Fifty-second session of the Commission for Social Development

Chair's Summary

At its fifty-second session, held in February 2014, the Commission for Social Development considered the priority theme "Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all" and issues pertaining to social groups. The Commission also convened three high-level panel discussions: on the priority theme; the emerging issues: social drivers of sustainable development; and in observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014.

Priority theme

Member States reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Summit for Social Development as well as the further initiatives for social development adopted by the General Assembly at its twenty-fourth special session.

It was highlighted that the focus on empowerment helps in accelerating the implementation of the MDGs as well as ensuring the centrality of people in the post-2015 development agenda. The post-2015 development agenda was recognized as a window of opportunity to empower all citizens, reduce inequalities and build inclusive, cohesive and sustainable societies. Many delegates stressed that the eradication of poverty should continue to be the focus of the post-2015 development agenda. In many countries, poverty remains a major challenge in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis, and in the context of continuous food and energy insecurity, negative impacts posed by climate change, and rising inequality. Several delegates highlighted extreme inequality as a hindrance to social and economic development, and a possible source of instability and conflict. Reaffirming their commitment to reducing poverty within the framework of the MDGs, Member States reiterated the importance of people-centred development.

The post-2015 development agenda should integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development in a balanced manner, taking into account the need for the empowerment of people, in particular, vulnerable and marginalized social groups and persons. Delegates emphasized that gender equality, democratic governance, and the rule of law are means for achieving sustainable development. The importance of inclusive and sustainable economic growth was underscored. Concerns were expressed for the growing number of natural disasters and its effect on development.

Many delegates stressed that governments can adopt an empowering approach to policy making and policy implementation through participatory mechanisms to meet the needs of all members of society. This approach goes beyond targeting social groups to aim at deep structural transformation. Open and inclusive institutions, transparency and accountability, respect for human rights, impartial justice system, and civic engagement are core elements of this approach. It was recognized that Governments can play an important role in creating an enabling environment to expand people's choices, promote their participation in decision-making, providing equal opportunities, and eliminating discrimination and inequality. Effective social protection, access to quality education and

decent work for all are proven effective strategies. In this regard, strong support was expressed by many delegates for the Social Protection Floors Initiative.

The need for a continued and strengthened partnership among governments, private sector, development partners, civil society, service providers, trade unions, employer's organizations and other relevant stakeholders, was reiterated as essential for the empowerment of all member of society. In particular, the important role played by civil society organizations, in empowering vulnerable or marginalized groups was emphasized. The role of the private sector in empowering people needs to be further explored in collaboration with partners such as UN Global Compact and the ILO.

Several delegates stressed the need to fulfil the internationally agreed commitments on official development assistance, debt relief, market access, financial stability, capacity building and technical support, including technology transfer. Innovative sources of finance for development, including a financial transaction tax were noted. The need for continued cooperation to improve data collection systems was highlighted.

Work of the Commission for Social Development

Delegates noted the Commission has made important contributions and progress in guiding social policy to open up opportunities for those who would have otherwise been marginalized. Ongoing attention of the Commission was identified as essential to support national efforts to address existing and emerging challenges.

The strengthening and reform of the Economic and Social Council was highlighted as a key opportunity to increase harmonization and coordination to achieve sustainable development. The need for the Commission to be aware of and to support the ongoing reform of the ECOSOC was underscored. The Commission, with robust civil society participation, has an essential role to play in the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda, through ensuring the strengthening of the social pillar of sustainable development. This should be further strengthened, in accordance with the General Assembly Resolution 68/1 and the newly created integration segment of the ECOSOC. Some delegates addressed the need for the Commission to adopt a multi-year work programme, aligned to the themes of the ECOSOC, as well as to identify clear conclusions and recommendations from a social perspective that are relevant for the Council and the High-level Political Forum.

Youth

Member States highlighted the need for an increased and effective participation of youth in decision-making processes at all levels, including in the post-2015 process. Youth employment challenges, especially mismatches between youth qualifications and skills required for labor markets were discussed. Member States shared initiatives in tackling youth employment challenges. Increased youth focus in the works of the United Nations system was emphasized and in this regard, the Secretary General's Five Year Action Agenda for Youth, the nomination of the Secretary-General's first Envoy on Youth and the upcoming ECOSOC Global Youth Forum were welcomed. Youth delegates called for strengthening of the youth delegate programmes, as well as consideration of new structures such as a Permanent Forum on Youth.

Older persons

Delegates discussed various policy initiatives for older persons and noted the need to promote and protect their rights. Issues highlighted include: age-based discrimination; active ageing; improving age-adequate infrastructure; improving social protection systems and providing income security; enabling older workers to extend their active lives; removing barriers to open businesses; and investing in healthcare services including homecare.

It was noted that the need to promote and protect the rights of older persons had become an important cross-cutting issue. However the means expressed by delegations varied from raising awareness in order to move away from a medical/welfare to a rights-based approach, to advancing the discussion of an international legally binding instrument. Some Member States expressed support for a UN convention on the rights of older persons. It was noted that the vision for the post-2015 development agenda can offer Member States and the UN system possibilities to anchor the issue of ageing at the core of the global development agenda.

Persons with disabilities

A majority of delegates emphasized the importance of the UN General Assembly High-level Meeting on Disability and Development (HLMDD) and the implementation of its outcome document, with a view to including disability in the post-2015 development framework. Delegates placed emphasis on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their social inclusion, and expressed their commitments to mainstream disability in all aspects of development. The importance of regional contributions to the HLMDD and disability-inclusive development was reiterated. To achieve disability-inclusive development, the quality of disability data, statistics and indicators need to be further improved. Some delegates called for the inclusion of quantitative goals with measureable targets for persons with disabilities in the post-2015 development agenda. The appointment of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disability and Accessibility was welcomed, but clarification of the envoy's mandate was requested.

The Special Rapporteur on Disability presented his report, emphasizing the importance of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the rights-based approach to social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Family

Delegates emphasized that empowering people required empowerment of families as agents of development, with family focused policies recognized as a part of an inclusive development approach. Several Governments prioritized support for vulnerable families and took measures to enhance the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society through legislative measures, social protection provision, up-scaling of cash transfers and investment to keep families together. Better representation of families through working with family organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders was seen as essential to advance effective family policy development.

High-level panel discussion on the priority theme: "Promoting the empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all"

The panel on the priority theme made clear that the messages of the World Summit for Social Development still resonate and that it is important to recall such messages and goals in defining the post-2015 development agenda. In the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, Governments agreed to a series of actions to empower people living in poverty and promote their participation. Empowerment of people is necessary for the achievement of sustainable development and should be an important goal of the post-2015 agenda.

Panellists noted that Governments play an important role in creating the conditions under which individuals and communities can empower themselves to escape poverty, attain productive employment and decent work and achieve social integration. While concrete strategies to promote empowerment are context-specific, panellists stressed the importance of strategies that build the capacities of individuals and groups; actions that strengthen inclusive and open institutions and mechanisms for participation; and of action to end discrimination. People must be active agents of development and control decisions about their lives. Equal opportunity for all and equity of outcomes should form the backbone of policy frameworks.

A two-track approach is needed to promote empowerment. General policies and inclusive institutions must equalize opportunities and eliminate barriers to full participation. At the same time, targeted measures must be taken to reach those groups that face challenges in overcoming exclusion and poverty to foster their participation. These two tracks must be integrated into one single policy framework.

Social policies, in particular social protection, serve as a tool to enable people to manage their lives meaningfully and can be a springboard for empowerment. Social protection and social services that are accessible to all are also necessary to reduce economic as well as political inequalities. Panellists noted the importance of empowerment and participation to ensure that social services reach vulnerable and excluded persons and groups. Thus empowerment itself can be an important counterweight to growing inequality.

Citizen engagement and participation is crucial to promote people's empowerment. Research demonstrates that, through citizen engagement, people develop greater skills and knowledge and awareness of their rights and responsibilities. These outcomes in turn encourage further participation and more effective participation practices. Where effective practices and institutions are in place, citizen engagement contributes to development gains, including improved education and health services, as well as improved governance through, for example, enhanced accountability frameworks or new policies that promote social justice. Participation also enables social integration by bringing new voices and issues into the public arena and fostering a sense of recognition, social identity and dignity.

Governments can play an important role in opening or supporting spaces for inclusive consultation and citizen engagement. This role is more effective when it serves to foster, strengthen and build links with existing collective associations and social movements rather than create new spaces and mechanisms for participation. Panellists also recognized that participation can disempower if it results in people losing trust, confidence or resources in the process. Empowering participation must be voluntary, designed collaboratively, recognize existing inequalities and undergo regular evaluation.

Supportive institutions are necessary. The building of open and inclusive institutions requires creating partnerships between Governments and other stakeholders and opening spaces for consultation. It also calls for transparency and accountability measures.

It was also noted that policy frameworks aimed at promoting empowerment must reach all realms of people's lives – economic, political and social. Efforts to empower people in one realm do not necessarily translate into empowerment in others.

Discrimination was cited as a key barrier to people's participation, access to resources and services, and having a voice. As part of efforts to address discrimination, it is important to ensure equal protection under the law. The promotion of empowerment should follow a rights-based and universal approach.

High-level panel discussion on the emerging issues: social drivers of sustainable development

The social dimension of a sustainable post-2015 development framework

The panellists emphasized that looking at sustainable development through a social lens is essential in the process of establishing an integrated and inclusive post-2015 framework. As agreed at the Rio+20 Conference, sustainable development enabled by the integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental stewardship, must become the global guiding principle and operational standard. The existing tendency to neglect the social dimension of sustainable development necessitates a shift from the focus on social impacts and consequences to how social mechanisms can move a sustainable post-2015 agenda forward.

A central aspect of the social dimensions of sustainable development relates to the social conditions and factors that shape processes of change. These "social drivers" reflect the structures and institutions that form people's preferences, behaviour and possibilities. Focusing on social drivers moves beyond a concern of social issues and solutions, to an understanding of social factors that drive or sustain development outcomes – a paradigm shift that broadens the scope of social policy.

Transformative social policy in achieving sustainable development

This shift is needed to tackle concrete sustainability challenges from climate change to water and food security, energy, land use and disasters to lead to more effective, durable and equitable, just solutions. In particular, *social reproduction,* which involves the care-economy and facilitates economic prosperity as well as *expanding the role of social policy,* can bring about the transformative change that supports equitable distribution, facilitates growth and incorporates the three dimensions of sustainable development.

The social drivers of sustainable development are closely related to the capacity of groups and institutions to affect change. Designing policies that promote sustainable development will therefore need to focus on social structures, institutions, behaviour and agency. Strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development includes a better involvement of social partners in decision-making processes. It is equally important to identify and launch actions to promote the empowerment of individuals and groups, to strengthen their capacities, to realise human rights and to improve social and economic governance at all levels.

Employment centred economic policy, decent work and social protection can facilitate transformative change, when approached from a cross-cutting perspective. Decent work transforms the contribution of productive capacity into poverty reduction, social inclusion and opportunities for all. Inclusive sustained growth, decent work and social protection floors require social structures, institutions, capacities as well as social norms and values that help integrate the sustainable development dimensions.

Further attention and a socially sustainable policy and program response are also needed in addressing environmental change. Environmental change cannot be solved without taking into account human attitudes and aspirations, institutional constraints, obstacles to political will and the role of power and economic interests. Climate and environmental change calls for transitioning to a green economy, including the development of a green employment agenda as well as consideration to how social mechanisms can support policy-making that facilitates effective and equitable sustainable development in specific socio-ecological settings.

Key challenges

Broadening the scope of social policy and integrating the sustainable development dimensions requires structural changes at the national, regional and international levels. It calls for the international community, including the United Nations system to embrace a more coherent and effective response to support a sustainable post-2015 agenda. The universal agenda should be based on a new global partnership, which applies to all countries and takes into account regional, national and local circumstances and priorities. This challenge therefore calls upon the UN system to work across its own structures and mandates and better integrate economic, social and environmental concerns into its policy, programmatic and operational activities. Policies must be evidence-based and should evoke ethics and justice.

There is a need for concrete actions that promote inclusive and sustainable growth. The core strategy for achieving inclusive growth ensures equal opportunities by eliminating circumstance-based inequalities. Inequality cannot be addressed solely by social policies, but requires inclusive, job-rich growth and fairer rules in a range of areas from trade to tackling

climate change. Promoting inclusive growth requires addressing unemployment, in particular of youth, decent work deficits, the transition towards green economy and the need for extending social protection coverage.

Additional challenges include addressing health safety at work, living wages, rights at work, lack of social protection, especially when associated with the informal economy and the global supply chain.

These challenges can be addressed in partnership by concrete actions including economic diversification, financial and social inclusion, socio-ecological initiatives, efficient infrastructure, productivity gains, social protection, trade, sustainable energy, decent work, relevant education and capacity building. Through accelerated action in these areas, momentum for an ambitious post-2015 development framework can be created.

High-level panel discussion in observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2014

Family and development

As an important social institution, the family is an agent of social protection and social integration, caring for vulnerable family members and socializing children. Families have a lasting impact on the achievement of development goals especially in the areas of education, health, gender equality and women's empowerment.

The preparations for the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014 have created an opportunity to reflect on family policy development and indicate a way forward.

In some regions there are growing concerns over the future of traditional family and solidarity systems currently under pressure from demographic, social and cultural trends.

On the other hand, it was recognized that families continue to change and the growing diversity of families should be recognized at the international level.

Despite diverging views on the composition and structure of the family there is a need to have a broad concept of the family taking into account its numerous functions, responsibilities and needs. Inclusive social development may require stable and strong families of many types to address poverty, work-life balance, and support between generations.

Family policy

Some countries have developed national plans for the family as tools offering guidelines for integrated family policies overcoming fragmented actions that had been adopted earlier. Moreover, some efforts have been underway to decentralize family policy through local entities and create partnerships with civil society and the private sector for effective policy implementation.

Family-oriented policies have been mainly enacted in the areas of health, education, housing, services and equal opportunity, work-family balance and care.

Governments have invested in work-family balance policies, such as expanded parental leaves accompanied by incentives for couples to share caring responsibilities. They also focused on improving early childhood education services; increased funding for employer-based day care and took some innovative approaches to elder care, such as postponing of income loss due to part-time work in order to care for older parents.

Care support for older persons and persons with disabilities in family contexts have been expanding as well with the recognition that their independence and well-being should be addressed across the lifespan. It is equally important to address the barriers people with disabilities may experience in forming and maintaining their own families and helping parents with disabilities to care for their children. Despite visible progress in family policy developments in some regions, numerous challenges exist. Among them, the lack of research and reliable statistics which can inform and influence policy development prevents development of sound family-oriented policies. Importantly, sometimes research is designed to meet donors' priorities rather than improve policy design itself.

A way forward

Some delegates suggested that moving forward on family policy development requires mainstreaming of family issues across sustainable development goals. An inclusion of an item: "family and development" in the ECOSOC agenda could be considered. Alternatively family-oriented goals may be considered as cross-cutting issues to be addressed in the overall post-2015 development agenda.

More efforts are needed to develop, implement and evaluate family policies. Life course approach and focus on gender equality are indispensable in family policy development, especially in the areas of work-family balance. Family impact reports and development of family wellbeing indicators would be useful in this area as well. Systematic evaluation of family policies is essential to improve their effectiveness and efficiency over time.

It is also useful to look at family and child poverty in a broader context taking into consideration the pathways to poverty, such as educational failure, unemployment and family breakdown. More focus on single-headed families is needed as they are more prone to poverty.

The impact of family units on development could be seen as being greater than the impact of the sum of their individual members and considering the family in the post-2015 agenda would signal commitment not only to the wellbeing of families but attaining of sustainable development in a comprehensive manner as well. Ultimately, the success of future family policy development requires active engagement of and cooperation among Governments, civil society, private sector and families themselves.