

Statement by the Juan Somavia, Director-General

Of the International Labour Office on the occasion of World Environment Day

5 June 2010

Human well-being and economic activity are intrinsically linked with the fate of the natural world: many species, one planet, one future.

Too often, physical, human and social capital have been short-changed and natural capital neglected, indeed destroyed. It is the manifestation of a world that is out of balance.

Abuse of the natural environment for short-term gain impoverishes communities and societies; the impact is eventually global.

Natural resources account for as much as half of the “GDP of the poor” even when the recorded average contribution to the national economy may be less than 10 per cent. Preserving natural resources and being attentive to how they are tapped economically is fundamental to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Biodiversity and natural resources are of immense economic and social significance to economies, enterprises and workers everywhere. They directly underpin over one billion jobs globally in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Today, one out of every three workers earns a living in these sectors. Biodiversity and nature are also the backbone of industries such as tourism, one of the most rapidly growing sources of employment in many countries.

Tens of millions of jobs can be created and sustained around the world with sound environmental management – for example by recovering degraded forests, wetlands and river systems which conserve soils and ensure clean water supplies.

The shock of the economic crisis is an opportunity to steer a new course towards strong, sustainable and balanced growth.

In responding to the imperative of a jobs-rich recovery we can draw on the job-creating potential of environmental protection. At the same time we can begin putting in place measures to secure a shift to a low carbon and environmentally-friendly economy.

All can benefit from a green economy. Protecting biodiversity and natural resources is to protect and create jobs for today and tomorrow. With strategies that are respectful of the environment and of people, responsive to the needs and concerns of economic sectors, enterprises and economies, sustainable development is possible. It is a huge challenge. It will require a sound process of social dialogue engaging all stakeholders to make the trade offs, to facilitate adjustment to change, and to mobilize know-how, energy and resources.

Experience is showing that poverty is neither a justification for inaction nor a barrier to action – indeed poverty is strong reason to act with haste.

Diverse countries, from Haiti in its rebuilding effort to major emerging economies like Brazil and China, are taking major initiatives to link economic and social development with the protection and restoration of their natural capital.

Through our Global Green Jobs Programme and our participation in the Green Economy Initiative with UNEP, the ILO is striving to show the potential for decent work in a green economy.

Our hope for a viable future compels us all to act together and to act now.

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