

Summary of the Panel Discussion of the Regional Commissions
Wednesday, 9 February 2005 (3:00PM)
Conference Room 4

The panel discussion with Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions on regional perspective on the implementation of WSSD focused on the issues of poverty, employment and social integration. Mixed progress was reported by all of the Commissions and many of the same constraints facing the regions that were present at the time the Copenhagen Summit took place continue to prevail.

Presentations and discussion

Mr. K.Y. Amoako, Executive Director of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) reported that in Sub-Saharan Africa poverty has continued to rise and over one third of the population is undernourished. There has been a net addition of more than 63 million people to the ranks of the poor. Unemployment on the continent is extremely high and underemployment is rampant, affecting 40% of the labor force.

Mr. Amoako did report progress on the issue of social integration which has been attributed to the growth of democracy and a notable improvement in governance throughout the region. While it was acknowledged that conflict continued to be a major disruptive factor, the African Union has had important achievements in conflict resolution and progress in the areas of civil society organization and gender equality.

The challenges to progress listed by ECA were low growth, persistent poverty, weak governance and institutional capacity, the social and economic disruption resulting from conflict, and shortfalls in health and educational services. Further constraints noted were inadequate financial resources and weak human and institutional capacity. Finally, ECA underlined that NEPAD will be instrumental in providing a framework to address these challenges and allow Africans to take ownership of the development process.

The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Ms. Brigita Schmognerova, noted the major challenges facing the less advanced economies and the emerging market economies in Europe. Less advanced economies were facing massive poverty and increasing inequality since the reforms of the late 1980s. Quality and access to health care are also inadequate with a temporary increase of death rates, a decrease in life expectancy, decline in fertility, and the rapid spread of infectious diseases.

Major trends of the emerging market economies were noted such as high and increasing unemployment and low employment rates. Disparities in income are growing quickly within some countries and urban –rural inequalities and regional inequalities in GDP per capita are deepening. Education, social and pension reforms lead to the deterioration of immediate social situation of the majority of the population.

Mr. Jose Luis Machinea, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) noted an overall lack of social progress in the

region since Copenhagen. While poverty rates had decreased slightly in recent years, the total number of poor has risen substantially. Urban unemployment and informal employment have increased, and the number of those employed in the formal economy has been decreasing since 1990. Workers without social protection now comprise the vast majority of the urban labor force.

Mr. Machinea indicated further that persistence of income concentration and employment constraints threatened social integration by segmenting society, reducing social protection and participation of the poor in the development process. Disruptive processes such as risky and violent behavior among youth have emerged as growing obstacles in the labour market and difficulties in achieving social mobility grow.

On a positive note, ECLAC noted that governments have increased the levels of public social expenditures, which have contributed to alleviating somewhat the special needs of the poor and most vulnerable groups. Similarly, significant progress has been made in the implementation of policies for reversing discrimination against women and against indigenous and afro-descendant groups, but sharp disparities still prevail.

Mr. Kim Hak-Su, representing the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), reported that efforts to eliminate poverty produced mixed results. While some areas reported progress, implementing national Poverty Reduction Strategies into effective policies would be needed in areas where the situation has deteriorated.

In the area of employment the issue of female international migration was highlighted. While female unemployment rates are higher than that of males, youth unemployment was greater than that of adults. Further noted, the Asia Pacific region houses 70% of the illiterate population of the world (600 million persons), and 65% of those are women.

Insofar as social integration is concerned, comprehensive social development programmes were being formulated and laws were being revised vis a vis vulnerable groups, and institutional arrangements for social development are being established with time bound targets to ensure cost-efficiency and maximum impact.

Finally, ESCAP underlined the great devastation in human and economic terms that the recent Tsunami brought to the region. A framework of action was presented, which included the development of an early warning system, the building of infrastructure to reduce vulnerabilities and the expansion of financial assistance.

Ms. Mervat Tallaway, Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia reported that efforts to create an enabling environment for social development included governance and democracy projects and numerous community development undertakings. In the area of poverty alleviation, progress has been made in the preparation of technical studies on the measurement, characteristics and determinants of poverty, as well as the development of policy tools necessary for poverty reduction.

ESCWA also reported that with a view towards full employment, technical studies were conducted focusing on the effects of globalization, the creation of employment opportunities among the rural population and the promotion of new technologies. In the area of social integration, activities to improve the situation of vulnerable groups have included implementing field projects, preparing studies and organizing seminars and training workshops to strengthen community self-reliance. In addition to encouraging policy-makers and donors to increase resources allotted for social development, studies were also prepared to improve and access to education and primary health care.

Following these presentations, an exchange took place between the Executive Secretaries and the Commission. Further elaborate by the Executive Secretaries on their plans of implementing policies of gender mainstreaming, addressing growing demographical imbalances, and how to improve coordination between the Regional Commissions and actors in civil society. The issue of violence and youth was also raised, as well as the question of how best to face the challenge of gathering reliable data.

Recommendations

For the ECA, in order to advance social development priorities, lessons learned in the poverty reduction strategies must be applied. Employment policy and the promotion of better governance can be achieved through research and advocacy and the importance of gender mainstreaming and tackling HIV/AIDS is also important.

Recommendations for the less advanced economies of the ECE included the promotion of policies that create pro-poor growth and the implementation of reforms that provide effective social protection for all. To redress current challenges in employment and in wage and income distribution, attention must be placed on the non-observed economy as it does not provide social protection and deepens, among others, gender inequalities. For the emerging market economies correcting market failures and integration of policies (education, housing, among others) are needed to increase employment opportunities.

For ECLAC, it is necessary to increase the level of high-quality employment and social protection, and to reduce income inequality and social disparities. Building human capital among low income groups and maintaining growth trends in social expenditures will also be essential to uphold the commitments made at Copenhagen.

Looking forward in the ESCAP region there are pertinent issues that deserve further attention such as poverty, migration, ageing, gender disabilities, HIV/AIDS and other contagious diseases. Additionally, in anticipating the longer term effects of the tsunami the needs of vulnerable groups in the area health and development must be attended to and close cooperation with relevant bodies will be needed to assist in the recovery.

In the ESCWA region, national, regional international efforts to achieve social development goals must be interlinked. On an international level, political financial and technical support are a prerequisite to overcoming challenges in the region. Promoting an environment free of war and instability is necessary to facilitate such support.