

Civil Society Forum
Employment Working for All: Partners in Innovation

Statement by Johan Schölvink, Director
Division for Social Policy and Development, DESA

6 February 2007

Madam Chair,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I was asked to address the methods of work of the Commission for Social Development, and talk about the importance of partnerships while highlighting the cross-cutting themes and difficulties in implementing the social development agenda.

In addressing the new, two-year cycle of the Commission, I wish to call your attention to the decision by the General Assembly at its 57th session, which requested that each functional commission of the Economic and Social Council examine its methods of work. The objective of this exercise was to better pursue implementation of the outcome of the major United Nations conferences and summits.

In each year subsequent to this, the Commission for Social Development examined its methods of work and discussed options for improvement. Then in 2005, ECOSOC decided that the Commission would be organized in a series of two-year action-oriented implementation cycles that would include a review segment and a policy segment – an approach that follows the work cycle of the Commission on Sustainable Development. In 2006 the Council decided that the priority theme of the 2007-2008 cycle would be “promoting full employment and decent work for all”. The promotion of employment, together with poverty eradication and social integration, form the three core pillars of Copenhagen.

The Commission will thus begin tomorrow, at its forty-fifth session, with the first part of its work in a review session of the priority theme. The second part of the work of the Commission will continue to be devoted to its review of plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups.

The review session, which will have as its outcome a Chairperson’s summary, will examine progress or regress in the implementation of the goal of full employment as called for in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action. This evaluation should enable an improved understanding of priority concerns and pave the way for an effective policy discussion in the course of the year. To assist this process, the Commission’s review will include interactive panel discussions that were mentioned by the Chairman of the Commission in his statement.

The policy session, which will take place in 2008 – the second year of the cycle – will focus on policy options and possible actions to address the constraints and obstacles

to implementation identified during the review session. The outcome of the policy session will be a negotiated document, which will be more action-oriented, identifying practical measures intended to facilitate implementation of full employment and decent work.

It is hoped, overall, that the focus on a core issue of the Copenhagen Summit over a two-year cycle will enable the Commission to go into greater depth by also addressing cross-cutting issues relevant to the theme under discussion.

This is critical as the Commission sets off to examine, in a multidimensional manner, the issue of employment. We are all familiar with the trends, which point to an increase in global unemployment and underemployment. And for those of us who work to advance the social development agenda, we know that this affects a much larger proportion of individuals on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder – poor and uneducated people and those with skills not valued in the economy – than those with an education, social connections, and more highly-valued skills.

It also disproportionately affects youth, older persons, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples. Moreover, opportunities for work and employment are generally more scarce in rural areas than in urban areas, even though rural residents make up the majority of the population in many developing countries, and the situation does not appear to be improving.

Around the world, new job opportunities have emerged predominantly in the services sector, and most of these opportunities have been within the informal economy, where workers are poorly compensated and not provided with any kind of social protection, and where labour laws and standards are seldom observed. Precarious working conditions are now the rule rather than the exception in many contexts. For the majority of informal workers, working in the informal economy is a consequence of significant entry barriers in the formal sector.

At the same time, the desire for flexibility and need to compete in the globalized market place has left even formal employment workplaces less secure. Globalization, manifesting itself through increased trade and mobility of financial capital, has prompted the oft-repeated phrase that a global marketplace has been created with winners and losers.

Madam Chair,

When I addressed this Forum one year ago, I said that society continues to be characterized by significant economic and social disparities, in which poverty sharply contrasts with levels of wealth. Numerous indices of well-being – wages, unemployment rates, income and wealth levels, crime rates, education, health and mortality statistics – all reveal a substantially stratified society. Sadly, this still rings true as this session of the Commission begins its work. In this context I wish to commend this Forum in the link it has made between employment working for all and the importance of partnerships.

It is well known that partnerships come in many forms at the local, national, and international level. Creative and strategic partnerships between governments, civil society and the private sector have a critical and longstanding role in advancing social development. Moreover, partnerships that maximize advantages on every side can lead to creative responses that result in demonstrable development impact.

But the space required among the various actors to further development goals, does not come easily. We hear often of calls to numerous entities to work in genuine partnership by assuming mutual responsibilities. But the reality of partnerships, as we know, is a two-sided coin; not all are considered beneficial, especially in cases where private interests trump the public good. In too many situations, workers continue to be exploited and collective labour agreements continue to be resisted. Let me point out, however, that there is no match to the work of NGOs in this perilous arena. Thanks to their tireless and diligent efforts, labour abuses around the world continue to be exposed.

Indeed, the United Nations is pursuing various paths to promote decent work practices and advance the decent work agenda, particularly with regards to clarifying standards of corporate responsibility and accountability. At the same time, multi-stakeholder coalitions work to monitor trends in workplace standards in order to bring businesses into compliance with ILO and fair labour standards.

Partnerships are also critical at the developmental level in the promotion of full employment. One of the more successful criteria, as noted in the Report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme, identifies integrated programmes that combine training with work experience. Apprenticeships help not only youth and others learn an occupation, but also foster their insertion into the labour market. Coordination between training institutions can help ensure that training content corresponds to labour market demand, which in turn can enhance the portability of skills. However, without employment opportunities for trained workers, training is of limited use.

Thus, greater effort is needed to build the pathways to disrupt this vicious circle and stop the devil from taking the hindmost. This is done through the positive contributions of partnerships that promote and implement social development objectives, and that strengthen the coalition of multilateral institutions as a powerful force for greater equity and social justice as a whole.

Thank you.