

Draft Remarks
ILO Director for the SADC ELS Senior Officials Meeting
Blueberry Hill Hotel, Roodepoort, South Africa
24-26 March 2026

- **Honourable Ms. Nomakhosazana Meth, Minister of Employment and Labour of the Republic of South Africa;**
- **Honourable Ms. Judith Nemadzinga-Tshabalala, Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour;**
- **Honourable Mr. Ntuthuko M. Sibiyi, Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour;**
- **Ms. Jacky Molisane, Acting Director-General of Employment and Labour and Chairperson of the Meeting of Senior Officials;**
- **Ms. Angele Makombo N'tumba, Deputy Executive Secretary: Regional Integration-SADC Secretariat**
- **Senior Government Officials here-present;**
- **Ms. Nester Mukwehwa, Chairperson of the SADC Private Sector Forum;**
- **Ms. Zingiswa Losi, President of the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council;**
- **Mr. Yitna Getachew, Director of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Sub-Regional Office for Southern Africa;**
- **Distinguished Delegates;**
- **SADC Secretariat Staff;**
- **ILO Staff;**
- **Members of the Media;**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen;**

We gather at a defining moment.

The world of work in SADC — and beyond — is undergoing profound technological transformation. Artificial Intelligence is no longer a distant prospect; it is already reshaping economies, production systems, public services, business models, social dialogue, and the organisation of work itself.

For SADC, this is more than a technological shift. It is a development crossroads, a social justice question, and a generational responsibility.

The issue is not whether AI will influence the future of work in our region — it already does. The real question is whether this transformation will expand opportunity for decent work, especially women and youth, or deepen existing inequalities.

Every technological revolution reshapes global economic power. The AI revolution will reward those who invest in people, institutions, and foresight. For SADC, AI offers the possibility to create jobs,

improve productivity, and accelerate structural transformation. But technology alone does not transform economies — human capability does.

If we treat digitalisation as merely a technical matter, we will miss its development potential. We must instead ask how it can drive inclusive growth and employment-rich development. How can it strengthen social protection systems? How can it reinforce social dialogue? How can it improve occupational safety and health, including in new and emerging forms of work? This is where ELS plays a role.

Young people are the fastest adopters of digital technologies. With the right investments in skills, infrastructure, innovation ecosystems, and entrepreneurship, they can become creators of technology — not merely users. This can help address the unemployment and underemployment challenge. If we fail to invest in youth skills, AI may intensify frustration and exclusion. If we succeed, it can catalyse productive youth employment at scale.

Technological revolutions are not gender-neutral. Women remain overrepresented in sectors vulnerable to automation, while underrepresented in STEM fields and digital leadership roles. Without deliberate action, AI could widen gender gaps in employment and income. But with strategic policies, it can also expand women's economic empowerment through digital entrepreneurship, improved access to finance, flexible work arrangements, and greater participation in value chains — provided adequate protections are in place.

Platform work is expanding across borders, creating new income opportunities but also new vulnerabilities. Many workers in digital labour platforms lack traditional protections, including social security coverage and effective access to labour justice.

The ILO's 2026–29 Strategic Plan places digital transformation at the centre of technical cooperation. We are committed to supporting SADC Member States in developing human-centred policies that ensure growth remains employment-rich and protective of worker well-being. You are aware this is an agenda of the ILC, active engagement from SADC will be essential to ensure that regional realities are reflected.

This leads me to pose a question for reflection: how is the Labour and Employment Sector systematically addressing AI and digital transformation?

Chairperson,

Last week, some of us participated in a workshop where an important shift in thinking became clear.

Trade policies are no longer solely about tariffs and market access. They are about development pathways. They are about the movement of people, labour migration, regional integration, and the positioning of our economies within global value chains. Trade policy shapes industries, employment patterns, productivity levels, and ultimately the world of work.

For this reason, trade agreements cannot be divorced from labour standards. They must reinforce — not undermine — our shared commitment to decent work, social justice, and inclusive growth.

At the workshop, strong emphasis was placed on mainstreaming International Labour Standards into trade agreements, and on ensuring meaningful engagement of workers' and employers' organisations in trade negotiations.

When trade expands without adequate labour safeguards, the risks are clear: downward pressure on wages, informalisation of work, weakened labour protections, and social tension — in short, a race to

the bottom. That is not the development model SADC seeks, nor should competition among Member States be based on lowering labour standards.

For SADC, this is particularly important as the region pursues industrialisation, diversification, and deeper integration into regional and global value chains. Sustainable integration requires that workers' rights, occupational safety and health, social protection, and social dialogue are embedded into the architecture of trade.

However, mainstreaming labour standards is not only about inserting clauses into agreements. It requires institutional coordination at national level. Ministries of trade, labour, finance, and industry must work together. This need for policy coherence was highlighted by all countries represented at the workshop.

Too often, trade negotiations proceed with limited labour input, while labour reforms are undertaken without reference to trade commitments. This disconnect weakens both agendas and creates avoidable tensions and missed opportunities.

Engaging workers and employers in trade negotiations is therefore essential. When social partners are consulted early — not merely informed after negotiations conclude — outcomes are more balanced, more sustainable, and more legitimate. Employers understand market realities and competitiveness pressures. Workers understand employment impacts and social consequences. Their insights strengthen national negotiating positions.

How do we make the mainstreaming of International Labour Standards in trade agreements — and structured engagement of social partners — a regular, standing item on the agenda of the Employment and Labour Sector?

The ILO's SUSTAIN project can support this work at SADC level, including strengthening policy coherence and social partner engagement.

Talking of projects, allow me also to express appreciation to Member States and social partners for the tangible results achieved under the Decent Work in Construction Project. I congratulate the team — including Naomy, Nyasha, Grace, and their colleagues — and look forward to further engagement during this meeting.

We express our sincere appreciation for the continued partnership with SADC. Despite a rapidly evolving global environment and reforms underway within the ILO, the Office remains fully committed to supporting the Employment, Labour and Youth, Social and Human Development Directorate, Member States, and tripartite constituents. ILO Country Offices in Eastern and Southern Africa will continue strengthening labour market governance, expanding employment opportunities, and enhancing social protection systems. In a context of unpredictable international financing, greater domestic resource allocation to labour administration and employment policies is increasingly important.

As you are aware, the ILO is navigating significant financial constraints due to shortfalls in assessed contributions. The Director-General has launched a comprehensive institutional review to ensure the Office remains fit for purpose and capable of delivering focused, high-quality technical support — particularly in regions such as SADC — aligned with the 2026–29 Strategic Plan and broader UN reform processes.

In November 2025, the ILO Governing Body adopted a major modernization of the supervisory reporting system. Reporting under Article 22 will move to a thematic approach, grouping Conventions

and Protocols into 15 thematic areas, with progressive implementation from 2027. This reform will reduce reporting burdens, improve coherence, and strengthen peer learning. Further practical guidance will be provided during this session.

We commend Member States for progress in advancing regional labour frameworks. We will provide updates on the Draft Guidelines for National Employment Policies, labour justice, labour market information systems, and the latest SADC Labour Market Report. Building on the outcomes of the 6th Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour and the SADC Child Labour Scorecard, we urge accelerated implementation of National Action Plans, supported by adequate resources.

Colleagues,

AI, trade, labour standards, and social dialogue are not separate agendas. They are interconnected pillars of the same development vision.

The question is not whether change will come. It is whether we will shape it — together — in a way that advances decent work, strengthens institutions, and delivers shared prosperity for the people of SADC.

Thank you.