

Remarks by Ambassador Mathu Joyini at the 2022 ADS, 27 May 2022.

Chairperson

Excellencies

We thank OOSA for organizing an excellent 2022 African Development Series to reflect on topics of great importance to our continent, Africa.

I am particularly pleased to take part in a discussion on the importance of social protection in enhancing food security and nutrition. There is no country today that is an advanced economy that did not implement social protection measures for its population in its process of development. Social protection measures are meant to support livelihoods and the health of societies. Yet this is an area where the glaring inequalities between and within countries are most manifested.

According to the International Labour Organisation less than 50 per cent of the world's population has at least one form of social protection. This leaves more than 4 billion citizens of the world without any cover of social security. The African continent has the lowest social security coverage in the world with 17 percent of our population covered compared to the global average of 47 percent.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the positive impact of social protection measures. Those countries with social protection systems were able to cushion their populations from the worst effects of the pandemic. Countries without these measures suffered more. Some countries, including my own South Africa, were also able to introduce additional social protection measures to deal with the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on our people.

Our government introduced a COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) cash grant to all citizens above age 18 who are unemployed and who are not receiving any other form of social protection. We also implemented a Social Relief of Distress food parcels programme to all South African citizens, permanent residents, and refugees in need. All these were welcome interventions assisting households to meet their basic needs at a crucial time when jobs were lost, and economic activities suspended.

These were additional to our existing and permanent social protection measures such as those for the aged, for people living with disabilities and child support grants, which currently reach more than 60 percent of our total households.

Chairperson

The fact that the world is witnessing a rather slow economic recovery from COVID-19 is another reason why we need to put social protection high in the political agendas of our countries.

We should use the experience of COVID-19 to accelerate actions towards meeting SDG target 1.3 which calls for all countries to **“implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable”**. Therefore, as we emerge from the pandemic we should not diminish the current focus on social protection. Rather this should be a window we use opportunistically to advance the spread of social protection in all countries.

Nowhere is this sustained focus on social protection required more than in Africa because of the reality that we lag behind the rest of the world in investments in social protection. Expenditure on social protection as a percentage of GDP in our continent averages 5 percent, compared with the global average of 8,6 percent. This means that COVID-19, climate change, and the food security challenges facing the world today, will have more detrimental impacts in African countries. They are reversing all the gains that our countries have been making with poverty eradication and broader investments to achieve the sustainable development goals. It should be recalled that before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic some of the fastest growing economies in the world were African countries. With the crises that the world is facing today therefore hunger and malnutrition are rising all over in our continent.

Chairperson

Excellencies

The case for social protection is strong and proven. It can support human capital development, social cohesion, and inclusive economic growth. As the example of COVID-19 shows, social protection cushions societies in times of crisis. It also contributes to households meeting their nutrition needs with associated positive impacts on health. Social protection is also important as a measure to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. We have seen the disproportionate impact that natural disasters have on women and girls.

In his report Our Common Agenda, the UN Secretary-General reminds us that social protection systems could also form the basis of peaceful societies. We have all witnessed in various times the link between social unrest and people in want of the fulfillment of their basic needs. Our Common Agenda is realistic in that it concedes that it may not be possible for all countries to provide social protection to all those who need it. But at least it proposes a baseline that all countries should aspire to – access to healthcare for all; basic income security for children; and for those unable to work, and elder persons. South Africa can identify with these proposals as they are in line with what we are already implementing in our country.

For developing countries and Africa, in particular, there is a need for enhanced international support for them to be able to afford social protection systems. This includes the fulfillment of already agreed international commitments on finance and other means of implementation.

Domestic resources to implement or expand social protection in Africa could include targeted taxation measures. We need to stop illicit financial flows in order for our countries to invest such resources on social protection. Debt relief in times of crisis is also critical to give our governments more fiscal space for redistribution of resources. The 2030 Agenda is an integrated set of commitments that are linked and interdependent in many ways. The extension of social protection is therefore also key to leaving no one behind.

In conclusion I therefore wish to reiterate and stress the following elements:

- We need to use the window afforded to us by COVID-19 to place social protection at the top of the agenda in our countries.
- Within the fiscal limitations of our countries, we need to consider a floor or a base for social protection measures, nationally defined by each country.
- In many countries, including South Africa, the debate is on whether we should keep permanent the special social protections measures we introduced for COVID-19. It goes without saying that our populations favour extension and permanence of these measures.
- We also need to grapple with the fact that COVID-19 is not the last major crisis that the world will face. Increased investments in social protection therefore will also prepare our societies for future shocks.
- Social protection is important to address different dimensions of malnutrition. By enhancing social inclusion, access to health and education it also promotes better nutrition outcomes.
- Food transfers and school feeding schemes are examples of social protection measures targeting malnutrition.
- Social protection is also key for resilience. Those affected most by malnutrition tend to be more vulnerable to shocks. At the sametime social protection helps households recover from emergencies.
- Nutrition objectives therefore need to be embedded in social protection measures.
- We need to integrate a gender perspective into social protection. Women tend to be more vulnerable to malnutrition. Yet we know that when women are affected by malnutrition this has a direct impact on children and future generations.