I would like to thank the Norwegian Government for hosting this European Regional Meeting of the ILO.

Forty years ago Ireland’s social legislation already reflected the positive influence of the Conventions and Recommendations adopted by the ILO. Since then, as members of the European Union, we have also benefited from the manner in which the Union’s four freedoms have been adapted to the requirements of a Social Europe. These European Union requirements now extend beyond the international standards and measures which underpin the concept of decent work.

We were happy to welcome the ILO Director-General Guy Ryder on his first official visit to Ireland in February, and to discuss with him the priorities of the European Union at a time when Ireland holds the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Creating an environment where growth and jobs can be fostered in a period of consolidation has been particularly challenging in Ireland. We have been conscious of the importance of retaining a stable industrial relations environment and maintaining social dialogue while achieving of a fiscal consolidation of the scale that has been required.
The Europe 2020 Strategy – responding to the crisis

Ireland’s EU Council Presidency is committed to moving more decisively from crisis response mode to doing what is necessary to support sustainable recovery. The grave crisis that faced the EU in 2011 and 2012 has shown some signs of receding. The stabilisation in conditions achieved to date demonstrates that the EU can respond effectively to severe challenges when its members act together cohesively and decisively.

But it is critical that we maintain the momentum behind national-level reforms that are underpinned by the goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy: supporting growth that is smart, sustainable and inclusive.

It is clear that we must remain firmly focused on addressing the scale of the current jobs crisis. Unemployment levels are unacceptably high: now averaging almost 12% for the Euro Area, 11% for the EU. This is 26 million people unemployed across the Union, nearly two million more than this time last year.

Youth unemployment

Youth unemployment is at crisis levels in Europe and the European Foundation based in Dublin puts the estimated economic cost of this at 1.2 per cent of GDP, or more than €150 billion. The political agreement on an EU-wide Youth Guarantee is a crucial first step in tackling the crisis.

When I chaired the February EPSCO Council just over six weeks ago, priority policy concerns highlighted by EU Employment Ministers
included tackling long term unemployment and youth joblessness, as well as pursuing more effective activation and better education and training. Political agreement was also achieved at that meeting on the Youth Guarantee.

Implementation of the Guarantee will take time and poses a range of challenges for individual Member States. However, once implemented, the Guarantee will assure young people under the age of 25 a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed. It will contribute to three out of the five Europe 2020 targets: increasing the employment rate, reducing the extent of early school leaving and lifting people out of poverty and social exclusion.

Social Dialogue
We welcome the review provided on the work of the ILO in the region from 2009 to 2012.

The Director General’s report implies that social dialogue has universally been a casualty of economic adjustment programmes especially in the crisis hit countries.

I agree with the Director General that social dialogue should be a vital resource in facilitating such adjustments. Ireland’s experience underlines the need for social dialogue in identifying pathways through and hopefully out of the crisis. Social dialogue continues to play a critical role in policy making and in the management of the Irish economy at what is a very difficult time for the majority of Irish citizens. Not everyone will
agree on the path eventually chosen – but that is part of the dialogue process; it will not always result in a unity of outcome.

The primary role of government in times of great emergency is to take responsibility for reconciling social demands and finding solutions that get people and businesses back to work. Governmental policy and action is ultimately the effective way by which varying interests can come together to do the best for our countries and our societies. In Ireland this has involved difficult compromises.

The challenge now is improve social dialogue at EU and national levels and for closer involvement of the social partners through all stages of the European Semester. This is crucial if we are to ensure legitimacy and ownership, as well as a shared responsibility for difficult structural reforms that can help to deliver well-functioning and inclusive labour markets.

Finally, I would like to say on behalf of Ireland’s Presidency of the Council of Ministers that we will be urging other EU Member States to ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention. To that end we will be seeking a Council decision confirming that any EU-level impediments to ratification have been removed.

ENDS