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OPENING STATEMENT

BY

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A.U. COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS

AT THE

OPENING SESSION OF THE MINISTERIAL MEETING

OF THE 8TH SESSION OF THE LABOUR AND

SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMISSION, YAOUNDE,

CAMEROON

14 April 2011

Honourable Ministers, and Members of the Bureau of the 7th Session of the Labour and Social Affairs Commission,
Distinguished Experts, and Social Partner Representatives from AU Member States,
Representatives from Regional Economic Communities,
Representatives from International Organisations, including UN Agencies,
Invited Experts, and Civil Society Counterparts in Africa,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and privilege for me to address this Opening Session of the Ministerial Meeting of the 8th Session of the Labour and Social Affairs Commission of the African Union. First of all, I wish to extend to all present here, the warm greetings and welcome of H.E. Dr Jean Ping, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, who, as you know, personally takes the matters of labour and social security very seriously.

In the Concept Note for this meeting, we are reminded, that since the last session of LASC in 2009, the employment situation in Africa has worsened, in parallel with the impacts of the financial and economic crises both on growth rates and profiles in our Member States. Forms of vulnerable employment have spread across the continent, affecting the youth, women, the informal economy and the rural working poor more severely. The loss of jobs was most prevalent in the manufacturing and service sectors, although the continent has been recovering faster than other regions in the world. However, Africa still continues to experience meager job content growth. This has led to rising social unrest on the continent with a threat to social and political stability.

The 8th session of LASC is therefore, taking place at a time of political volcano on our Continent that erupted due to chronic unemployment among the youth and women and inadequate social protection in the informal economy. It is set to leave lasting changes in its wake. It is too early to say exactly what those changes will be, but one thing is for sure, we need to address youth and women unemployment, particularly the disconnect between our educational system and the demands of the labor market, as well as the plight of the workers in the informal economy, if we are true to our human rights, and democratic principles.

We need to further consider that, at the human level, the African continent is roughly halfway through a demographic transition from high to low death and birth rates, despite the impact of HIV and AIDS. The youthful momentum of Africa's growing population means that, by 2050, almost one in four of the world's people will live in Africa. It is projected that by 2025, only 14 years from now, the majority of Africans will live in towns and cities and the Continent will cease to be predominantly rural. For these reasons, the key issues of youth employment, social protection for the informal economy and rural workers, resource mobilisation for the implementation of the Ouagadougou Plan of Action and coordination of the Labour Market Information System that will be discussed at this Ministerial Conference, are of paramount importance and relevance to the African Union. I consider these issues closely linked, and I trust that our minds will grab a handle to practically and gradually build up a mix of social sector interventions, based on national, regional and continental policy support and advocacy. We have responsibility to provide employment for social inclusion and cohesion, thereby ensuring social protection for our people. Africa must respond to this great challenge of our time.

I wish to underline that considerations of risk and vulnerability, in particular when it comes to employment, are key to understanding the dynamics leading to perpetuating poverty. We need to provide more social security and social protection to our citizens. For us in the African Union, social protection has been on the agenda since 2004 with the adoption of the Ouagadougou Plan of Action on Employment Promotion and Poverty Alleviation, and the Programme on Upgrading the Informal Economy, as well as the Social Policy Framework for Africa, adopted in 2008, which demonstrates concern for empowerment and protection of vulnerable and marginalized groups in our societies. These policy frameworks take into account the specific social protection needs of the working poor in the informal economy and the rural sector, as well as of that of children, the youth, the elderly, the disabled, and for providing the African Family access to services to promote their resilience to shocks and risks, such as clean water, sanitation and access to health care.

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The theme of the 8th session is ***“Promoting Employment for Social Cohesion and Inclusive Growth”***. This Meeting provides an opportunity for a Ministerial Panel Discussion on the central. The outcome of the discussion should serve as key input to the forthcoming Assembly of the African Union in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, (30 June 2011), under the theme ***“Accelerating Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Development”***. You will also have the opportunity to consider the Report of the Experts meeting of this 8th Session who have deliberated extensively on the issues social protection for the informal economy and rural workers, as well as funding of employment policies in Africa. I am happy to note that the representatives of the Youth were invited to participate at the deliberations of the Experts. I wish to acknowledge their presence at this Ministerial segment.

I trust that our deliberations will, once again, be based on the African principle of “Ubuntu”, translated into, “I am because your are”, for which we have many different nomenclatures and expressions of the same principle in our African languages and cultures. By this, I mean that when it comes to the social security measures pertaining to labour and related social matters, the groundwork has been laid already on our Continent. The challenge is to translate this principle into mechanisms that would fulfill the function of redistribution, in using the professional jargon regarding the functions of social protection.

Finally, as the elected Commissioner for Social Affairs, this will be the last session of LASC that I will attend, as my term will end by this time next year. I wish to express my appreciation to you Honourable Ministers for your cooperation and collaboration over the years. I value the friendship and the camaraderie that we have developed over the years and I hope that we shall continue to work for the betterment of the people of this great continent.

I thank you.