

Commission for Social Development
52nd Session

Chair's Summary

High-level Panel Discussion on Emerging issues: the social drivers of sustainable development”

(14 February AM)

The Commission held a High-level Panel Discussion on Emerging issues: the social drivers of sustainable development under sub item 3 (c) during its 52nd Session. The following panellists elaborated on how social initiatives can support the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development: Mr. Magino Corporán, Director of the National Council for Disability of the Dominican Republic; Dr. Amr Osman, Director of Drug Addiction Control Fund, Egypt; Dr. Heide Hackmann, Executive Director, International Social Science Council and Mr Rudi Delarue, Deputy Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Prior to the panel discussion, keynote speaker Ms Amina Mohammed, Special Adviser of the UN Secretary General on Post-2015 Development Planning addressed the Commission. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Sarah Cook, Director of the United Nations Institute for Social Development.

Based on the Note prepared by the Secretariat (E/CN.5/2014/8), the discussion on the ‘Emerging issues: the social drivers of sustainable development’ centred on the need to address the social dimensions of sustainable development in order to create conditions for an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable future.

The social dimension of a sustainable post-2015 development framework

The panel discussion 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. A strong framework, which includes the complex issues that inter-link the three dimensions of sustainable development, will help move this agenda forward. The existing tendency to neglect the social dimension of sustainable development, calls for a need to shift 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. Social drivers are not only related to poverty reduction, but can also enhance productive capacity, employment, social justice and empowerment. Therefore, a focus on social drivers moves beyond a concern of social issues and solutions, to an understanding of social factors that drive or sustain development outcomes. Building on the MDGs and arriving at the realization of sustainable development therefore requires a paradigm shift that involves broadening the scope of social policy.

Transformative social policy in achieving sustainable development

Broadening the scope of social policy 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 pursuing the empowerment of individuals and groups, to strengthen their capacities, to realise human rights and to improve social and economic governance at all levels. Action-based prioritisation is needed to foster more effective, durable, equitable and just solutions to the connected problems of sustainable development.

A number of areas that can facilitate transformative change are employment-centred economic policy¹; decent work and social protection. These areas are not just silo issues but have a strong transformative capacity when approached from a cross-cutting perspective. Decent work transforms the contribution of productive capacity into income generation, 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. At the same time, they can help strengthen these aspects and 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, 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.

¹ E.g. as defined in the the Global jobs Pact, G20

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.

In order to facilitate an integrated policy and program approach, 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 and facilitates equal access for all individuals, groups and institutions. 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.

A number of critical challenges lie in building the necessary capacities; tackling the informal economy as well as addressing global supply chain issues related to health safety at work, living wages, rights at work and lack of social protection. In addressing these challenges, innovation should be encouraged across industrial sectors. Concrete measures such as defining indicators on inclusive growth can help define the next steps.

These challenges can be addressed in partnership by concrete actions in the field of 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 achieved.