

Commission for Social Development
51st Session
Panel discussion on Emerging Issues: The social dimension in the global
development agenda beyond 2015
(Friday, 8 February, 2013, morning)

Chair's Summary

The Commission held a panel discussion on “The social dimension in the global development agenda beyond 2015” under sub-item 3 (c) on Emerging Issues, and heard presentations from the following panellists: Ms. Sarah Cook, Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Dr. Timo Voipio, Senior Adviser on Social Policy and Decent Work, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Mr. Mawutor Ablo, Director of Social Protection, Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare of Ghana, Mr. Stephen Pursey, Director of Policy Integration and Adviser to the Director General, International Labour Organization (ILO), and Mr. Nikhil Seth, Director, Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. The panel was moderated by H.E. Mr. Carlos Enrique García González, Ambassador, Vice Chairperson of the Bureau of the Commission for Social Development and Deputy Permanent Representative of El Salvador to the United Nations.

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), world leaders made a commitment to promote sustainable development, integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions on equal footing. The post-2015 development agenda is expected to guide global efforts to realize the commitment. This provides a unique opportunity to strengthen the social dimension of sustainable development.

It has emerged that a fundamental rethinking of development, giving greater emphasis to the social dimension, is necessary. In Rio, Governments re-emphasized the need to place people and the planet at the centre of sustainable development. Such inclusive, people-centred, sustainable development will require transformative changes. The post-2015 global development agenda, therefore, must be more ambitious in its vision and goals than the MDGs. The challenge is to balance an ambitious vision with the need to prioritize and agree on a limited set of clear and practical, measurable goals.

Strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development

To date, insufficient attention has been given to the social dimension of sustainable development, despite the fact that the three pillars (social, economic and environment) are intimately interlinked. There is a growing recognition that economic growth alone is not sufficient to ensure social justice, equality and sustained prosperity for all. A strong social foundation is crucial for ensuring sustainability of social and economic development and environmental protection. Therefore, poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, social protection and social inclusion should be at the core of economic and environmental policies to realize inclusive and sustainable development with social justice.

Not only is social development necessary for sustainable development but, with the right policies in place, social processes that transform behaviour can be drivers of change in economic and environmental spheres. At present, however, policies aim mainly at addressing the social consequences of economic or political processes, including their negative impacts on particular marginalized social groups, rather than addressing the root causes of social exclusion. Yet social relations, institutions and behaviours underpin efforts to change patterns of production, consumption and distribution, and to improve individual well-being. In order to promote such a transformation, policies should move towards addressing the social drivers of structural change.

In formulating the post-2015 global development agenda, new policy frameworks that integrate social dimensions at all levels of policy design and implementation should be prioritised in order to ensure equitable and socially sustainable development. Clearly defining the social dimension as both a stand alone pillar and a cross-cutting issue will enable effective integration of social perspectives in framing issues and policies. This will also allow refocused attention on social institutions and relations, which provide a foundation to improve individual well-being and quality of life.

Priority areas

The following were identified as important areas which need to be incorporated in the post-2015 development agenda: inequality, social inclusion, empowerment and participation, full and productive employment and decent work, and social protection. The challenge is to find a consultative way/process to select the core priorities and structure them in a meaningful way for effective monitoring. Therefore, elaboration is necessary to identify context specific indicators and available data on best practice at national and international level. Framing the development agenda around people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, would enable addressing structural causes of poverty and inequality.

Inequality and social inclusion

Despite overall progress in advancing the MDGs and reducing extreme poverty, there are significant regional disparities and inequalities in income and opportunities both between and within countries. A people-centred approach is essential to understand and address the determinants of inequalities from multiple dimensions, including income, place of residence, gender, age and others. This will enable achieving sustained, inclusive and equitable growth and a sustainable path to our future.

Empowerment and participation

The process to formulate the post-2015 framework has led to open and inclusive consultations (as called for by Governments) to ensure the agenda will be the result of a participatory process and therefore reflect the concerns of people. The empowerment of people and their participation is critical to the objective of an inclusive and equitable future that is sustainable as they will be integral part of the solution. Therefore, the post-2015 agenda should aim at promoting the enablers of participation of all segments of society and their empowerment.

Full and productive employment, decent work and social protection

Decent work is the main means to sustain livelihoods, move people out of poverty, improve the quality of life and empower people. As such, it should be a critical element to be strengthened in the post-2015 global development agenda. A stronger focus on decent work calls for bringing a 'job-lens' and conducting social/job impact assessments of policies in place.

Social protection has been making a sustained impact on reducing poverty among the extremely poor and vulnerable. Well designed social protection systems also contribute to ensuring productive participation by all, and therefore are considered key to reduce inequalities, promote inclusive growth and empower people. Therefore, it is another area that should be strengthened in the post-2015 development framework.

National social protection floors should go beyond providing cash transfers, and include care work and capacity building, both of which are necessary to empower disadvantaged groups. Strengthening social protection systems and programmes would require high-level policy commitment and coordination at the national level and funding both at the national and international levels. Social protection programmes should be tailored to address multiple vulnerabilities of the poor, and be linked to other areas including productivity, skills development, micro-finance etc.

Monitoring mechanism

The post-2015 agenda should go beyond monitoring averages and track changes in the lives of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups and individuals. This disaggregated approach to monitoring is one way to focus attention on inequality.

Accountability mechanisms in the post-2015 agenda could be developed at the global level, while allowing for flexibility at the national level in defining national targets according to local conditions. Taking into account that monitoring of the global agenda takes place at the national level, there is a need for improving data collection and data quality, including at the sub-national level. In this regard, increased attention should be given to strengthening national capacity in monitoring the implementation through participatory processes, including enhancing civil society participation.

A way forward

The Commission for Social Development was urged to consider the structure of post-2015 priorities from social perspectives, taking into consideration its expertise and constituencies in the social dimension of sustainable development. This is vital to formulating a post-2015 global development agenda that is sensitive to the needs and concerns of the most vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged groups and population. The success of the post-2015 agenda depends on how it will empower them and uplift their lives.

From the panel discussion it clearly emerged that although the social dimension is often understood as a cross-cutting issue, there is a need to have a strong social pillar with its own identity. A strong social pillar enables promoting transformative changes that affect the way we think and we behave in the economic, environmental and social spheres, which will ultimately improve the well-being of people. Realizing such fundamental

transformations could be a major contribution of the social dimension in the global development agenda beyond 2015.

It was proposed that the summary of this panel discussion should be transmitted to the next substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, and also shared with the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.