



Chairperson's Summary of the High Level Panel Discussion to Commemorate the Fifteenth Anniversary of the World Summit for Social Development

3 February 2010

The Commission for Social Development held a High-Level Panel discussion to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the World Summit for Social Development held at Copenhagen in 1995. Mr. Jimi Adesina, Professor of Sociology at Rhodes University, South Africa, gave the keynote speech. The Commission also heard presentations from the following panelists: H.E. Mr. Rudolf Hundstorfer, Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection of Austria, Mr. Enrique Deibe, Secretary of Employment, Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security of Argentina, and Mr. Chua Hoi Wai, Business Director of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service of Hong Kong, China. An interactive dialogue followed the presentations by the panel.

Rethinking social development

At the World Summit on Social Development in 1995, world leaders agreed to fight poverty, promote productive employment, and strengthen the social fabric of their societies. The outcome of the meeting captured a new approach to social development consisting of a series of commitments and the Programme of Action that reflected a common purpose and sense of solidarity between nations and their desire to put people at the centre of development.

It was observed that the world was still far away from achieving the commitments made at Copenhagen. The World Social Summit was a historic moment for returning to a wider vision of social development. It was held under conditions of widespread poverty and growing inequality, even after a decade of neo-liberal orthodox economic reforms. The Copenhagen plus 5 and Copenhagen plus 10 reflections also portrayed grim images of the state of the world social situation. Currently, the world was encountering two major additional challenges - the global financial and economic crisis, and climate change. They were creating social and economic crises and acute vulnerability in the world's poorest regions.

Social policy should address social development in a much broader way: addressing production, protection, reproduction, redistribution, social cohesion and nation building, and should be based on equality and solidarity. The proposed transformative social policy should lead to outcomes that simultaneously reduce inequality, poverty rates, and improve social development in health, education and international

competitiveness. Such social policy should relate not only to the economy but also to the transformation of social relations, such as equality and gender relations.

Social policy regimes grounded in solidarity and norms of equality were much better in producing social cohesion and inclusion. There was a need for universalism in social policy for both practical and ethical reasons.

A more visionary agenda setting for social development was required. There should be an acknowledgement of the importance of policy space and coherent national-level efforts in building institutional capacity for policy learning. It should also be recognized that successful financing mechanisms were first local and should not simply be about the State's capacity to tax, but the collective capacity for resource-pooling and building social funds. International development assistance should complement, rather than supplant, local level efforts.

Copenhagen+15: Progress made

The important role of the World Summit for Social Development in making social development part of the development agenda, and in setting the precedent for other world summits was emphasized. In the light of mixed progress over the last 15 years and the recent food, energy, financial and economic crises, as well as climate change, the commitments of the World Summit for Social Development should be more relevant than ever before.

The Copenhagen vision was a very integrated approach where social development was positioned in the context of economic, political, social, cultural and legal environments. One of the important achievements of the Social Summit was to confirm that social development was an integral part of sustainable development. The Social Summit also raised awareness on social development among policy makers and the general public. The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action gave visibility to basic workers' rights and reconfirmed the commitment to promote full and productive employment after many years of purely economic priorities at the international level.

Progress towards achieving the goals of the Social Summit had been mixed. In some areas, such as primary school enrolment and gender equality, significant progress had been documented, while advancements in other areas such as reducing poverty and inequality had been disappointing. While many new global instruments had been implemented in the area of social integration, progress had been elusive and difficult to measure. The global crises, including the food and fuel crises followed by the financial and economic crisis, were posing a major challenge to social development and threatened to reverse gains achieved thus far.

New challenges and responses

There was a shared concern about the negative impact of the global financial and economic crisis on development and achieving internationally agreed development goals,

including the Millennium Development Goals. Many developing countries had suffered setback in their efforts to achieve the MDGs by 2015 as a result of the global crises. It was the poorest that needed protection from loss of income, high food and oil prices and the effects of climate change. International cooperation was imperative and developed countries could do the most in helping developing countries cope with the global crises.

It was noted that social policy had become even more important during times of crisis. Some countries had made positive changes in social policy – including moving towards greater universalism and expansion of social protection – that had helped them in the current crisis. Other countries focused on creating employment, protecting families, and adopted counter-cyclical measures as well as national social protection strategy to combat poverty. In response to the recent food and energy crises, cash transfers to cover food and energy price increase were provided. Increased attention was paid to the needs of rural areas and social expenditures were not reduced despite the crises. Continued efforts to achieve the Copenhagen commitments included a focus on growth and equity, strengthened domestic economy and infrastructure, and policies and interventions that targeted the prevention of poverty traps and relapses.

In some other countries, low unemployment rates were attributed to measures that maintained existing employment, created new jobs or redistributed work, provided training, and improved social safety nets. Nevertheless, since the weakened economies had limited the capacity to address global challenges, a redesign of strategies aligned with new realities was necessary.

The role of poor economic policies in instigating the crisis and the importance of not repeating the mistakes of the past were also noted. For example, when economic growth was based on low wages and employment insecurity, a high level of vulnerability was generated. In that context support for the ILO's Global Jobs Pact was expressed.

Social protection was a means to achieving social integration and poverty reduction and the role of the State in conducting social policy was important. Given the different levels of development and the specific conditions among and between countries, there was no “one size fits all” formula to cope with the financial and economic crisis. Different policies that range from Government intervention, increased levels of consumption and competitive exchange rates had helped countries cope with the challenges of the global crises.

Role of civil society in social development

Civil society had an important role to play in fulfilling the commitments of Copenhagen. Civil society organizations supported the design, implementation and monitoring of policies at the global, national and local levels to achieve those commitments. They had for long advocated pro-poor policies and also played a vital role in delivering social services to those who needed them the most.