by closing a border. But there are a lot of people acting and thinking that they can close the crisis of migration or mobility by closing their borders.

And then the crisis becomes not a global one with a common responsibility of us all, but it becomes a problem of the people in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to deal with dramatic circumstances on their own. So, the first appeal has to be an appeal to one of global responsibility. Wherever you are, whatever your national circumstances in respect of migration and mobility issues, this problem is a problem of us all and we have to act according to that understanding.

The second thought that I have is – and here is the biggest paradox of them all – at a time when the economic case, if you like, for migration, and the benefits to be had from migration are stronger than they

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<sup>1</sup> Ms Sandra Polaski, ILO Deputy Director-General for Policy (event moderator).

<sup>2</sup> Ms Cecilia Rebong, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Philippines to the UN (event panellist).

have ever been because of demography, because of differential employment opportunities, because of differential development, as that economic case grows in strength, the political and social barriers to migration are growing almost in proportion, but in contradiction to the economic case.

And we see this in too many of our societies. The toxicity of migration in political discourse. The distortion of realities in political discourse. The resurgence of what is politely called “identity” politics. Questions around multiculturalism. Polite words for things that sometimes hide very unpleasant realities. These are the circumstances in which we're trying to deal with the issues before us.

Now, others before me have spoken of the mixed nature of mobility of people. Some are moving in response to labour market issues. Others are refugees escaping repression. We have “mixed flows”. One of the problems I found as I chaired the Global Migration Group is that the international system does not “do mixed”. They are very bad at doing “mixed”. We do one thing, somebody else does another thing. We don't mix easily. We have to do better. And that's why I welcome Mr Türk's<sup>3</sup> sentiments about reaching out to working together much better.

The multilateral system has to work together much better. The Global Migration Group brings together, I think when I was chairing it, 18 organizations and the numbers were increasing as we were meeting. We have to interact better. We have to address the full complexity of the issues before us with much greater skill, I would argue, than we have done up until this point.

This said, there are some issues the ILO needs to focus on. They have been mentioned. Dealing with what Ambassador Sørensen<sup>4</sup> described as the “rogue middlemen”, and “middlewomen” I guess as well. This matters a great deal. They can be unscrupulous recruitment agencies acting “legally”, but abusively and exploitatively. They can straightforwardly be traffickers. I was very pleased today to receive the first ratification of the Protocol to Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour that we adopted last year at the conference. It was from Niger. There is a lot of work to be done around those issues.

And yes, through political dialogue, through state-to-state cooperation, we have to create these conditions for legal, orderly, safe, secure – all of those words that you used, Ambassador Rebong – Fair Migration. In some ways we are rowing against the political tide. But that is what we have to have the courage to do. And I hope that the ILO will do its part in moving forward.

And my last word is just to echo what was said by Catalene Passchier.<sup>5</sup> Equal treatment of migrant workers is a very fundamental principle embodied in our standards, including the one of which we celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is insufficiently ratified, particularly by receiving countries. But, you know, if you actually make a reality of equal treatment, you actually begin to remove some of those fears that people have about migration. You deal with the real social issues that surround migration.

It is no use us making only an appeal to economic rationality in dealing with migration. Because you miss a lot of the story and you fall into the trap of treating labour as a commodity, if you deal with migration as a purely economic equation. It has economic benefits and we need to make sure those are understood. But there is a whole surrounding package of social issues that we have to deal with, because we are not dealing with commodities, we are dealing with human beings.

Thank you, Chair.

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<sup>3</sup> Mr Volker Türk, Assistant UN High Commissioner for Refugees for Protection (event panellist).

<sup>4</sup> Mr Peter Sørensen, Ambassador, European Union Delegation to the United Nations (event panellist).

<sup>5</sup> Ms Catalene Passchier, Worker ILO Governing Body Member and Vice-President, Dutch Trade Union Confederation (FNV) (event commentator).