

54th SESSION OF THE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Summary

High-level panel discussion on the priority theme: Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world

3 February 2016

The Commission for Social Development held a high-level panel discussion on the priority theme of rethinking and strengthening social development under sub-item 3(a) and heard presentations from the following panellists: Mr. Marlon Aguilar, Head of Planning and International Affairs of Mexico's Ministry of Social Development; Mr. Jean-Paul Tricart, Adviser on International Relations in the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission; Mr. Rolph van der Hoeven, Emeritus Professor in the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam; and Ms. Ana Martinez de Luco, Founding Member of the non-governmental organization Sure We Can. The panel was moderated by Mr. Raymond Torres, Director of the Research Department at the International Labour Organization.

Panellists underscored that the contemporary world presents both new challenges, as well as opportunities for social development. Globalization, technological change, environmental degradation, weak economic growth and the end of the commodity boom, for instance, have all had social consequences. The connections between social and economic policies – with ecological boundaries – are thus increasingly profound. Noting that good social policies have been shown to lead to good economic policies, panellists emphasized the need to strengthen the social dimension of sustainable development and recalibrate its interaction with the economic and environmental pillars.

Policy coordination and cooperation

Panellists highlighted the importance of strong coordination and cooperation at the international regional and national levels for strengthening social development.

A broader sense of international cooperation - beyond aid - can inform the deliberations of the Commission and national policies. This would extend to the social aspects of areas such as trade, finance and technology, such that social policies are seen as elements of growth and investment. They noted that despite progress made through the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action in 2015, international solidarity regarding taxation, capital flows, illicit financial flows, etc. is still lacking. This has meant that even *domestic* resources in developing countries are not being maximised for social development ends. Panellists emphasised that social development is not only a national concern, but can be dramatically affected by international or regional developments – citing as an example how United States policies affect development within Mexico. International coordination of economic and social policies is thus crucial for sustainable development.

Relatedly, there is a need for better understanding of the interaction between national development strategies and regional or international strategies. For example, countries within the European Union pursue diverse development strategies; Governments must therefore identify mechanisms for refinement, coordination and regulation when strategies conflict. In addition, international development plans should align with national priorities and budgetary processes.

With a view towards implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the discussion included consideration of leveraging coordination to meet a few fundamental goals – such as those on clean water and sanitation, health, education, and peace, justice and inclusive institutions – in order to generate momentum to then achieve all of the goals.

At the national level, strong coordination across government ministries is crucial for social development in the contemporary world. This entails ensuring a clear plan of action with measurable objectives and goals, clear lines of responsibility as well as a strong monitoring and evaluation system. Incentivising coordination and cooperation and penalizing poor performance may also contribute to greater effectiveness and efficiency.

Participants emphasized that corruption undermines social development, and noted that the Commission for Social Development might address the impact of corruption on progress towards sustainable development, and in particular international and national taxation and illicit financial flows. They highlighted the importance of strong and transparent institutions and sound legal frameworks for effectively tackling corruption.

The need to separate institutional responsibilities for executing social development plans and for monitoring that execution was also stressed.

Panellists noted concrete implications for the Commission as a platform for social development and social policies. The Commission can raise the profile of social policy and issue recommendations in support of the participation of excluded groups in decision-making on social development and in SDG follow-up. The Commission can also democratise its own processes and build the capacity of civil society organizations to participate in the Commission and other social development processes (though this requires national government partnership and support). Moreover, the Commission can contribute to the process of monitoring the SDGs and thereby lead to better articulation of social policies and strengthened national conversation about social contracts, which are crucial for social financing and for enabling social policy to be an engine for growth and well-being.

Poverty

Panellists stressed the importance of measuring poverty not just by income alone but by looking at multiple deprivations – for example in education, health, housing, basic services, food – that better encompass the rights of people. This conceptual change provides not only different poverty figures, but also different policy implications. For example, it means that genuinely addressing poverty requires consolidated and coherent action across government ministries – not only those dedicated to social development, but also those responsible for housing, education,

health, finance, etc. These coherent programmes may provide support for livelihoods and income, life insurance for female heads of households, child nutrition, migrant integration, and other efforts which can help to reduce poverty from different angles. Addressing food security, in particular, can be an entry point to tackling other deprivations associated with multidimensional poverty. Such development efforts must operate in partnership with local communities, whose goals and priorities may be undermined in the absence of their commitment and participation.

In this context, national statistical capacity to ensure that Governments can properly and precisely measure the impacts of various policies on poverty levels is very important. Investing in and adopting new types of surveys, statistical techniques, indicators and other tools is key to bringing about more effective responses to poverty. In taking such steps, countries can further align their work with monitoring requirements under the SDGs.

Panellists noted that the profile of global poverty has changed and requires a broader set of policy responses. For example, a quarter of those living in poverty globally now live in conflict or post-conflict countries, while the situation of those living in poverty in developed countries is getting worse. This calls for a rethink of approaches to global poverty in the coming decades.

Inequality

Much discussion focused on the threat to social development of growing inequalities within and between countries, as well as between groups and generations. Social inequalities lead to income inequality, and narrow tax bases in developing countries further limit the ability of social agendas to address these challenges. Global inequalities and declining faith in fairness were exacerbated by the recent financial and economic crisis (and perhaps even contributed to it).

Accordingly, there was a call for greater emphasis on fairness and a rebalancing of sustainable development with a more robust social dimension. A floor or pillar of social rights and upward convergence - whereby least developed countries have the opportunity to catch up with those most developed - should be priority concerns. There is a need to boost resource bases for social policies to tackle inequalities, such as through higher marginal tax rates on profit, which have historically been higher than at present despite current levels of growth and prosperity. There must also be greater dialogue about fairness and efficiency in taxation, and enhanced understanding of the need for profits to be reinvested into expanded production (incremental wage increase and job growth) and for taxes to fund social development efforts, which have demonstrated effectiveness in the past. The European Social Model was cited as a policy approach conducive to these goals, according to which the social market economy (which integrates the principle of social justice), inclusive growth and reinforced role of civil society can help to support convergence. The approach also calls for addressing gaps in social rights (through labour laws, social protection, etc.). Collective action has an important role to play in addressing these and other challenges to sustainable development.