

Labour rights at the heart of Arab transformations

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The world has been transfixed in awe and admiration at the courage of the women and men who have taken to the streets across the Arab region over the past year. In some countries popular upheaval is yielding far-reaching political and societal change, while in others the transition will be more gradual. But change – with its attendant opportunities and challenges – is certainly underway.

As the world grapples with the continuing impacts of the financial and debt crises, Arabs are confronting their own historic challenges: a skewed economic growth model that has entrenched patterns of exclusion, discrimination and inequality with limited integration into the global economy; the false trade-off between socio-economic and political rights; and a deep-seated crisis of governance and accountability.

Moreover, the current volatility in the region and crisis-induced recessions are compounding economic hardship while diminishing the fiscal capacity of governments to meet demands by citizens for more and better social services, decent and productive employment and social protection.

In light of these developments, how do we harness the vast potential of this historic moment to establish a new development paradigm that is inclusive, sustainable and meaningful for the women and men of the Arab world?

The Arab region has its strengths and it is high time to make use of them by fostering an inclusive economic model that leads to decent work opportunities through sustainable enterprises, higher productivity and growth with equity.

First, we must seize the opportunity for democratic reform through strengthening social dialogue, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The opening up of political systems offers opportunities for respecting workers' rights and pursuing social justice. Independent, democratic and representative workers' and employers' organizations are key to this process.

Second, markets should be better regulated. An inclusive model benefits from the synergies arising from the cooperation of the public and private sectors and a cooperative dialogue between the social partners. Only strong labour market institutions can guarantee equality of treatment and enable workers to increase their share of productivity gains, particularly women, youth, migrants and informal workers.

Third, we must tap into the region's youthful potential: Arab youth are increasingly more and better educated and the region's youth bulge has actually begun to ease this past decade as birth rates decline. Promoting decent work opportunities for young people requires smart education and skills policies in line with market needs. Employers

have a role in this – especially through investing in on-the-job training and apprenticeships.

Fourth, the establishment of a social protection floor is essential in a region where large categories of workers, particularly those in the informal economy, lack basic social security guarantees including healthcare and income security. Coherent and responsive security systems that address both long and short term needs can significantly reduce poverty and contribute to social stability.

Arab countries can learn from the valuable expertise of their Asian counterparts on issues such as building stronger safety nets, developing skills and supporting small businesses. They can increase coordination with Asian countries on issues such as labour migration, human trafficking and climate change that require innovative cross-border solutions.

Policymakers from governments, employers' and workers' organizations have an opportunity to do just that at the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 15th Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting which is being held in Kyoto, Japan, 4-7 December. Delegations from more than 40 member States, from Asia, the Pacific and the Arab States of West Asia, will discuss ways of creating a more just and sustainable future for the world of work.

These are times of great promise but also great uncertainty in both our region and the rest of the world. The universal need for decent jobs, basic rights and freedoms and respect for human dignity must be addressed to avert further instability. We must heed this call to action, this opportunity to create a more equitable, just and sustainable future for all.
