



## UNITED NATIONS

Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and  
Development

Expert Group Meeting on  
Promoting people's empowerment in achieving poverty eradication, social integration  
and productive and decent work for all

10–12 September 2012  
United Nations Headquarters, New York

### **Draft Aide-mémoire**

#### **I. Purpose of the meeting**

The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs is organizing a high-level expert group meeting on “Promoting people’s empowerment in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all” from 10-12 September 2012, in New York, USA as part of preparations for the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development, which is scheduled to take place in New York in February 2013.

The meeting is convened in the context of draft Resolution 1 in the Report of the Commission for Social Development (E/2012/26) in which the Economic and Social Council decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle should be “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”. The outcomes of the meeting will provide important inputs to the work of the Commission, in particular contributing to the formulation of policies that have been shown to have a major impact on efforts to promote people’s empowerment.

#### **II. Background: Justification and basic concepts**

Empowerment has enjoyed considerable currency among development circles and institutions in recent years. Its popularity is partly reflected in the fact that scholars and organizations in the field of development have increasingly used the term in various contexts, leading to possibly more than 30 definitions (see E. Fraser 2010 “Empowerment, Choice and Agency”, Helpdesk Research report).

In general, empowerment has been used mainly to denote increased resources, assets and capabilities of marginalized social groups to engage in mainstream social, political and economic life, and exercise greater choice and control over their own well-being. Empowering individuals and social groups requires a comprehensive set

of policies and institutions. From education and health care to governance and economic and social policy, activities that seek to empower people are expected to increase opportunities and improve people's quality of life. In the context of the work of the Commission for Social Development, empowerment should relate to the enhancement of the capabilities of all individuals and groups, particularly persons living in poverty and of the population and social groups that fall under its mandate (youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples) to fully participate in all aspects of society and to control their own development.

Given that the mandate of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD) is the follow-up to the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and the 24<sup>th</sup> special session of the General Assembly, and taking into account its choice for the priority theme of its 2013-14 cycle, an expert group meeting on empowerment should focus on: 1) A practical definition of empowerment relevant to achieving the three core objectives of social development (as the CSocD mandates). 2) A review of what has been achieved so far in promoting the economic, social and political empowerment of people and social groups. 3) An evidence-based set of policy recommendations to promote the empowerment of people. The expert group meeting (EGM) should provide concrete suggestions in order to contribute to the Division's preparation for the forthcoming session of the CSocD.

### **Toward a framework for action on empowerment**

In the context of the work of the CSocD, social groups include people living in poverty, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous people and families. Empowerment, therefore, relates to the enhancement of the capabilities of these social groups to fully participate in all aspects of society and promoting enabling social, economic, cultural and political conditions that can help them take control of one's own development destiny.

The concept of empowerment has been used mainly promoting the advancement of women. Much can be learned from the experience of women's empowerment in achieving gender equality. In parallel to this, the wealth of experience of the CSocD in the empowerment of persons with disabilities and equalization of opportunities could also be useful.

It is also commonly recognized that empowerment is a long-term dynamic process affected by and resulting in changes in norms, values, rules, institutions and social relations. Another point of consensus is that empowerment does not by itself ensure desired outcomes. For empowerment to secure full and effective participation, it requires capable and responsive decision-makers whom empowered citizens can hold accountable as well as effective institutions.

### **Key dimensions of empowerment**

#### Social empowerment

Social empowerment refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to autonomously foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for their well-being and productivity. This aspect of people's empowerment is closely linked

to social integration and poverty eradication. It builds people's capabilities to participate. Inclusion of the poor and other traditionally excluded or marginalized social groups in priority-setting and decision-making is crucial, in order to ensure that limited public resources are utilized wisely by leveraging local knowledge and working with community values and priorities. In the context of social development, the mandates of DSPD, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the World Programme of Action for Youth, the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, social empowerment is about the removal of social, political, legal and economic barriers to the active participation of certain social groups in society.

#### Economic empowerment

Economic empowerment enables marginalized people to assert greater control over their resources and life choices, especially including decisions on investments in health, housing and education. This form of empowerment is not only critical to poverty eradication and the promotion of productive employment and decent work, it is also instrumental in facilitating social integration, by improving participation in economic activity. The enabling effects of economic empowerment in achieving other dimensions of empowerment are particularly recognized and documented in the area of gender.

#### Political empowerment

Political empowerment arises from the ability of marginalized groups to influence processes and decisions that affect their well-being. It is concerned especially with state and social institutions that serve people's needs, and entails an emphasis on constructing responsive government and cultivating citizen participation. Promoting participation is vital to mobilizing people and improving government accountability and transparency. This often involves expanded citizen engagement in decision-making and greater public input into the planning and delivery of social services. Better access to information and ICT can help advance these processes.

#### Legal empowerment

Legal empowerment of the poor refers to empowering people to demand and exercise their rights while at the same time strengthening institutions so that they can better respond to the needs of people. Strengthening legal identity, voice and standing of the poor to ensure an inclusive development process is an important step. From a legal empowerment perspective, stronger property and land rights as well as other rights related to livelihood and entrepreneurship can help communities and societies garner development dividends. The legal empowerment underscores a renewed emphasis on affordability and accessibility in the delivery of services, especially in justice delivery, to the poor.

### **III. Objectives**

The expert group meeting will undertake a comprehensive review of what has been achieved so far in promoting the social, economic, political and legal empowerment of people and social groups, highlight challenges and successes,

examine best practices and lessons learned and make policy recommendations on concrete steps that can be taken at the national, regional and international levels to strengthen capacity to promote and accelerate progress toward the empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment for all.

The deliberations and recommendations of the meeting will contribute to the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General to be submitted to the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the CSocD on the priority theme of “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and productive and decent work for all”.

To accomplish these objectives, experts will be drawn from academia and practitioners (representatives of civil society organizations and international development agencies) and from across regions to provide experiences in the area of empowerment at global, regional and national levels.

Presentations will centre around the following questions:

1. What has been achieved so far in promoting social, economic, political and legal empowerment of people, including social groups? Please provide concrete examples focusing on specific social groups (youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples).
2. What are the key challenges and barriers for promoting social, economic, political and legal empowerment of people, including social groups? Please provide concrete examples focusing on specific social groups.
3. What lessons have we learned from achievements and/or lack of progress in promoting empowerment of people, including specific social groups?
4. What policies are needed to further promote social, economic, political and legal empowerment of people, including social groups?

#### **IV. Expected outputs**

The outcome of this meeting will influence how the CSosD and the ECOSOC will shape the major issue of promoting empowerment of people. The meeting will produce the following outputs:

- Policy recommendations and proposals for action, including new initiatives;
- Expert papers on a topic or area related to the theme of the meeting and each expert’s greatest interest;
- A final report on the deliberations and outcome of the meeting. The expert group will seek to achieve consensus on the main issues/aspects of empowerment that are relevant to the work of the CSocD.

#### **V. Organizational and administrative matters**

The expert group meeting will be organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of UNDESA. The meeting will take place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 10-12 September 2012.

Up to 15 experts will be invited to participate in the meeting. The Division for Social Policy and Development of UNDESA will meet the travel and per diem costs of all the invited experts.

The invited experts will be required to submit their presentations and written papers (7-10 pages in length, in English) to the United Nations Secretariat by 3 September 2012. Participants are expected to arrive in New York on 9 September 2012 and stay throughout the duration of the meeting.

In addition to the invited experts, participation will be extended to:

1. Staff members of the Division for Social Policy and Development as organizers of the meeting and to provide administrative/logistical support;
2. Representatives of the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations;
3. Representatives of the United Nations Regional Commissions;
4. Consultant

All sessions of the meeting will be in plenary. The invited experts will lead off discussions in each session by presenting papers, to be followed by in-depth discussions. At the close of the meeting, participants will outline the major conclusions and recommendations of the meeting. A final report will be produced after the meeting.

## **VI. Meeting documentation and working language**

The documentation of the meeting will comprise relevant publications, documents and materials related to the promotion of empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all. The papers of the independent experts will be made available on a DSPD web page to be created for the meeting. Expert participants will be invited to provide their contributions in advance (no later than 3 September 2012) and to make brief presentations in the plenary.

The working language of the meeting will be English. Documentation of the meeting will be provided in English.