Speech by
Steven K. Miller
Secretary, The UN Secretary-General's Youth Employment Network

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to first thank the Government of India for demonstrating its commitment to youth employment by hosting this important meeting and for being represented at the highest level. I furthermore thank Ms. Lakshmi Venkatesan and all of her colleagues at BYSY for taking the initiative to organize this meeting and for the excellent work they have done. The Youth Employment Network is extremely pleased to be a partner in this important Summit, and we are here to learn from the grassroots experiences across Asia being highlighted here today. Before presenting the UN Secretary-General’s Youth Employment Network, a Global Partnership on Youth Employment, allow me then to begin by stressing the importance of the work which BYST and its various partners throughout Asia are achieving at the local level. It has been said that all politics are local. The important political work of this global partnership for youth employment begins with the achievements, which you have nurtured with perseverance over the past decade. The knowledge and experience gained at the local level by the many young entrepreneurs present here today are invaluable ingredients for our Global Partnership. The added value then of this Global Partnership should be to help us learn from each other’s experiences, and in so doing, to bring them to scale for a broader impact.

And indeed, the challenge is enormous. The ILO estimates that there are over 74 million young women and men are unemployed throughout the world, 41% of the globally 180 million unemployed. These unemployed are only the tip of the iceberg since many, many more young people are working long hours with low pay in the informal economy. Indeed, for many of the working poor, open unemployment is a luxury they cannot afford. This is illustrated by the fact that in a good number of developing countries, the more educated young people are also more highly represented amongst the unemployed, a fact illustrated yesterday by Shri K C Pant in his remarks addressed to the High-Level Consultative Forum. Since 85% of young people live in developing countries, the youth employment is of particular concern to these countries. And with over half of the world's youth population living in Asia and the Pacific, this challenge is very much an Asian challenge. The Youth Employment Network while universal in scope is an initiative being driven and guided by developing and newly industrialising countries.

Let me lay out some of the key ingredients and partners for this Network. These partners begin with young people and youth organisations, governments, representatives of workers and of employers, and the joining of forces between the United Nations, the World Bank and the ILO. The Network also is backed up by the personal commitment of the heads of these three organizations. The ILO Director-General Mr. Somavia has sent his special representative, Mr. Allan Larsson - who is also a member of Kofi Annan's High-Level Advisory Panel - to represent him here today. The World Bank President Mr. Wolfensohn has written a letter to all Summit Participants expressing a strong message of support for your work. Mr. Wolfensohn writes: “As a reflection of the growing focus of the international community on this issue, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the ILO Director-General Juan Somavia, and I agreed to combine forces under the Secretary-General’s Youth Employment Network to develop “imaginative approaches” to the problem of youth unemployment.” And all those young entrepreneurs and support organizations such as BYST form a growing network of partners making the Youth Employment Network a “network of networks.”

These are some of the partners, but what are the ingredients? The first ingredient is a powerful political commitment: that of Heads of State and Government made at the Millennium Summit. Their commitment underlines that youth employment is not merely a technical issue, but also an economic and social issue, and, above all, a political issue. The second ingredient is a strong and clear message as conveyed in the policy recommendations of Kofi Annan’s High-Level Panel on Youth Employment: youth are an asset, not a problem. Unemployment is the problem, and youth are the
solution. The message is also based on the four global priorities of employability, equal opportunities, entrepreneurship and employment creation. This is a message which includes both the public and private sectors, and where youth must be better prepared and equipped for the labour market and but where public policies must also play its role in ensuring that the necessary jobs for the newly trained workforce are in fact available. Employment should be made central to macro-economic policy, rather than its by-product. The third ingredient is a solid political foundation. A powerful UN General Assembly Resolution on Promoting Youth Employment, co-sponsored by 106 UN Member States including India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, whose are represented here today, was universally adopted in December 2002. This Resolution has now taken on board the High-Level Panel’s recommendations. This is no “pat on the back” Resolution, but rather a Resolution which charts out a growing political movement in support of the Millennium Development commitment on youth employment. The fourth and perhaps most crucial ingredient are policies and programmes in favour of youth employment being implemented at the national and grassroots levels. These are the experiences which the Network is designed to share and help replicate on a larger scale.

In my role as Secretary to this Network, allow me now to report on some of the concerns and perspective raised by Kofi Annan, Mr. Wolfensohn and Mr. Somavia as they share with us their thoughts on the future directions of the Network.

The first perspective is the importance of involving young people themselves in the Network. Kofi Annan when addressing the young people present at the latest YEN meeting in Geneva told us that “normally when we need to know about something we go to the experts, whether it’s an accountant, or a lawyer, or a doctor. But we tend to forget that when we want to know about youth and what they feel and what they want, that we should talk to them. You are the experts. We were once there, but we are no longer there. . .” Mr. Wolfensohn in his letter addressed to you, the Summit participants, writes about his meeting earlier this year with youth leaders representing organizations with more than 120 million members worldwide. They said, we are ready to be part of the solution, to be partners. We are not just the future, we are the now.” Therefore, our first and foremost partner in this Network should be young people themselves, the real experts. Policies to create decent and productive work for young people should take into account their expectations, frustrations and aspirations.

This brings me to a second perspective raised by the Network, that of youth employment and social stability. This is a perspective that concerns not only governments, but also entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs will not be able take initiative and make the investment decisions necessary for job creation without confidence in the future. Again quoting from Kofi Annan at the most recent YEN meeting, he says, "I believe investing in decent and productive work for young people is both a strategy for economic and social development and our quest for national and collective security. Indeed, we have seen, all too often, the tragedy of youthful lives misspent in crime, drug abuse, civil conflict and even terrorism. And we see these teenage and boy soldiers - how do you reintegrate them into society, how do you unteach them all the painful and brutal things that they have learnt? And it’s really a challenge for all of us.” When I met with the Prime Minister of Senegal earlier this year to discuss the Youth Employment Network, he stated that for him youth employment was a question of national security. And Dr. Heptullah, kindly allow me to echo your comments of yesterday, namely, that employment is an agent of social empowerment, and that growth without employment can lead to social unrest. And Shri K C Pant in his rigorous and comprehensive analysis of youth employment spoke yesterday of the importance of evaluating its costs. I would argue that these social and economic costs, both to young people and to society as a whole, if properly evaluated, would demonstrate that the costs of implementing policies and programmes for youth employment are much less than the costs of inaction.

The third perspective which I wish to raise concerns the central importance of youth employment to the whole international development agenda as set out in the Millennium Declaration. Mr. Wolfensohn again states, “Decent and productive work for youth has been identified as a target for reaching the Millennium Development Goals.” Mr. Somavia told the Youth Employment Network “we need to
drive home the message that without significantly expanding youth employment, the overall international development agenda will fail to eradicate poverty.” Youth employment is not just a sectoral policy amongst others, but rather the key to unlocking solutions to a host of other issues, such as HIV/AIDS, migration and peace building.

Let me close with the words of Kofi Annan: “Our challenge is now to move from the excellent policy work that has been done to a new phase, a phase of action at the country level.

Thank you