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Esteemed Delegations from BRICS States and Invited Countries

Social Partners

Representatives of International and Regional Organisations

Senior Officials

Esteemed Guests

On behalf of the Government and the people of the Republic of South Africa, it is indeed our great pleasure to take over the presidency of BRICS from the People's Republic of China for twelve months.

Coordinator of China's BRICS Affairs and Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu attended the First BRICS Sherpa and Sous-Sherpa Meeting held in Bela Bela, Limpopo Province, from 01-02 February 2023, and that is where he formally handed over the gavel to South Africa.

Thus, the labour and employment stream takes the cue from this important event. Therefore, I am extremely proud to announce that the First Employment and Labour

Working Group (EWG) is amongst the first meetings our country is hosting as we traverse this journey of improving the lives of our citizens.

We would like to welcome delegations from fellow BRICS Member Countries to this First EWG as well as to the BRICS Network of Labour Research Institutes meeting, both taking place simultaneously here in Johannesburg during the course of the next four days.

As a quick reminder, our country's foreign policy approach is committed to extending the reach of BRICS beyond the five member states to include other states and intergovernmental bodies. BRICS is about friendships, partnerships and collaboration and seeks to leave its mark in the new global order that we all feel must include Africa and the Global South.

We must recall that the South African Presidency of BRICS is held under a broad theme: "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism". We are therefore pleased to receive our neighbours, namely; Eswatini, Malawi, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Last but not least, we are also delighted to have the representatives of the ILO, ISSA, ARLAC, and other guests at this meeting.

The number of partners will increase when President Cyril Ramaphosa hosts the BRICS Summit in August. We hope all our friends will join us again in future meetings and during the September BRICS Labour and Employment Ministers' Meeting (LEMM).

And very close to my heart. I take note of the five students that we, as the Department, want to expose to the issues of the labour market and diplomacy. Our commitment to developing young people is critical for the future of our country and beyond. The Guests of the Deputy Minister are here with us for the learning experience.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather today, we are faced with a world grappling with multiple challenges, such as volatile geopolitics, socio-economic challenges, climate change and many things that make our world less predictable. In addition, the world faces a series of interrelated crises, from

economic stagnation and joblessness to energy price increases and persistent poverty.

Most notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended economies and brought to the fore the need for a more robust and sustainable approach to work and the economy.

As our Foreign Affairs Minister, Naledi Pandor, said, BRICS has the potential to provide the leadership necessary “to strengthen multilateralism, bring about meaningful reform and can also work together to drive a sustainable global economic recovery that benefits not only us but the broader global South”.

We, as the employment and labour stream, need to cease this moment and meaningfully contribute to global economic recovery by providing balanced solutions for the future. We must look critically at how we can build sustainable enterprises, spur innovation, and enhance productivity while promoting labour rights and reducing decent work deficits.

Our collective march to gain lost economic ground due to prevailing challenges should not come at the expense of

the rights and welfare of workers. Instead, as articulated in the ILO's 2019 Centenary Declaration, a human-centred approach should serve as a compass to guide our efforts toward achieving economic recovery and growth.

Again, and more than anyone else, BRICS is well-positioned to lead this conversation.

BRICS countries are home to over 40% of the world's population and account for over a quarter of the global economy. Therefore, we must work together to address the pressing issues facing our countries, including the creation of decent work, social protection and the elimination of child labour.

Also, I believe we have a unique opportunity to create new and innovative policy environments that promote innovation, skills development, social justice and universal access to social protection while simultaneously addressing pervasive low productivity, inequality and poor working conditions.

South Africa presides over the labour and employment stream with an ambitious goal in mind of *ensuring decent work, dignity and respect for all!* And that is the leitmotif

that frames our approach to all technical meetings and the LEMM.

We are keen to achieve this goal through the following priorities:

- Building sustainable enterprises, including new forms of employment and increasing productivity;
- Promoting labour rights and decreasing decent work deficits in the context of the recovery;
- Universal social protection and ensuring minimum basic income; and
- Promoting decent work by closing skills gaps in the informal economy.

These priorities will form the basis of the technical meetings as we prepare a ministerial declaration to be adopted by our principals later in the year. This is the exact reason for these technical discussions in preparation for the LEMM will be an important opportunity for us to discuss these interrelated themes and identify concrete steps that we can take to achieve our shared goals.

I am confident that, through our collective efforts, we can build a more just, equitable and sustainable world of work, and I look forward to our discussions in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This working group will provide us with a platform to exchange ideas and best practices for addressing these challenges. I do not doubt that we will leave this conference with a better understanding of the steps we must take to improve workers' lives in our countries.

While pushing to attain Decent Work, one of our key priorities in the coming months will be to explore how we can build sustainable enterprises and enhance productivity across macro-economic, sectorial and enterprise levels.

This requires us to think seriously about new forms of employment and consider the role of innovation and technology in promoting sustainable development. To eloquently discuss a topic crucial to our countries and people, the relationship between productivity and decent work must be firmly established.

Productivity and decent work are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, productivity is essential for economic growth and competitiveness. But on the other, decent work, including protecting workers' rights, is critical for social progress and human development.

Unfortunately, in many of our countries, productivity is often achieved at the cost of decent work. As a result, we see too many cases of low productivity, poor working conditions, and exploitation of workers. This is unacceptable, and we need to find ways to change this.

That is why I am so thrilled to see all of you here today as we work together to explore how we can optimise the relationship between productivity and decent work. And this means that we must create policy environments that can enhance and promote productivity in all enterprises and economic sectors.

To achieve this goal, we need to take a comprehensive approach that addresses pervasive low productivity and poor working conditions in general while simultaneously attempting to develop a skilled workforce and productive economies.

As a result, the South African Presidency proposes the creation of a Productivity Ecosystem Platform among the BRICS members. We plan to launch this initiative during the LEMM later in the year. We also reach out to the ILO for support in developing and rolling out this programme.

At the same time, we must also prioritise promoting labour rights and reducing decent work deficits in the context of economic recovery. The world of work is undergoing a profound transformation. Therefore, we must work together to protect workers' rights and standards, even as economies and employment markets change.

Employment and labour rights issues are of the utmost importance to our economies and the well-being of our citizens.

Let me also remind you of the importance of the ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW), which serve as the foundation of Decent Work. These core conventions set out the fundamental rights of workers, including the right to form and join a trade union, the elimination of forced labour, and the abolition of child labour.

Worker rights are the **cornerstone** of a fair, just and prosperous society. They ensure that employees have access to safe working conditions, fair pay and benefits, and the ability to form unions and negotiate for better treatment. These rights are essential for individual workers and the health and stability of the broader economy.

Therefore, worker rights, productivity and Decent Work are intrinsically linked – a happy worker is a productive worker!

As BRICS countries, being some of the largest economies in the world, we have a special responsibility to lead the way in promoting and protecting worker rights. By implementing ILO Conventions, we can demonstrate our commitment to a fairer, more equitable society and create sustainable and inclusive growth conditions.

However, the reality is that many workers still face challenges in securing their rights. In many parts of the world, workers are denied basic rights, such as negotiating for better conditions or receiving fair pay for their labour. These challenges are often exacerbated by globalisation and the rise of many economic actors that

easily exploit workers in countries with weaker protection systems.

That is why BRICS countries must work together to promote and protect worker rights. By sharing our experiences and best practices, we can learn from each other and develop more robust, effective policies that ensure workers are treated fairly and equitably.

Worker rights are not just a moral obligation but a strategic imperative. Promoting and protecting worker rights can build stronger, more inclusive economies and create a better future for all our citizens.

The importance of worker rights cannot be overstated. It is our responsibility to ensure that workers have decent working conditions, fair wages, and protection against health and safety hazards. The ILO's FPRW conventions provide a vital framework for achieving these goals. As representatives of the BRICS countries, it is up to us to take a leadership role in promoting and protecting these rights.

As we Chair BRICS, it is also our wish to see this partnership operationalising the Durban Call To Action,

which is an outcome of the Fifth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour we hosted in May last year. We need to protect the most vulnerable among us.

As we discuss these issues over the next few days, I encourage you to think about how we can leverage the power of BRICS to drive progress and make a difference. We have a unique opportunity to collaborate and share best practices to help create a better future for our citizens.

In conclusion, I urge you all to engage in meaningful discussions and develop actionable recommendations that will help shape the future of work in the BRICS countries.

Thank you for being here today, and I hope you have an enjoyable and productive stay in Johannesburg.

Le a mogelegile!