

**United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
Division for Social Policy and Development  
Social Perspective on Development Branch**

**Expert Group Meeting on Rethinking Social Development in the Contemporary World**

**United Nations Headquarters, New York, 17-18 September 2014**

**Concept Note**

**Purpose of the meeting**

In its resolution E/CN.5/2014/L.4,<sup>1</sup> the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations decided that the priority theme for the 2015-2016 review and policy cycle of the Commission for Social Development would be “Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world”. The expert group meeting is convened in the context of this resolution and in preparation for the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission, which will take place in February 2015.

The outcomes of the meeting will provide inputs to the Report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme by providing elements for an assessment of progress in social development with particular emphasis on the post-Copenhagen period (1995-2015). The outcome will supplement the political perspective brought by other stakeholders as input to the Report and the work of the Commission, and will provide a foundation for broader consultative processes planned by the Division.

**Background**

Reviewing progress made in social development and rethinking ways of strengthening it is a timely endeavour. The agenda-setting phase for the post-2015 global development agenda is underway. Intergovernmental negotiations will be launched in September 2014 and should conclude in September 2015. In addition, 2015 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. At the Summit, Governments agreed to give social development goals the highest priority and launched a global drive for social progress embodied in ten commitments, including commitments to eradicate poverty, support full employment and promote social integration based on the enhancement and protection of all human rights.

Twenty years after the Summit, these goals remain relevant. There has been progress in reducing poverty, but the international community remains far from eradicating it. Unemployment is as high today as it was in 1995 and many workers struggle to earn sufficient income in the informal sector, where social protection is largely absent. In every country, certain groups confront barriers that prevent them from participating in social, economic or political life. International instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have helped promote equal rights and protections of these vulnerable groups, but much remains to be done to ensure their full inclusion and participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Final symbol pending.

At the same time, rapid economic, social, political and environmental transformations have created new opportunities for social progress, exacerbated some of the long-standing social problems and changed their nature while presenting new challenges. Improvements in data and methodology have also improved our understanding of such problems. Given such transformations and the ongoing process of defining a new global development agenda, should the international community consider rethinking social development and its role in the global development agenda? Can traditional approaches ensure the achievement of social development goals?

Rethinking social development requires, in the first place, appraising progress made in achieving the internationally-agreed social development goals, identifying new trends and opportunities for social development. Secondly, it means assessing whether the international community should consider reassessing the importance of a strong social pillar for sustainable development and advocating for forward-looking social policy in the framework of the post-2015 agenda.

This review and forward-looking exercise requires broad-based research and consultations. Contributions from experts within and outside the UN system and consultations with other stake-holders are essential.

The expert group meeting will provide a platform for interaction between a small group of essential experts and staff responsible for the preparation of the Report of the Secretary General on the priority theme, allowing for pointed, in depth discussion and analysis of the proposed themes. The meeting and ensuing outputs will provide input for the preparation of the first report of the Secretary-General (due in the fall of 2014) and lay the ground for the second report. At this initial stage, it is critical to bring data to assess whether there has been progress in social development indicators and to show where and under which conditions this progress has been most significant. It is also important to discuss the policy implications of these trends –taking into account that a more comprehensive policy analysis will be undertaken during the second year of the cycle (2016). In particular, experts will assess the current relevance of the internationally-agreed social development goals and principles in the broad context of sustainable development.

In addition to holding a meeting of key experts, the Division for Social Policy and Development will consult electronically with a broader network of experts from all regions starting in July 2014 (list of experts attached). This broader network of experts, which will consist of academic and civil society think tank researchers, should help fine-tune a limited number of key messages (questions or hypotheses) for the first report of the Secretary-General. These key messages will also guide further elaboration of priority policy areas for action that will be the focus of the second SG report to be prepared in 2015 for the Commission session in Feb. 2016. In support of the review, consultations should also bring input to assess progress in social development and to gauge how global trends have affected social development outcomes.

## **Objectives**

The expert group meeting aims to supplement the political perspective brought by other stakeholders as input to the Report of the Secretary General on the priority theme of the Commission for Social Development of rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world. Taking into account that this is the review year of the two-year

cycle, the meeting and the in-depth research it will generate will focus on assessing progress in achieving the internationally-agreed social development goals, with a focus on those set forth at the World Summit for Social Development, in 1995. The report will also discuss how the intense global transformations that the world has witnessed in the last twenty years (1995-2015) have affected social progress and the impact of existing policies and strategies (including international instruments) on such progress.

The presentations and discussion that will take place during the meeting as well as its conclusions and the in-depth research that will follow, will directly contribute to the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General that will be submitted to the Commission for Social Development at its 53rd session in February 2015 on the priority theme.

As an input to the Commission the outcomes of the meeting will also inform indirectly the inter-governmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda, which will be launched in September 2014 and should conclude in September 2015. In doing so, they will highlight concrete issues in need of action to strengthen the social dimension of sustainable development. They will also make some initial recommendations on how these issues should be tackled by the international community, taking into account that a more comprehensive policy analysis will be undertaken during the second year of the cycle, in 2016.

The small group of key experts will focus on answering the following questions:

1. Have the goals agreed on at the World Summit for Social Development, in 1995, been met? Do they remain relevant?
2. In what areas has progress been most significant? And where is progress lagging the most?
3. Have the global transformations of the last twenty years created new opportunities for social development? Are they raising new challenges?
4. What strategies have contributed the most to making progress towards the internationally-agreed social development goals and which have been detrimental to their pursuit?

The expert group should conclude the meeting by reaching a consensus on: a) A common framework for analysis to ensure a meaningful review of progress in advancing social development; b) a concrete and limited set of issues that the analysis should focus on and a list of key messages that should be reflected in the report of the Secretary-General.

## **Outputs**

The expert group meeting will result in the following outputs:

- Substantive papers produced by expert participants on the core themes of the meeting.
- A list of key messages.
- A short report summarizing the expert deliberations and presenting the meeting outcomes.

## **Organizational aspects**

*Date and venue of the meeting*

The expert group meeting is scheduled to take place from 17 to 18 July at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The meeting will be organized by the Social Perspective on Development Branch, Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat.

*Organizational set-up of the meeting*

Between 4 and 6 experts, identified and invited by the Division for Social Policy and Development, are expected to attend the meeting.

The Secretariat will provide a preliminary list of substantive issues that will be described in an annotated agenda of the expert group meeting. Prior to the meeting, experts are required to submit short written papers in English, to the United Nations Secretariat. Experts are expected to take part in all meeting sessions. The participants will meet in five working sessions.

- Each session will include a short presentation by a lead expert to provide context for the ensuing discussion.
- A rapporteur for each session will lead the group discussions and be responsible for writing the summary of proceedings.
- Brainstorming will be the preferred method of work and no formal conference-style presentations are envisioned.
- The working language of the meeting will be English. There will be no interpretation provided.