

Introduction

Why social inclusion?

In September 2015, world leaders adopted an ambitious global development agenda, envisioning a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable would be met.¹ The central pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to ensure “that no one will be left behind”. That means, in particular, that all Sustainable Development “Goals and targets [should be] met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society”.² Implicit in these commitments is a broad recognition that the extraordinary economic growth observed in some parts of the world and the widespread improvement in social indicators in the last few decades have failed to reach many people and to close the deep divides within and across countries.

Humankind has indeed achieved unprecedented social progress over the past several decades. Poverty has declined dramatically around the world, and people are healthier, more educated and better connected than ever before. Important political changes, most notably the end of the cold war and the spread of democratic ideals, have created opportunities for political participation and, with improvements in information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the expansion of education, for enabling more people to make more informed choices and exercise voice.

Yet progress has been uneven. Oftentimes, rising income levels have gone hand in hand with growing inequality. In the majority of countries, the wealthy have grown wealthier while the relative situation of those who are living in poverty has improved only little. Unemployment is widespread and many workers struggle to earn sufficient income in vulnerable jobs amid inadequate opportunities for decent work. Having just emerged from the latest financial and economic crisis, many countries are faced with persistent economic uncertainty and volatility in the real economy and in the labour market. Inequalities pervade not only the economic, but also the social, political, cultural and environmental spheres, thus constituting systematic disadvantage for some social groups, that is to say, their social exclusion.

Virtually everywhere, some individuals and groups confront barriers that prevent them from fully participating in economic, social and political life. Democratization and the demand for equal rights have led some Governments to loosen legally imposed discriminatory measures as well as policies that

¹ General Assembly resolution 70/1, para. 8.

² *Ibid.*, para. 4.

sustain unfair treatment, but these formal measures have not been sufficient to eliminate disadvantage or achieve inclusive societies. Overall, there is a growing realization that development and growth have done little to promote equality and inclusion.

In the process leading up to the new 2030 Agenda, civil society networks and organizations joined forces with the United Nations to have a voice in shaping “the world we want”.³ Unfortunately, mankind is very far from realizing the vision that emerged from those global conversations and, ultimately, from the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, there are worrying signals of more difficulties in the future. Growing nativist political movements have emerged in some countries, partly in reaction to large movements of people seeking to escape unceasing war and destitution in their own countries. Distrust is evolving into anger among neighbours, based on differences in religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, and disability.

It is against this backdrop of sharp inequalities that the commitment of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind must be understood. The Agenda’s core message of inclusion echoes the commitment made by representatives of Governments participating in the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen 20 years earlier, to foster social justice, equality and inclusion, and is founded on the recognition that, unless development is inclusive, it will not be sustainable.

Indeed, leaving no one behind is not just a fundamental moral imperative; social exclusion also has significant economic and social costs associated with foregoing the contribution of individuals and groups that cannot access educational systems, land or the labour market. Exclusion has political costs as well, as it reflects and feeds social tensions and is at the root of many violent conflicts. Exclusion further interacts with environmental risks: excluded individuals and groups, especially those living in poverty, frequently inhabit areas that are more vulnerable to natural hazards and disasters and are disproportionately harmed by such disasters as a result. Exclusion makes societies not only less cohesive, but also less safe and productive.

The United Nations Secretariat cannot by itself change these political and social realities. What it can do, however, is describe the situation, try to raise the world’s consciousness about worrying failings and recommend concerted actions that Governments might wish to take to overcome them. That is precisely what the present issue of the *Report on the World Social Situation* is designed to do.

³ General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex. The global conversations referred to and the web platform supporting them were named “The World We Want 2015”. For more information about these, see www.beyond2015.org/world-we-want-2015-web-platform.

Social inclusion in the international development agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals contained within the 2030 Agenda carry forward commitments agreed at several United Nations summits, including the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. At a time of significant political change, including the end of the cold war, and renewed hope in the potential offered by international cooperation, that Summit gave rise to a far-reaching people-centred agenda aimed at promoting inclusive societies, social progress, justice and a higher quality of life for all. While advocating a broad vision of social development, Governments called for particular attention to be paid to eradicating poverty, promoting full and productive employment and fostering social integration – a concept that is closely linked to social inclusion.

Agreement on the need to pursue social integration as one of the goals of social development arose from the dramatic events that took place during the preparations for the Summit. The so-called ethnic cleansing and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), the war in Croatia (1991-1995) and the genocide in Rwanda (1994) loomed large in the Summit's outcome. These horrors of conflict and genocide added to the rising concerns about the social polarization and fragmentation that existed in some of the newly independent countries of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as well as in post-apartheid South Africa. The Summit thus posited social integration as a goal, namely that the world should endeavour to create a "society for all" based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.⁴ Fostering social integration thus called for the active pursuit of social inclusion of the most disadvantaged groups.⁵

International efforts to advance social integration since the Copenhagen Summit led to the subsequent adoption of new international instruments aimed at realizing the rights of particular social groups. Some of the major instruments are the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for women in 1995,⁶ the World Programme of Action for Youth and the Supplement to the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond,⁷ the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing,⁸ the

⁴ Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution I, annex I, para. 66.

⁵ The concepts of social inclusion and social integration are nonetheless distinct; see chap. I and box I.1 of the present publication.

⁶ Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution I, annexes I and II.

⁷ General Assembly resolution 50/81, annex, and resolution 62/126, annex.

⁸ Report of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, 8-12 April 2002 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.02.IV.4), chap. I, resolution I, annexes I and II.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁹ and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰

The Copenhagen Summit also influenced the outcomes of several subsequent global intergovernmental conferences. Notably, in September 2000, the Millennium Declaration¹¹ reaffirmed the centrality of many of the values and principles that had been advocated at the Summit, including equality, solidarity and tolerance. Concerns related to the challenge of exclusion, however, were not absorbed into the Millennium Development Goals. Despite a prominent commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, the Goals have been criticized for insufficiently integrating the principles of social justice and equality. That is, since the Goals were largely monitored by measures of average progress towards each indicator, they could be reached – and in some cases were reached – amid large and even growing inequalities in human development, entirely bypassing some vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups.

Thus, renewed determination to promote inclusion has become visible in the 2030 Agenda. In order to hold Governments accountable for their pledge to leave no one behind, several targets of the Sustainable Development Goals include specific reference to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and indicators have been proposed to measure progress achieved by these groups, including through data disaggregated by age, sex and other criteria. In particular, one target under Sustainable Development Goal 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries is specifically aimed at empowering and promoting by 2030 “the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status” (target 10.2). Moreover, the term “inclusive” is used repeatedly, as in relation to education (Goal 4), economic growth (Goal 8), industrialization (Goal 9), cities and human settlements (Goal 11) and, more broadly, societies and institutions (Goal 16).

Aim of the report

The focus of the 2030 Agenda on inclusion underscores the need to clarify what constitutes social inclusion and to identify who is being left behind and in what ways so as to inform policy action. In the present issue of the report, patterns of social exclusion are examined, and the question of whether or when development processes are inclusive is considered, with particular attention being paid to the links among exclusion, poverty and employment trends. It is recognized that the promotion of inclusive societies and inclusive

⁹ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 2515, No. 44910.

¹⁰ General Assembly resolution 61/295, annex.

¹¹ General Assembly resolution 55/2.

development processes requires the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities and the creation of decent jobs for all workers. The importance of promoting economic and social policies and public institutions that are inclusive is underscored in the report.

The report comprises five chapters. Chapter I contains a conceptual overview of social inclusion and exclusion and illustrates the challenges of identifying indicators to measure these broad concepts across countries. The chapter's discussion underscores the need to maintain close links between indicators of exclusion and the problems that they are intended to address, as few measures serve as all-purpose indicators or are applicable in all contexts (United Nations, 2010). In chapter II, there is an assessment of the progress being made towards the eradication of poverty, the reduction of income inequality and the attainment of full employment and decent work as essential elements of inclusive development processes. In doing so, findings from previous editions of the *Report on the World Social Situation* are consolidated in this chapter and complemented with new analysis as well as a discussion on the links between these key social indicators and social inclusion.¹² Chapter III illustrates patterns of social exclusion across several dimensions, with the focus being primarily on an assessment of the disadvantages faced by particular social groups in gaining access to opportunities, resources and participation in political and cultural life. The chapter brings out the diversity of trends and patterns of exclusion around the world. Chapter IV explores the role of discrimination as a key driver of exclusion. In reviewing the empirical literature on discrimination, the challenges involved in capturing its presence and measuring its impact are highlighted. In chapter V, consideration is given to policy implications of the analysis, including for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Attention is drawn to the need for addressing the structural causes of exclusion, including exclusionary institutions, policies and norms, and ways are proposed for promoting inclusion through the empowerment and active participation of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in social, economic and political life. More and improved methods for monitoring and analysing social inclusion are called for, as well as additional research and an exploration of practical strategies to advance social inclusion.

¹² The *Report on the World Social Situation 2010* sought to rethink poverty and ways to eradicate it (United Nations, 2009). The *Report on the World Social Situation 2007* addressed the employment imperative (United Nations, 2007), while the reports published in 2005 and 2013 assessed the inequality predicament and reasons why inequality matters, respectively (United Nations, 2005 and 2013a).

