Youth Related Excerpts from The ILO Director-General, Juan Somavia’s speech at the Organization of Islamic Conferences on 27 February 2003.

"This leads me to the second challenge, and that is the absolute priority of expanding opportunity for our young people. I don't have to tell you the facts on the ground. You know them well.

We know, for example, that half the population of countries such as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, are under 25 years of age. We know in nations like Pakistan and Afghanistan, it's more than 60 percent. We know that in the next decade, 1.2 billion young women and men will enter the working age population. We know that youth are two to three times more likely to be jobless.

Without opportunity and hope, what is left for our youth? Where do they go? Too often, the choice is clear. It's work or crime. Work or drugs. Work or violence. Work or gangs. Work or something even worse.

We need to concentrate our energies and attention on this issue. If our society cannot assure people the right to work, what quality of society are we living in?

And that is when you look at globalization—and all the recipes that we were told were going to work—and at some point, you begin to get angry. And you say, look, we've followed this for 20-25 years and it's simply not happening.

So we have to think anew in order to respond to what our people need. Our people need jobs. And the first who need jobs are young women and men. So concentrating on this is central and we have a growing consensus for action.

On that note, I commend the leadership of Senegal for introducing a Resolution in the UN General Assembly to promote Youth Employment. It was cosponsored by more than 100 member states in December. The Millennium Development Goals also point us in the right direction. The MDGs highlight the issue of decent work—and put the focus on young people. The message is clear: start with youth. Specifically, the MDGs call on us to "develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work."

At the request of the Secretary General, we at the ILO are leading a Youth Employment Network to help do just that. And I invite you to work with us and think together about this.

If we have this high level of unemployment, it's not because people don't know about it. It's not because policies haven't been tried to put it right. So we need much more creative thinking. Part of it is the system. But part of it has to do with how we develop education, the skills development system, and I would suggest we include this in our cooperation agenda.

I would add, that we as adults have a major responsibility to give youth the opportunities they rightfully expect and deserve. We talk a lot in the context of the environment about solidarity among generations. I can't imagine a more important expression of generational solidarity than if adults who are managing the world today are able to provide young people with the dignity of work.
Our generation has the responsibility to come up with the solutions."