The ILO is giving ever more priority to action against trafficking, both in its normative work for the adoption and supervision of relevant standards, and in its operational programmes throughout the world. All of this is key to effective prevention.

International labour standards identify the principles – of eradicating forced labour, and child labour and its worst forms, and of the protection of migrant workers. They provide guidance for the ILO’s own activities and for the interventions of others.

Our operational programmes tackle all aspects of the trafficking cycle in origin, transit and destination countries. This is prevention in its broadest sense. At places of origin they combine skills training, employment promotion, community mobilization, awareness raising, and labour market analysis. Throughout the trafficking cycle, ILO programmes aim to root out the worst abuses by trafficking intermediaries, by ensuring that employment and job placement agencies carry out their proper function, and by enhancing supervision of these agencies.

In destination countries, where we are now beginning to work more earnestly, programmes aim to achieve several things. First, to improve knowledge of demand factors, of why there is growing demand for irregular migrant labour in different sectors of the economy. Second, to examine the working of recruitment and contracting systems, and to monitor the living and working conditions of trafficked persons. Third, to work together with governments and our social partners, to devise sustainable systems of migration for employment, taking due account of demographic change and demand factors, and building on the principles of our conventions.

We have a unique experience in tackling labour exploitation, in cooperation with employers’ and workers’organizations as our institutional social partners. We also make extensive use of partnerships in civil society. We believe that we can be truly effective with broad NGO involvement, including humanitarian organizations.
Some years ago, the global movement against trafficking was concerned mainly with sexual exploitation. Today there is more awareness of the wider dimensions. The European Union, the Council of Europe, and many national governments are drawing greater attention to the forced labour conditions in which children, women and also young men can be exposed in the shadow economies of regions including Europe. There is also a global economic dimension: very restrictive state policies on migration combined with huge wage differentials mean that the expected returns from taking the risks involved in trafficking become attractive.

The ILO accepts its responsibilities in this area, documenting facts and seeking appropriate solutions through strengthened supervisory procedures across the trafficking cycle. Our normative work is of intrinsic importance, not only for monitoring and supervision, but also for the design of integrated preventive programmes. Forced labour, coercion, compulsion and deception distinguish human trafficking from the smuggling of persons. The wealth of expertise associated with the ILO’s normative machinery – first of its Forced Labour Conventions and more recently of its Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention – can help States address the problems of trafficking more effectively, adopting the appropriate legislation, and devising the appropriate institutional response.

I should like to highlight the contribution of our International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) over the past decade. Child trafficking is a particularly loathsome form of human rights abuse, and the problem of child trafficking for labour as well as sexual exploitation is growing in parts of Europe. Today IPEC has programmes against trafficking worldwide, covering over 30 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. IPEC has recently turned its attention to the Balkan countries, adapting its successful methodology to the challenges of this region.

I should also like to introduce a very recent ILO initiative, the creation this year of its Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour. Most of you will be familiar with the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up, under which all ILO Member States accept certain principles including the abolition of forced labour. A Conference report published last year on Stopping Forced Labour, justly depicted trafficking as the “underside of globalization”, and considerably raised the profile of activities against trafficking within our organization. The special action programme was created to spearhead these activities through technical cooperation activities. Its goal, building on the earlier experience with child trafficking, is to ensure that our future programmes are fully comprehensive, drawing on all the ILO’s capacity to develop integrated approaches throughout the trafficking cycle.

Our first such programme addresses problems in Europe, with a particular emphasis on labour exploitation, employment-based prevention, and the need to redress labour market failures. We target several origin and destination countries, addressing both adult and child trafficking, with a number of demonstration projects. The programme is innovative and shows
the particular contribution that the ILO can make to the sustainable eradication of forced labour and trafficking.

Trafficking is an appalling manifestation of modern slavery. It is a highly complex phenomenon, a labour market and societal failure, linked to an often painful debate on irregular immigration and – increasingly - national security. It can be tackled effectively when employer’s and worker’s organizations reach agreements on humane conditions and social protection for all workers - and when there is full awareness among all relevant actors in civil society as to the urgent need to root out this social evil. The active participation of employers’ and workers’ organizations, as well as of the NGOs who have played such an important role at the community level, will greatly strengthen national and international action against trafficking.