Mr. President, Dr. Koser, Distinguished panelists and colleagues,

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I would like to thank you Mr. President for convening this thematic debate on international migration and for providing the opportunity to highlight important and encouraging milestones as well its key challenges and constraints.

**Asia-Pacific: A modern day hub of labour migration**

My discussion focuses on Asia and the Pacific. Aside from being the world’s most dynamic and populous region, it is also a modern-day hub of labour migration. Some 25 million Asians are employed in countries other than their own.

Migrants from Asia and the Pacific can be found working in almost any occupation in almost any other country as well as their own - their reach is increasingly global. It is a movement that has a growing share of women workers, as well as youth seeking employment and socialor,
or fleeing either economic stagnation or political instability and volatility in their home countries.

More than three million Asians are embarking on journeys for work each year. What’s striking about more recent migration patterns though is that, increasingly, many of these migrant workers - an estimated 43% - are remaining within the region. In other words, increasingly, migrants in Asia and the Pacific are crossing borders rather than oceans. It’s a sign not only of the region’s rapidly developing economies but also of an emerging economic interdependence within Asia and the Pacific.

Migration for employment has become an established structural feature of many Asian economies. Foreign exchange remittances and workers’ earnings have proven to be a lifeline for families back home in many Asian migrant sending countries. For more developed economies in Asia and the Pacific with a shortage of both skilled and unskilled workers, the proximity to an available labour pool has resulted in a comparative advantage over their competitors in other parts of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Many of us here today are aware of the significant development contributions that migrant workers make to their host and origin countries. These take the form of enhanced services and improved competitiveness in countries of destination and financial flows through remittances to their countries of origin.

And yet despite these contributions, many migrant workers and their families continue to be subject to labour exploitation and abuse. It is not
unusual to hear and receive reports from migrants of fraud and deception over their contractual arrangements, on earnings, type of work and legal status; the non-payment and withholding of wages; high costs of recruitment and resulting indebtedness; the retention of passports or identity documents by employers and recruiters; physical confinement; the use of intimidation, violence and threatening behaviour. Migrant workers are often denied the right to organize unions in practice and even by legislation. Domestic workers are among the most vulnerable.

I think I speak for many colleagues working on migration issues when I say it’s not uncommon to become frustrated over the slow rate of progress and a sense of problems refusing to go away.

It is important to take a longer view and mark milestones and achievements.

Mr. President, Dr. Koser, distinguished panelists and colleagues,

To have a good grasp of the accelerating pace of change in the field of the better governance of migration, including measures to eliminate its worst abuses, it is essential to take a hard look at some of the concrete actions being set at the national, bilateral and regional levels in the last decade. Let me center these on the Asia-Pacific region.

We are seeing a strong efforts by governments to review and rearticulate their national laws and policies on the governance of labour migration and the protection of migrants’ rights across countries with different levels of development, among them China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam among others. These
revisions reflect legal provisions incorporate fundamental principles and rights at work of all workers.

In 2007, the ten member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a unanimously endorsed Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers. The Declaration outlined the responsibilities of ASEAN governments in managing migration for the regional grouping. It called for, among others, the collaboration in data collection and the ability to access the services of each other's embassies in times of crisis and displacement.

In a parallel measure, the vision of the ASEAN Economic Community for 2015, provided for a freer movement of skilled workers, while simultaneously calling for a mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Since 2007, the ASEAN Secretariat, assisted by the ILO, IOM and UNIFEM, has been convening the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour to encourage tripartite and stakeholder dialogues on migration policy and practice in the ASEAN.

In 2004, the six countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region signed a Memorandum of Understanding affirming the importance of human rights adherence in action against human trafficking. It clearly acknowledged the UN, including the ILO as key development partners. This intergovernmental process has resulted in concrete collaboration on identification and recovery of victims, on the conduct of joint training programs, and in aligning recruitment rules to improve labour migration processes.

In 2005, the Government of the Republic of Korea launched its Employment Permit System, effectively transforming its immigration
policy from a system of industrial traineeship to one in which workers are recruited and ensured the same coverage under Korea’s labour protection schemes already entitled to national workers. The EPS also introduced changes by insisting on government-to-government arrangements for recruitment services, in the use of standardized contracts and close monitoring support services for workers. These services form part of the Memorandums of Understanding concluded by the ROK with 15 countries in Asia: (namely: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam). In national and regional fellowships, the ILO has assisted in the training government offices engaged in the Employment Permit System – or EPS – and a convener of dialogue between the member states on issues of common concern.

Return and reintegration services, the last of the government and institutional services to be developed and made part of migration programs in sending countries, have expanded and become part of many migration services in sending countries, clearly part of the learning from the global financial crises. The Philippines leads in setting up systematic processes to improve the employability and adjustment of migrant workers when they return home, providing placement and entrepreneurial services for more effective reintegration back home.

Regional cooperation has not been exclusively nor purely government driven. Trade Unions from Asia (examples of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia) have entered agreements with their counterparts in Middle East Countries to facilitate access to legal and other social services for their migrant workers in difficult situations. Recruitment agencies across the sub-region have adopted common codes of practice for better recruitment and employment of migrant workers.
Bilateral labour agreements negotiated and agreed by sending and receiving countries have evolved from what were general and broad statements of cooperation into viable instruments outlining streamlined and transparent processes of recruitment and providing some protection for migrant workers at worksites. The quality of bilateral labour agreements depends on the commitment of the negotiating parties to implement these accords. Often they reflect the imbalanced leverage that receiving countries have in the negotiations, and it is often uncertain which international and national organizations are responsible to monitor and address gaps and issues that may arise.

The above examples are all work in progress. There are neither perfect migration systems nor is there perfect international cooperation. Often, progress means two steps forward and one step back. Systems are not stable – often in times when we celebrate or mark some positive changes, then political events can trigger radical shifts in migration policies and practices.

Admittedly, developing the right policy and legislative responses that balance these different interests and effectively govern migration are relatively complex. Technical solutions, for difficult issues are relatively easier to come by; the more difficult and at times incomprehensible, obstacles are political. Source and destination countries face different sets of policy constraints, All countries need to build institutional capacity and unity of purpose to meet difficult labour migration challenges.

What is obvious is that international cooperation requires consistent and systematic engagement, a continuing conversation on ways to achieve concrete goals in order to move forward. It requires building trust, confidence and it requires patience. In many instances, third party
facilitation in the form of honest brokering can prove to be indispensable in resolving issues and breaking deadlocks in regional processes.

Much of this migration management and the counter-trafficking work— and good practices and lessons learned as a result— has been made possible through partnerships and donor contributions through a number of member States and their international development agencies. While traditionally technical cooperation programs have been supported by better known migration donors including the EU, the United States and Switzerland, among others, it is also heartening to see that donors from Asia and the Pacific, especially Australia, Korea and Japan are now also funding migration related institutional capacity building programs.

In undertaking technical cooperation in the field of migration, the ILO is first and foremost, a normative organization. The ILO’s migration strategy is anchored in fundamental rights at work, the international Conventions No. 97 and 143 on migration and the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration. The multilateral framework is a set of non-binding principles and guidelines— the building blocks for sound migration policy and good governance — which can help ensure significant development dividends for migrants, employers, and the countries of origin and destination. It is mutually supportive of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and of course the ILO’s own eight core Conventions of the Fundamental Principles for Rights at Work.

Indeed, the ILO’s comparative strengths in migration lie in its tripartite structure, the facilitation of mechanisms for achieving broad social
consensus, and its expertise in a diverse set of labour market subjects from employment policy, employment services, social protection, occupational safety and health, social security, vocational and skills training. The individual and collective strengths of governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations are harnessed for the drafting and implementation of labour migration policy and institution-building programmes. It is this technical assistance that is desired, requested by constituents and delivered by us. So while it may not be as dramatic or visually compelling as other direct assistance and targeted programs, the improvement in policy formulation, implementation and strengthening of institutional capacity is critical to creating a better world of work, not just for migrants, but for all of us.

CONCLUSIONS:

We’ve learned many things about better approaches to improving migration policies bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally.

1. The first is the importance of shared values as basis for cooperation and collaboration. One of the major challenges in setting multilateral directions for migration policy is arriving at a consensus of values widely shared among source and destination countries. The existing international normative instruments do articulate a set of shared values, rooted in universal principles that can serve as basis for international dialogue and cooperation in migration.

Equality of treatment between migrant and national workers is a cornerstone in international labour standards on migration. Equality of treatment calls for equal protection under the labour law of the destination country and ensures that the hiring of migrant workers does
not yield an incentive from lower costs due to lower wages and substandard working conditions.

2. While states are clearly key actors in the formulation and implementation of migration policy and programmes, social dialogue and systematic engagement ensures that policies take into account the interests of most stakeholders – governments at all levels, migrant workers, social partners (employers and trade unions) and civil society. ILO research on public perceptions on migrant workers shows that in countries where governments have taken an effort to consult and explain its migration policies, there is much greater public appreciation of the value and contribution of migrant workers.

Over three years ago, as part of a mission to work closely with the Greater Mekong countries to improve overseas recruitment policies, I was having a discussion with a senior official of the People’s Republic of China on the value and importance of international and regional cooperation on labour migration. Typical to many of the Chinese officials who use symbolic language to explain and describe processes, she compared the six countries of the GMS as boats in a big ocean and regional cooperation as the wind that helps the boats move faster and directs them to the shore. Indeed, strengthening the governance of migration requires that we do have the strong boats with the proper national vision and direction, sufficient capacity and strength; but we also need the winds of cooperation to bring all of us faster and closer to the shore.

Thank you.