



**United  
Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

## Sixtieth Session of the Commission for Social Development

### High-level panel discussion on “Emerging issues”

**"National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond: Challenges to getting on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda"**

**Wednesday, 9 February 2022, 10:00am – 12:00pm**  
(Virtual meeting)

### Chair's Summary

The Commission for Social Development held a panel discussion under sub-agenda item 3 (c) Emerging Issues on 09 February 2022. The theme of the panel was “*National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond: Challenges to getting on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.*”

**H.E. Ms. Maria del Carmen Squeff**, the Chair of the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission, opened the panel. The panellists were **H. E., Ms. Marisol Merquel**, President of the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies in Argentina; **H. E., Mr. Stephan Cueni**, Ambassador and Vice director of the Federal Social Insurance Office in Switzerland; **Ms. Megumi Muto**, Vice President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA); and **Mr. Stephen Devereux**, Research Fellow and the Founding Director of the Center for Social Protection at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. The panel was moderated by **Prof. Rolph van der Hoeven**, member of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy and Professor of Employment and Development Economics (Emeritus) at the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University in the Netherlands.

### **The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) context and beyond**

The socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been huge. Millions of lives have been lost and many more livelihoods have been disrupted, deepening poverty, inequality, and hunger, and reversing decades of development progress. Speakers highlighted the differentiated impacts of COVID-19, by age, gender, and socio-economic status. Emphasis was placed on the severe labour market impacts among young people, migrants, low-paid low-skilled workers, informal workers, and women who carry the burden of both paid and unpaid work and were

disproportionately represented in the most impacted sectors of the economy. In some countries, racial and ethnic minorities have faced disproportionately high rates of food insecurity while being least able to respond to COVID-related shocks. Young people globally expect to suffer long-term consequences of the pandemic with difficult transitions from education to the labour market and interrupted career paths. Countries with limited social protection programmes in place often struggle to mobilise an effective rapid response. Many low-income countries depended on assistance from the international community, including the United Nations agencies. COVID-19 exposed huge gaps in social protection provision even in high-income countries with well-developed and relatively generous programmes.

### **National policies and measures implemented by Member States to combat hunger and poverty in times of COVID-19**

Speakers highlighted the crucial role social policies, including social protection measures, have played in mitigating the worst impacts of the pandemic. However, it was also stressed that the fragmented nature of these policies has deepened disparities across and within countries. While many countries were able to deploy significant financial resources to crisis mitigation and recovery, others were not. Although many individuals were able to weather the storm, other individuals and groups in vulnerable situations were not adequately protected by policy responses. In addition, policies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, including school closures and rigid restrictions on mobility, have not affected all people equally, resulted in widening inequalities, for example in access to education.

Among the policies available to countries during COVID-19, social protection has been a key tool. **Argentina** – where the right to social protection is enshrined in law – has made significant efforts to protect its citizens through income support schemes, consolidated health care coverage, and direct food assistance among other measures. **Switzerland** expanded coverage of existing schemes to ensure the most vulnerable to COVID-related shocks were protected, including single-parent households, illiterate persons and those with insecure employment and housing situations. To protect people at risk from falling into poverty, Swiss authorities are supporting local and international research efforts to compile data in the targeted area, particularly on homelessness. **Japan** mobilized its Official Development Assistance to support social protection and health systems in several countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

While many countries deployed new social protection measures to counteract the impact of COVID-19 on the loss of livelihoods, speakers noted that countries with existing systems in place were able to scale up coverage and benefits more rapidly. Where existing systems were weak, countries struggled to respond adequately to the scale of the COVID-19 shock. Moreover, systems that already utilized digital technologies, for example, to register beneficiaries and make payments, experienced more effective emergency responses. Finally, even in countries where social protection systems were strong, there were still many gaps in coverage exposed by the crisis. Informal workers and migrants, who often lack coverage by either social insurance or social insurance schemes, were particularly vulnerable. Self-employed workers and employees of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises have also fallen into the category of vulnerable groups with limited or no access to social insurance and ineligible for social assistance. Women, who are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, bore a significant burden in light of these policy shortcomings.

## Getting back on track towards the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Speakers identified several critical policy directions that can help countries get back on track in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Consolidating the gains from the expansion of social protection measures during the pandemic was one such imperative. This includes, among others: ensuring coverage for informal workers and other vulnerable groups; increasing the value of benefits provided to guarantee economic security; harmonizing emergency and regular social protection systems; anchoring social protection in legal frameworks; digitizing social protection delivery where possible; and establishing more effective institutions for the management of social protection. It also means avoiding the imposition of austerity measures that would erode the gains made in social protection coverage and delivery. International financial institutions are key partners in this regard.

Speakers also mentioned the importance of using targeted social policies – in addition to universal rights-based policies – to address the specific disadvantages some vulnerable groups face, including informal workers, small-scale farmers, migrants, and persons with disabilities. These measures rely on strong data, to better understand who is at risk and in what ways and to ensure effectiveness and coordination in the delivery of public services. Other barriers to access to social protection and other social services include stigma and discrimination, as well as onerous bureaucratic and administrative requirements. Governments can learn lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of streamlining procedures and deploying more participatory techniques, including digital technologies, to involve those who receive support in decisions about implementation.

Throughout the discussion, speakers highlighted the need to strengthen the digital technologies that made many elements of life – from employment to healthcare provision, to social contact – possible during widespread pandemic-related restrictions. The imperative to leave no one behind must now also extend to leaving no one offline and removing existing digital divides. Speakers pointed to the power of rural internet access in extending public service provision including healthcare, enabling business growth, especially for micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises through the more efficient supply chain and human resource management, as well as promoting financial inclusion of previously excluded groups. Governments must build on these experiences and continue to expand digital opportunities.

Finally, speakers emphasized the need to engage all stakeholders in the social and economic recovery from COVID-19. Private sector actors, for example, can be crucial partners for mobilizing financial resources for sustainable recovery measures and to push towards achieving the SDGs. Ensuring capacities and systems are in place to make use of this finance is the critical responsibility of governments. Similarly, the international community has an important role to play in ensuring inequalities between and within countries do not increase during recovery. Relationships between local and central governments may be revisited based on pandemic experiences in order to make the most effective public sector delivery mechanisms as well as to support and develop a sustainable agricultural sector, critical to achieving food security and eliminating poverty. Civil society partners must be engaged to guarantee the participation of all population groups – including women and girls, children, youth, older persons, persons with

disabilities, migrants, and others – in important decisions about policy implementation and to ensure that their voices are heard during recovery.