*EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON "PRACTICAL STRATEGIES
TO PROMOTE SOCIAL INTEGRATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM
EXISTING POLICIES AND PRACTICES"*

ACCRA, GHANA 17 – 19 NOVEMBER 2009

**THE AFRICAN COMMON POSITION ON SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND
THE SOCIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICA**

*Ms Sadequa Rahim
Policy Officer
Social Welfare Division
Department of Social Affairs
African Union Commission
Addis Ababa - Ethiopia*

AFRICAN UNION

الاتحاد الأفريقي

UNION AFRICAINE

UNIÃO AFRICANA

THE AFRICAN COMMON POSITION ON SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND THE SOCIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICA

Introduction

The principle of guaranteeing the African people their rights, freedom, non-discrimination of any kind such as race, ethnic group, colour, sex or religion are all enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the AU Constitutive and the AU vision and mission. Similarly, the development Agenda of the AU Commission promotes the development of human beings and affords them an opportunity to use their potentials; ensures that noticeable improvements are made in the lives of Africans and is all inclusive, and is based on a human-centered approach where all social groups, including the poor, marginalized and vulnerable are taken on board. It is, therefore, evident that the concept of social integration started with the establishment of the continental organization although the focus then was on the decolonization of the continent. The new vision is to focus on socio-economic development while building an integrated, prosperous, stable and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens. The challenge lies in how to make this happen. It is in this spirit that the AU Commission is taking the political leadership to coordinate and harmonize, among others, policies and strategies to ensure the well-being of African people and make noticeable improvements in their lives.

Current Situation

Notwithstanding progress made in certain areas of social and economic development as shown, for example, by increased literacy rates in many countries, increased enrollment rate of children, reduction in child mortality, recovery in the rates of economic growth, increasing democratisation and reduction of civil strife, Africa is still faced with incidences of extreme poverty, unemployment, violence, diseases, conflicts, and lack of access to social services. These challenges have also led to the fragmentation of the family and alienation of kinships and the social protection provided by the community.

In our society, the most vulnerable groups are children particularly orphans, the older people, people with disabilities, widows, people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, people in situations of conflict; and those in risky occupations especially in the informal sector. These categories of people have unique needs and require special support.

Poverty is one of the most pervasive challenges which many people have to grapple with, especially during this time of the global financial crisis. Poverty manifests itself in many forms and is a multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral phenomenon which requires a more holistic and integrated approach and should be addressed in conjunction with other socio-economic challenges. Poverty has damaged family structures, degenerates the human condition, creates social disintegration and accelerates disparities, marginalization and exclusion of vulnerable groups such as women, children, the permanently unemployed, the older people, people with disabilities and the poor. Alleviation of poverty should therefore go hand in hand with social development policies and programmes.

Being a critical component of social policy and development, social protection has an important role to play in fostering social integration. Social protection programmes can address the various dimensions of poverty, reduce inequities and inequalities and contribute to enhance economic growth.

Social Integration and development

Social integration is a prerequisite for sustainable social development as it ensures that all members of society enjoy full and equal participation. It is a concept of inclusion and equal opportunities and rights for all people which should be addressed on a long term basis and through a process which countries should be ready to undertake. This includes: enhancing social justice and human rights; improving the quality of life of people; and enhancing the life chances of the population, including the most vulnerable group of the society. Social integration policies should therefore seek to reduce inequalities; promote access to basic social services, education for all and health care; and increase the participation and integration of social groups. Development has to encompass the aspirations of people and be sustained by the people themselves through their full and active participation.

The ultimate goal of social integration is to create a 'society for all' as called for in the Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development. Commitments made at the Copenhagen Summit were followed by the MDGs setting targets to attain social development. Nonetheless, disparities and inequalities of income and wealth among nations continue to widen; people, families, communities and social groups are still marginalized; violence is still being perpetrated especially against women, children, people with disabilities, and older people; crime, and trafficking in women and children have escalated; conflicts and civil war have continued and social barriers have been created. It is for this reason that more social policies are required to improve the social and economic conditions of all people and to foster social integration.

While there is consensus to achieve social integration, much more needs to be considered as to how to reach that goal. Many interventions by various development partners and other stakeholders are underway to fight poverty and meet social development goals. However, a strong partnership is required to harmonize and coordinate efforts in order to make a significant and sustainable difference. It is only

through concerted efforts that an impact can be made on the lives of people and, in particular, vulnerable groups.

AU Commission's Approaches

In advancing its social development Agenda, the AU Commission has taken the political leadership to harmonize and coordinate Africa's efforts in ensuring that noticeable improvements are made in the lives of Africans. In this endeavour, the AU Commission works in close collaboration with development partners and different agencies. It is also in this spirit that the AU Commission collaborates with its partners to assess progress made in implementing the MDGs related to social development.

Since the 1990s, AU Commission has taken explicit measures to address the social challenges at the continental level. In this regard, a number of commitments have been made as expressed in various policy instruments that promote human and social development in Africa and improve the living conditions of its people. Consequently, as Africa's contribution to the World Summit for Social Development, an African Common Position on Human and Social Development in Africa was adopted by the African Heads of State and Government in June 1994. They committed themselves to an actionable agenda for human and social development in the 1990's and beyond which underscores the urgent need to reverse Africa's unfavourable human and social conditions.

The efforts to address employment and poverty reduction issues culminated in the convening of an Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government on Employment and Poverty Alleviation in Ouagadougou in September 2004. The outcome was a Declaration and Plan of Action to guide Member States to develop policies on poverty reduction and job creation. The Heads of State and Government also raised concerns about the sustainable livelihoods of the African population in general, and vulnerable groups in particular, and called for equal opportunities for all. They committed themselves to empower the most vulnerable group, include them in poverty alleviation efforts and ensure their participation in the implementation of such initiatives.

Other instruments which, in general, promote accelerated improvement of the wellbeing of the African population, include:

- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- The African Youth Charter;
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human an People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa;
- The Plan of Action on the Family in Africa;
- The Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing;
- The Declaration and Plan of Action on the African Decade of Disabled Persons;
- Abuja Declaration and Framework Plan of Action on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Other Related Infectious Diseases

However, in its efforts to pursue its vision to "build an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa' three key instruments, were adopted by the 1st Session of the AU Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development which took place in Windhoek, Namibia in October 2008. These documents deal specifically with pro-poor, empowerment, social protection, human rights and other issues related to an inclusive development which are all important for social integration and building a society for all. The documents are the following:

- The Social Policy Framework for Africa
- The African Common Position on Social Integration
- The Windhoek Declaration on Social Development

The AU Commission has also commissioned a study on Social Protection in Africa which was also considered by the Conference. The study was instrumental in galvanizing support and attention around the issue of social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Social Protection, as we all know, has long been a viable method of guaranteeing basic services and catering for the welfare of the people in general and the marginalized and poorer groups of the society, in particular, at the national level.

The African Common Position on Social Integration

The African Common Position on Social Integration was Africa's contribution to the 47th Session of the Commission for Social Development held in February 2009. In the Common Position, Member States reaffirmed their commitments to global and continental social development and adhered to the principles of creating a more stable and safe society for all by enumerating concrete actions that need to be taken to that effect. It also acknowledges that the goals stipulated in the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit on Social Development, the MDGs and other social development policies and strategies are mutually reinforcing and that efforts need to be intensified to achieve them.

While the Common Position calls for the reduction of political, economic and social inequalities; closing the gaps between existing exclusion and integration; and creating equal opportunities, it recommends actions which are required at national, regional, continental and international levels to achieve a more stable and safe society for all.

The Social Policy Framework for Africa

The lack of inclusive development in most African countries as well as the compelling socio-economic development challenges have necessitated the development of a Social Policy Framework for Africa. The Social Policy Framework combines economic dynamism, including pro-poor growth policies, social integration to create a stable and just society, promotion and protection of human rights, non-discrimination, and the active role of Governments to provide the people with basic and social services. It also promotes a holistic and human-centered approach to socio-economic development, and intra-and inter-sectoral coordination of the social sector with a view to alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life of the African people. It, therefore makes provision for

state-led measures to protect vulnerable groups such as the poor, by guaranteeing basic economic and social conditions, overcoming structural deficiencies in the distribution of wealth and productive assets, and creating greater equality for all.

The document focuses on 18 key thematic areas of social development and under each area a broad range of recommendations are spelt out to guide Member States in the formulation and implementation of their social policies on the various social challenges. It also provides a Follow-up Mechanism for Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation, outlining the key roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders. The Social Policy Framework is therefore an overarching policy structure to assist Member States in developing national social policies and promote human empowerment and development in their ongoing quest to address the multiple social issues facing their societies.

The Windhoek Declaration on Social Development

The Declaration on Social Development recognizes the persisting social and economic challenges on the continent and the prevailing marginalization and exclusion experienced by some social groups.   Commitments were reiterated to scale up interventions to address the various socio-economic challenges using the Social Policy Framework as a guide; and accelerate sustainable social development in the continent in order to achieve stable, cohesive, safe and just societies for all. Member States were called upon to work in partnership with development partners to eradicate poverty by promoting decent employment, sharing of experiences and harmonizing policies to foster social integration.

The challenge is to ensure that these policy instruments are implemented at the national level to have real impact on socio-economic development and the lives of the people and to put in place proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The AU Commission will continue to pursue its advocacy, follow-up and monitoring role to ensure the well-being of the people of Africa.

Actions at National Level

As explained earlier, the main actors for implementing the above-mentioned regional policy documents are indeed the Member States. The documents are meant to serve as a guide and countries can utilize elements of the documents as they deem fit, in the formulation and implementation of their national policies on social development. However, translating these frameworks into concrete actions as well as evaluating and monitoring their impact on the lives of the people are imperative if meaningful progress is to be achieved in fostering an inclusive society and social development in Africa.

The Common Position on Social Integration and the Social Policy Framework already recommend some actions which countries could undertake at national level. These recommendations are mutually reinforcing and Governments should coordinate and harmonize their political, economic and social policies in order to create an enabling environment to deal with social challenges and achieve social development objectives

based on a human rights approach. However, there is no one model or framework to achieve social integration and sustainable development. Each country needs to adapt and develop its own unique social development architecture taking into consideration the prevailing reality in the country. Political will, commitment and coordination among all sectors of the society are key to building cohesion and social integration.

One important element in fostering social integration is to strengthen partnership with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the International Organisations, the CSOs and other stakeholders. Similarly, Countries need to interact as much as possible with the Civil Society, the private sector, community-based organizations and development partners in addressing the social challenges.

The Common Position on Social Integration recommends the following actions at national level: Member States are urged to:

a) Implement the Actionable Agenda of the African Common Position on Human and Social Development in Africa as well as the commitments in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action and the MDGs.

b) Develop and implement comprehensive policies to support socio-economic policies, in line with the Social Policy Framework for Africa.

c) Improve coordination in the public sector through a multi-sectoral approach in order to overcome fragmentation and piecemeal programming to deal with social challenges.

d) Improve public administration, including democratic governance and rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and encourage broad-based participation.

e) Accelerate socio-economic growth and improve development indicators aimed at attaining the MDGs by 2015.

f) Strengthen the process of integration of the marginalized and vulnerable groups in Poverty Reduction Strategy and other development programmes.

g) Develop structures that ensure greater involvement of the community, local Authorities, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the design and implementation of social, economic and cultural projects and programmes with the aim of improving the social welfare of their populations.

h) Collaborate closely with the Civil Society Organizations and other stakeholders in implementing the social development Agenda.

i)   Develop and produce world class products based on cultural heritage to increase their articles for world trade.

The Social Policy Framework calls on Member States to:

a)   Use the SPF as the key guiding framework to develop where these do not exist, detailed national social policies that clearly outline objectives, milestones, the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, and how resources will be mobilized.

b)   Where national social policies exist, harmonize them with the SPF and develop country-level operational plans.

c)   Adopt a social development approach across key Ministries and build capacity of the Ministries and their Departments to deliver and implement social development objectives in accordance with the principles of a human rights-based approach.

d)   Use national budgets as the primary source of funding for social development in the medium term. Therefore, advocate and engage with Ministries of Finance to realize this.

e)   Ensure that national statistical agencies collect relevant data to inform evidence-based social development planning.

f)   Strengthen and support social research and share best practice experiences and models with other African countries.

g)   Establish a National Social Development Coordination mechanism to promote inter-sectoral coordination and effective implementation of the SPF and social policies.

h)   Prepare and submit biennial progress reports on the implementation of the recommendations of the SPF to the African Union Commission.

i)   Need to ratify the various policy instruments, develop and implement national action plans and follow up with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

These recommendations need to be looked at in detail with a view to developing strategies that can accelerate their implementation.

Conclusion

The AU Commission remains committed to work with all development partners in moving the social integration agenda forward. As the continental organisation the AU Commission will continue to take the leadership role in following-up, coordinating and monitoring the implementation of all the social policy documents which have been adopted by policy makers at the highest level. With the current global financial and economic crisis, we call on the International Community to support developing countries in their efforts to alleviate poverty, end social disparities and exclusion of people and to harmonize their social, economic cultural and political policies in order to achieve sustainable social integration and development.