

Commission for Social Development
51st Session

Agenda item 3 (a), priority theme: “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”

Chair’s Summary

The Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2006/18 requested that the outcome of the Commission's review of the priority theme should be in the form of a Chair's summary. The Commission for Social Development at its 51st session held discussions, including a panel discussion, under agenda item 3(a) on the priority theme: “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”.

The Commission heard presentations from the following panellists: H.E. Ms. Maria Soledad Arellano, Vice Minister of Social Development of Chile; H.E Mr. Ahmad Zahir Faqiri, Deputy Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, on behalf of H.E. Dr. Suraya Paikan, Deputy Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Disability of Afghanistan; Mr. Lauris Beets, Director for International Affairs and principle advisor to the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment on international matters of the Netherlands, and Dr. Ronnie Goldberg, Executive Vice President and Senior Policy Officer for the United States Council for International Business (USCIB) of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) (NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC). The panel was moderated by the Right Honourable Ms. Kim Campbell, former Prime Minister of Canada.

Empowerment of people is critical to achieving poverty eradication, full and productive employment and social integration, the three core objectives of social development as defined by world leaders at the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development. Policies and strategies to promote empowerment will advance those objectives, while measures to further social development also reinforce and advance the empowerment of people.

The term empowerment has generally been employed to refer to enhancing the capabilities and functioning of marginalized and disadvantaged social groups, including people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, youth and older persons, to fully participate in social, political economic and cultural life, and to exercise greater choice and control over their own well-being. However, promoting people’s empowerment should go beyond group-specific approaches. It should rather aim to embrace a holistic venue so as to focus on people-centred development as a comprehensive objective of the development agenda.

Centrality of empowerment to social development

Empowerment is emerging as a central theme in development parlance, one that is often closely linked to effective participation. Aspects of empowerment such as

participation, human dignity and freedom and full utilization of human resources are elaborated in numerous key United Nations policy and human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Declaration of Social Progress and Development and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Empowerment is a process with different components. Empowerment requires an enabling environment that supports policies and an attitude change to permit all people of all abilities across the lifecycle to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Meaningful participation is one of the most observable aspects of empowerment. In fact, the process is interactive and mutually reinforcing: through active participation, people affect the achievement of objectives, and the achievement of objectives reinforces empowerment.

Empowerment derives and builds upon the intrinsic resources of human beings and their inner potential for taking charge of their own destiny. Its essence relates to the need for people to reclaim ownership of the improvement of their life through enriching it. As a tool for enhancing human capital, empowerment is a process for self-development. As such, empowerment does not imply a set of measures that a group of people may prescribe to another group to adopt and implement. The process of empowerment will ideally combine policies and behaviours that seek to enhance choice and capacities of those who are experiencing powerlessness and discrimination.

Key aspects of empowerment include: *social empowerment*; which refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for well-being and productivity; *economic empowerment*, which enables disadvantaged and marginalized populations, through access to jobs and livelihoods as well as basic entitlements, to exert greater control over their resources and choices in areas such as health, housing and education; *political empowerment*, which refers to a populations' ability to influence processes and decisions that affect their well-being; and *legal empowerment*, which concerns strengthening individuals' ability to exercise their rights, and institutional capacity to respond to the needs of people.

Key areas of empowerment in social development: policies and measures to *eradicate poverty* will directly and indirectly empower people living in poverty. The active participation and strengthened voice of people living in poverty in national and local decision-making help policies better respond to their needs and anti-poverty measures more effective; creation of *full employment and decent work* promotes empowerment and social integration by making people agents of their own actions and helping to improve living standards. Empowerment is also a means of achieving decent work through individuals or groups negotiating, including in collective action, more equitable access to jobs, better working conditions and ultimately more inclusive and job-rich economic growth; empowerment is central to *social integration*, as it strengthens the capacity and voice of all people to fully participate in all aspects of society, including decision-making. In turn, social integration fosters the empowerment of all people, particularly the most disadvantaged groups such as persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and indigenous peoples, through the

removal of any barriers to participation and the provision of opportunities for decent work, enjoyment of basic services and full participation in political life for all.

Sustainable development: broad-based engagement is required for any efforts to confront challenges to sustainable development, in its all dimensions – social, economic and environmental. When empowered, people will become agents of their own positive change, and can be part of the solution to global challenges. Participation is also important in ensuring that Governments respond to social needs, including those of people living in poverty, and therefore for development to be socially sustainable.

Creating an enabling environment to empower people

Empowerment is a long-term dynamic process that requires actions along multiple fronts. Its realization requires inclusive and coherent cross-sectoral policies; a strong just and non-discriminatory legal framework; effective institutions that can facilitate civic engagement and broad-based participation. This process is a two-way street since the participation of citizens makes institutions accountable and decision-makers more responsive.

While all stakeholders have a role and responsibilities for promoting people's empowerment, Governments, in particular, have a critical role to play in creating an enabling environment that provides the tools and capacities needed for individuals to empower themselves.

1) Policies and strategies to promote people's empowerment

An enabling environment calls for the formulation and implementation of ***inclusive and comprehensive policies and strategies***. Simply allocating a certain portion of a national budget has proven to be insufficient for national poverty reduction strategies to be sustainable. It requires empowerment of people, by involving them in the decision-making process to improve their own life. Such a people-centred approach gives people choices, enables them to claim their rights but also makes them accountable for their responsibilities.

Strengthening ***human capacities*** is necessary for people's empowerment. Investment in quality education and skills training opportunities, particularly for young people, as well as basic health care is essential for empowerment and improved livelihoods. In addition to political will and the provision of adequate financial resources, concrete and practical measures that are appropriate for the national and local context are needed to remove cultural and physical barriers to full access to educational opportunities.

Social protection further helps individuals and families build human capital, as well as other assets, and improve their livelihood prospects, thereby empowering them socially and economically. Social protection systems should be developed progressively to ensure sustainability, as levels of coverage and benefits can be expanded over time and remain effective in empowering people. When well organized with consideration of its sustainability, social protection could lead to greater socio-

economic equalities, equal opportunities, equal access to social services and broad-based participation.

A sustainable labour market is needed for empowerment and poverty eradication. In order to promote decent work, economic growth and good governance must be accompanied by functioning markets, a healthy private sector and an environment conducive to enterprise. In particular, an enabling environment should be created to support economic growth, open markets, increase opportunities and allow for the development of a favorable regulatory framework for private enterprise and entrepreneurship to invest in people, infrastructure and connectivity. Empowerment through economic institutions such as cooperatives also contributes to the creation of decent employment as well as poverty reduction and social integration.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to multiple dimensions of empowerment. Public policies on information and communication technologies should foster wider use of ICTs, including through the development of technology infrastructure and public access, engagement in public-private partnerships, and promotion of content in indigenous and local languages.

2) Strong and efficient institutions

Effective and responsive institutions provide the tools and capacities necessary for all citizens to fully participate in all aspects of life in an enabling environment. This involves putting people at the centre of decision-making processes, creating the conditions for their exercise of choice and freedom regarding their own lives, and social investment in areas such as education, health and infrastructure.

3) Legal Framework

Empowerment of disadvantaged social groups, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, peoples with disability, and older persons, also requires the elimination/amendment of discriminatory laws and provisions and improved access to justice and legal instruments. Strategies to empower social groups should be developed in accordance with their respective needs and concerns, particularly in the areas of full employment and decent work, equality and financial inclusion. In this regard, international legal instruments help to transform national policies, legal frameworks and strategies, in particular for persons with disabilities. It is important to prioritize the implementation of internationally-agreed programmes of action, conventions and norms through removing social, political, legal and economic barriers to meaningful participation by all members of society, especially of marginalized groups.

A way forward

Empowerment of people, in particular, the most vulnerable, requires the transformation of policies, strategies, programmes as well as behaviours in all areas, at all levels, and by all stakeholders. It requires a sustained, dynamic and interactive process that creates the conditions for people to claim ownership of the improvement of their life. This process enables people to become active agents of positive change and be a part of the solution with the support of national and local institutions.

Concrete measures to creating an environment conducive to people's empowerment involve: 1) further strengthening of social policies to address specific needs of disadvantaged social groups; 2) adoption of people-centred development as a core objective of social and sustainable development; 3) formulation of more comprehensive, integrated inclusive policies and programmes that aim to improve access and opportunities for all; 4) building or strengthening the capacity of institutions facilitating the participation and engagement of citizens so that they become more efficient, effective, transparent and accountable; 5) ensuring access to justice and legal instruments to reduce/eliminate poverty and inequality; 6) strengthening of human capacities through promoting inclusive and sustainable labour markets, social protection and investing in, among others, education, health, and ICTs.

Empowerment of people is a critical building block in the achievement of the core objectives of social development - poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work, and social integration -, and more broadly, sustainable development.

Empowerment should be regarded as an emerging policy approach that cuts across sectors and can address various aspects of social development and sustainable development. As such, it can be a critical instrument to elaborate a policy framework in following-up the Rio+20 outcomes as well as preparation for the post-2015 development agenda.