

**REPORT OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON
PROMOTING INCLUSION THROUGH SOCIAL PROTECTION - THE REPORT
ON THE WORLD SOCIAL SITUATION 2017**

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New York

Organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and
Social Affairs, United Nations

Introduction

The Expert Group Meeting on “Promoting inclusion through social protection” was organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development of the United Nations Department on Economic and Social Affairs and was held on 1 and 2 December 2016 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The purpose of the meeting was to provide material and suggestions for the Report on the World Social Situation (RWSS) 2017.¹ Included among the experts were colleagues in other parts of the United Nations system as well as experts from academia and think tanks. Each of them made presentations and discussed the state of social protection and social inclusion throughout the world, as well as the main substantive issues to be addressed in the report.

The meeting consisted of five sessions. The first session focused on social exclusion and access to social protection; the second session placed social protection in the wider international development context, while the third and fourth sessions were devoted to the barriers to social protection faced by disadvantaged social groups and best practices in promoting their inclusion through social protection. The final session was devoted to a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the meeting for the Report on the World Social Situation 2017.

Summary of proceedings

Opening Session

Welcoming remarks were delivered by Ms. Daniela Bas, Director of DSPD, and Ms. Wenyan Yang, Chief, Social Perspective on Development Branch (SPDB) within DSPD.

Ms. Marta Roig, Senior Social Affairs Officer, DSPD, also welcomed and introduced the participants. She also emphasized the expected outcomes of the meeting and its implications for the Report on the World Social Situation 2017.

Session I: Social exclusion and access to social protection

¹ The Report on the World Social Situation, one of the flagship publications of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, is prepared by the Division for Social Policy and Development and published on a biennial basis.

During the first session, moderated by Ms. Yang, Ms. Roig presented the concepts, definitions and main findings from the Report on the World Social Situation 2016 “Leaving no one behind: the imperative of inclusive development”. She defined social inclusion as the process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resource, voice and respect for rights. She ended by highlighting that the accumulation of disadvantage across multiple domains among certain social groups has been considered as a symptom of their exclusion in the 2016 report. However, improvements in one domain, for example income, employment or education, suggest progress in promoting the inclusion of excluded individuals and groups.

Ms. Maitreyi Das, World Bank, made a presentation on “Promoting social inclusion through social protection”, via Webex. She reiterated that even though social protection can be one mechanism to promote social inclusion—and is often a good starting point—it is not the only one. She explained the pathways through which social protection can promote social inclusion: namely through proper analysis of exclusionary factors, adequate targeting, monitoring and accountability, systematization, and the changing of perceptions towards exclusion. Through the presentation of the cases of Nepal, Mexico, India, and Brazil, she showed that there are ways in which social protection can reinforce the social contract between citizens and the State.

Ms. Rachel Gisselquist, UNU-WIDER, made a presentation via Webex under the title “The politics of ethnic inequalities” that underlined the need for an understanding of individuals and groups as political actors in order to understand the impact of social protection on the reduction of poverty and inequality. She outlined the ways in which the State could exclude and oppress ethnic groups in multiple ways, providing case examples of different countries. She indicated that there are many ways in which members of ethnic groups may be targeted and on various grounds, even though their identities are not necessarily obvious. She noted that there are many ways in which the State can exclude—often through the design and implementation of policies.

During the discussion that followed, participants shared their views about the way in which social protection systems should be organized. There was general consensus on the fact that programmes targeted solely at the poor tend to be poor programmes. Participants agreed, however, that even within a universal system of social protection, policies should be sensitive to the needs of groups of the population that have historically been left behind. There was also discussion about the potential of social protection systems and of their limitations in promoting inclusion by themselves. Participants generally agreed that social protection systems should be seen as one element of broader policy frameworks aim at addressing the root causes of exclusion and social injustice. A participant pointed out, also, that exclusion from social protection was but one aspect of social exclusion. Participants from DSPD observed that the report was meant to examine both access to social protection and the impact of such access on several dimensions of social inclusion, noting also that the possible lack of empirical evidence would prevent a comprehensive assessment.

Session II: Social protection in context

The second session was moderated by Mr. Vinicius Pinheiro, International Labour Organization (ILO). Ms. Isabel Ortiz, ILO, opened the session with a presentation on “Social protection and the international development agenda”. She outlined the history and expansion of social protection worldwide, and she focused on the shift from the structural adjustment and safety nets policy paradigm of the 1980s towards the current push for universal social protection systems. She reiterated that the 2030 Agenda identifies a strong role for social protection in combatting poverty and reducing inequalities, and calls for universal approaches to social protection provision while accelerating efforts for the poor and vulnerable. She then talked about the United Nations Social Protection Floor Initiative—a coalition of UN agencies and development partners promoting universal access to essential social transfers and services—and the way national social security strategies should be formulated. She discussed recent policy trends towards fiscal consolidation and adjustment as a response to the 2008 financial crisis, and the implications for the expansion of social protection.

Mr. Stephen Devereux, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), made a presentation on “Social exclusion and access to social protection programmes”. He provided a definition of ‘transformative social protection’ in which social protection is defined not only as the set of measures necessary to provide income security but is also aimed at addressing social equity concerns, including discrimination and indignity. In giving definitions of the concepts of social inclusion and social exclusion, Mr. Devereux discussed the main determinants of exclusion from social protection and provided a few examples of best practices in which the gap between eligibility and uptake of social protection had been reduced. These included social grants in South Africa, in which applications and payments processes were simplified and made more accessible. He pointed out the challenge of reaching the “hardest to reach”, noting that increasing the uptake of social protection measures to high levels was less costly than reaching those that are hardest to reach.

Mr. Michael Cichon, UNU-MERIT, continued with a presentation on “The cost of closing social protection gaps”. He presented estimates of the cost of closing social protection gaps and estimated the potential cost difference between a universal benefit system and perfectly targeted social assistance solutions. He concluded that closing social protection gaps is affordable within existing resource constraints in most countries. However, at least 13 less developed countries would require a significant amount of external assistance to close the gap. He also pointed out that social protection is only complete when transfers and infrastructure complement each other so that all people have *de facto* access to essentially goods and services of adequate quality.

In the discussion that followed, participants exchanged views on the definition of social protection—including which definitions should be used in the RWSS 2017. It was noted that ILO recommendation 202 (2012) provides the internationally-agreed definition of social protection floors. A participant noted that defining social protection as cash transfers only would narrow its scope to simply “economic protection”. Following the discussion from the

previous session, participants agreed that social protection was necessary but not sufficient to promote social inclusion, i.e., it could not achieve social inclusion by itself.

Session III: Barriers and best practices in promoting the inclusion of disadvantaged social groups through social protection (Part I: persons with disabilities, older persons and youth)

Ms. Maria Martino, DSPD, DESA, presented “Lessons learned and best practices in providing social protection to persons with disabilities”, in a session that was moderated by Mr. Jonathan Perry, DSPD, DESA. She introduced the international framework of social protection for persons with disabilities and described the social protection services that they receive. She paid special attention to the current challenges to providing social protection to persons with disabilities and the various options for addressing them. She highlighted the importance of promoting greater participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market thereby reducing the risk of income insecurity and poverty.

Mr. Stephen Deveraux, IDS, made a presentation on “Social exclusion and social protection for older persons”. He compared current pension systems across different country contexts, and analysed why older persons are vulnerable to social exclusion. He highlighted Australia and Mauritius as strong examples from the developed and developing world respectively. He also discussed some lessons learned in ensuring the dignity of older beneficiaries of social protection programmes. He argued that social protection systems that emphasise the importance of recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity, and material well-being are those most likely to promote the social inclusion for older persons.

These presentations were followed by a debate on good and bad practices around the world to increase the effective coverage of older persons, persons with disabilities, and youth. Participants highlighted that the sufficiency of benefits was an important consideration, beyond purely focussing on extending coverage to assess the impacts of social protection on inclusion. Some participants noted that the possible impact of social protection as a work disincentive was often highlighted in both policy and academic circles, yet impact evaluations rarely found significant disincentive effects. There was also discussion of the ways in which new technologies can play a role in the delivery of social protection—for example through mobile banking as a way to reduce corruption in social assistance programmes.

Session III: Barriers and best practices in promoting the inclusion of disadvantaged social groups through social protection (Part II: indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities)

In a session moderated by Ms. Maren Jimenez, DSPD, DESA, Ms. Rebecca Holmes, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), opened the session with a presentation on gender and ethnicity. She analysed the key barriers to accessing social protection for these groups and underlined the benefits of providing gender-sensitive social protection to members of ethnic minorities. She then presented a case study of social protection and social inclusion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. She noted that there is some empirical evidence of social protection affecting the outcomes of social exclusion of women such as income poverty, but

much less evidence of it addressing the drivers of their exclusion, such as discrimination from political processes or other exclusionary social norms.

Mr. Simone Cecchini, ECLAC, made the final presentation of the day, on social protection and indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean. He discussed examples of how the expansion of non-contributory social protection such as conditional cash transfers (CCT) has contributed to the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the region through monetary support and increased demand for education and health services. He noted that there were still many challenges to effectively include these groups. He emphasized that strong universal systems could correct the disparities that affect excluded groups such as indigenous peoples, without precluding the complementary use of targeted action policies to break down barriers to social protection for them.

The session finished with a discussion of the positive effects of cash transfers, both to empower economically, but also socially, and whether or not these should be conditional. It was noted that cash transfers were economically empowering but also socially empowering—there was evidence of their positive effect on participation in social events and even in the labour market. However, cash transfers coupled with additional measures (“cash plus”) were often needed to promote participation effectively.

Session V: Conclusion and implications for the Report on the World Social Situation 2017

The last session of the meeting, moderated by Ms. Roig, consisted of a dialogue between invited experts and the RWSS 2017 writing team. Participants discussed the conclusions and main themes of the previous day and highlighted the implications for the Report.

There was consensus that social protection is but one policy tool to promote inclusion. It had to be part of a broad and well-integrated social policy framework. There was some more discussion of the definition of social protection for the Report’s purposes, particularly of the benefit of a focus on income security and access to basic services as defined in ILO Recommendation No. 202 on social protection floors or, alternatively, a broader definition that would acknowledge some of the social equity objectives of social protection. Some participants noted that, under the first definition (social protection floors, Rec. 202), the focus of the RWSS 2017 would be exclusively on ensuring income security of excluded groups. It was also noted that income security was a necessary condition to promote social inclusion but not a sufficient one.

There was also agreement on the fact that, while there are data on global social protection coverage (general and measure-specific coverage), **there are no systematic, comprehensive data to assess the characteristics of those covered and not covered (i.e. there are no comparable data by country on coverage by age, sex, ethnicity, race, migrant or disability status)**. Therefore, the RWSS 2017 would have to rely mostly on case studies, which limits the ability to generalise findings on a global scale.

A number of examples were suggested as possible case studies for the Report:

As positive examples of social protection programmes for **older persons**, the cases of Australia, China and Nepal were discussed (as high-, middle- and low-income countries respectively). In addition, participants mentioned the *pension alimentaria* programme in Mexico City, the high levels of benefits provided under the Namibian pension system, as well as the good coverage of older persons in the health care systems of Thailand, Ghana and Viet Nam. Meanwhile, the cuts made to social pensions in much of Europe since 2008 were highlighted as a possible negative example, as was the introduction of individual accounts under the Chilean pension system, which have disadvantaged women in particular.

Evidence on addressing the needs of **youth** seems less robust. Some limited available evidence suggests that social protection measures that effectively supported youth were “cash plus” (cash transfers with links to programmes that promote employment and/or school retention, for example). The examples of Kenya, Namibia and Brazil expanding the age eligibility for child benefits were highlighted, as was the experience of South Africa, Kenya and Zambia in providing wage subsidies for youth and linking youth benefits to HIV prevention programmes.

For **persons with disabilities**, participants suggested exploring work conducted by the Southern African Social Protection Experts Network (SASPEN). In addition, the disability grant in Brazil and the disability pension in Nepal were highlighted as promising examples to explore. The issue of dependency was mentioned in the context of disability schemes in the Netherlands, as a possible negative example.

Regarding **international migrants** and refugees, the experience of UNHCR providing benefits to Syrian refugees in Jordan was discussed as possible good example, as was the expansion of benefits to cover migrants in South Africa and the coverage of migrants under Thailand’s comprehensive health care system. The coverage of IDPs in Colombia’s CCT programme was also mentioned as a positive example.

For **ethnic minorities**, and particularly for women within these groups, key barriers to social protection include eligibility and participation restrictions. The child grant in Nepal, including Keetie Roelen’s work on dalit children, as well as various examples from Latin American programmes including Brazil’s inclusion of Afro-descendants, were highlighted as good practices. The challenge faced by ethnic minorities in accessing Bangladesh’s various social protection programmes was mentioned as a potential troubling example to explore.

There was also a discussion on the importance of support to **children** under social protection programmes. These supports tend to have long-lasting impact on social inclusion throughout the life cycle. Some participants suggested the inclusion of children in the RWSS.

Participants also acknowledged the importance of popular support for social protection systems. For instance, in developing countries, social pensions were politically popular because they costed less than other “demo grants”, such as family benefits or child grants. These universal social pensions were preferable to means-tested social pensions at low levels of development. The group also agreed that the expansion of non-contributory social protection had been important, particularly in promoting the inclusion of indigenous peoples

and other ethnic minorities, but many lacked an explicitly “ethnic” approach. However, there were still challenges, due to the limited access to services, low quality, negligible inter-cultural approaches, and difficulties in proving identity.

Participants also noted that changing attitudes towards excluded groups will be crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of social protection coverage as well as its political sustainability.

In closing, attendees were thanked for their participation in the meeting and for their informative presentations as well as their engaging discussions, while also acknowledging the value of their inputs in the writing of the RWSS 2017.

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