

Presentation delivered by

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SPECIAL MEETING OF THE PERMANENT COUNCIL OF THE
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES
IN COMMEMORATION OF THE WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE 2023

THEME:

Addressing Inequitable Privilege and Unjust Advantage
in Access to Social Services in the Americas

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HALL OF THE AMERICAS OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES
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I wish to congratulate the OAS on this special meeting to celebrate the World Day of Social Justice and I thank you for your kind invitation.

The concept of Social justice is about fairness and equity across society. Social justice speaks to, among other things, equal economic, educational, and workplace opportunities for all and promotes the safety and security of individuals and communities.

In fact, access to resources is a fundamental principle of social justice and so is Equity, Diversity, Participation and Human Rights.

I will focus my short presentation today, on social justice in the world of work.

Social Justice is very fundamental to the practice of Labour Law and good Industrial Relations. More than a century ago, the ILO in the preamble of its Constitution of 1919 stated that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice”.

According to the ILO, the aspirations of social justice is for every working man and woman to claim freely, and on the basis of equality of opportunity, their fair share of the wealth that they have helped to generate. Aspirations which are as important today as they were in 1919, especially in these times of rising inequalities and exclusions.

The concept of social justice features prominently in the ILO's Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944, a declaration which has been adopted and recognised by governments and by employers and workers representatives worldwide. The Declaration reminds us that "labour is not a commodity" and that work is part of everyone's daily life and is crucial to a person's dignity, well-being and development as a human being. Therefore, economic development should include the creation of jobs and working conditions in which people can work in freedom, safety and dignity. Social Justice is inextricably linked to International Labour Standards, which are essential to sustained progress, the improvement of quality of life, and to the dignity of men and women.

To appreciate the role which international labour standards play in promoting social justice, one has to first understand the work of the ILO which is to set labour standards and promote policies of decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity for all men and women around the world. Currently, in the world of work, workers are faced with a number of unexpected challenges and there is evidence of the deepening of inequality.

Permit me though, to remind of the importance of the concept of Equity, which I feel is critical to any discussion of Social Justice. Equality, as we are all aware, refers to each individual or group of people being given the same resources or opportunities. Equity on the other hand, I feel may better expand any discussion of social justice as it takes into account the fact that each person has different circumstances and therefore aims to provide the requisite resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome. Both are central to achieving and sustaining social justice but I like to think of equality as the destination and equity as the vehicle we use to arrive there.

I submit that understanding this distinction assumes even greater urgency when we consider that the distribution of wages at the individual level has also become more unequal, with the gap growing between the highest 10 per cent of the wage scale and the lowest 10 per cent.

Social justice is the lynchpin to addressing the deepening of inequality.

Permit me to take a brief look at the Americas, the ILO's World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2023 reports that the macroeconomic situation and growth outlook of both Latin America and the Caribbean and North America has been dampened by the combination of geopolitical uncertainty in Ukraine and persistent inflation.

Both factors have eroded consumer and business confidence and reduced overall aggregate demand and investment. In turn, job growth has weakened and, in some instances, turned negative.

The ILO's "Social Protection Overview" for Latin America and the Caribbean region in December 2022 which focused on pension systems in the region, reported that improvements in coverage, sufficiency and sustainability are essential to provide economic security, particularly to those people most affected by crises such as COVID-19.

The ILO has warned that old age-related social protection coverage is deteriorating, leaving 34.5 per cent of people over the age of 65 without any labour-related income or pension, a situation of vulnerability and economic insecurity that has been made worse by the COVID-19 crisis. This Overview states that "The pandemic made visible the importance of social protection systems" and that "Social protection is essential to promote social inclusion and cohesion and reduce poverty and social disparities, especially in the context of a crisis that hit the most vulnerable sectors hardest."

Moreover, the ILO's most recent report for Latin America and the Caribbean, which was released this month (February 2023), noted that

although the Unemployment rate in the region fell to 7.2 per cent in 2022, job quality problems persist in the region as inflation impacts wage levels. The report also stated that the region faces a "highly complex and uncertain" labour market in 2023 due to a conjunction of multiple crises that impact labour markets and make it necessary to implement policies to create formal employment.

The report states that "in this economic scenario the most pressing labour issue for the region is the quality of employment and the insufficient labour income generated by workers and their families."

The report further highlights that the labour recovery so far has been strongly driven by the increase in informal occupations, which represented between 40 and 80 per cent of the jobs generated.

I suggest that this data should be examined together with the findings of the ILO that "informal workers are between 3 and 4 times more likely to be poor than formal workers, while accounting for between 70 and 90 per cent of the total working poor". As you know, a large informal economy has its attendant social issues such as job instability, low income and little or no social protection.

I will end where I started with the words of the ILO's Constitution that "universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice". Therefore, we as individuals and as a global community, should each play our part in promoting and adopting policies to ensure that a world of equity, equality, fairness and inclusion is not a dream but in fact a reality.

I thank you for your kind attention.