

## 52<sup>nd</sup> SESSION OF THE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Chair's Summary

#### **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”**

11 February 2014

The Commission held a high-level panel discussion on promoting the empowerment of people under sub-item 3 (a) on the priority theme and heard presentations from the following panellists: Her Excellency Mrs. Bakang Mbock, Minister of Social Affairs of Cameroon; Her Excellency Ms. Susanna Huovinen, Minister of Health and Social Services of Finland; Mr. Carlos Rafael Urquilla Bonilla, Undersecretary for Social Inclusion of El Salvador; Professor John Gaventa, Director of the Coady International Institute at St. Francis Xavier University, Canada; Mr. Fabio Palacio, representative of the International Movement ATD Fourth World and the NGO Committee on Social Development. The panel was moderated by Mr. Danilo Türk, former President of Slovenia and Member of the Club de Madrid.

#### **Overview**

Panellists noted that empowerment is a long-term process that cannot be brought about by any single actor or entity. However, 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. Either positively or negatively, all public policies affect empowerment. The United Nations has also played a role in helping people to empower themselves and in creating an enabling environment for their participation.

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. Enabling people to manage their own lives meaningfully requires upholding and restoring their dignity, fulfilling their rights and meeting their basic needs. 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 the greatest challenges in overcoming exclusion and poverty and foster their participation. These two tracks are not mutually exclusive but must be integrated into one single policy framework.

Throughout presentations and during the discussion, the high-level 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 Programme of Action of the Summit, 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.

### **Social policy, including social protection**

Social policies, in particular social protection, serve as a tool to enable people to manage their own lives meaningfully and, in this way, 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. Participants 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.

In the case of Finland, successive Governments have helped to translate economic growth into improved well-being for all through, for example, guaranteeing income security, affordable health care and other essential services at every stage of life. At the same time, the creation of a society for all has been a source of further social and economic development. Examples of Finnish social services and policies include day-care programmes, family leave, and a recently-launched youth guarantee scheme that supports the transition from education and training to working life through multi-sectoral cooperation.

Participants expressed appreciation for the UN Social Protection Floor initiative and welcomed UN action to promote its principles and implementation. They also noted that, although today's economic realities challenge social protection systems, it is crucial to maintain investment in them to ensure people's well-being.

### **Citizen engagement and participation**

Research demonstrates that, through citizen engagement, people develop greater civic and political knowledge and awareness of their rights. 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 recognized that participation can in fact disempower when it results in people losing trust, confidence or resources in the process. Carried out correctly, participation initiatives must be voluntary, designed collaboratively, recognize existing inequalities and undergo regular evaluation.

Discrimination was cited as a key factor preventing 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.

Supportive institutions are necessary to enable empowerment and participation. The building of open and inclusive institutions requires creating partnerships between Governments and other stakeholders and opening spaces for consultation. It also calls for implementing 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. That is, action to help people build economic and livelihood assets will not necessarily contribute to their social or political empowerment, nor will the reverse take place automatically.

It is recognized that poverty eradication, social inclusion and decent work for all calls for an approach that envisions the realization of human rights. The panel underscored that empowerment too, must be seen in terms of human rights. The importance of economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to political and civil rights, was emphasized in underpinning empowerment processes.

The promotion of empowerment should follow a rights-based and universal approach. Although human rights may be exercised differently among individuals and across groups, they must be guaranteed for all. In order to ensure the fulfillment of human rights for all, individuals belonging to disadvantaged or excluded groups may require greater political attention. Empowerment therefore needs decisive political action to rectify asymmetries and inequalities.