

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/SDD/2013/Technical Paper.12  
26 December 2013  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PARTICIPATION  
POLICY BRIEF**



United Nations

13-0379

## Introduction

The history of social justice is as contested as its definition. Building on the universal definition of justice, the 1960s witnessed the entry of social justice into official economic discourse as a leftist, anti-capitalist construct. It quickly evolved into a larger concept involving the fair and just distribution and redistribution of wealth in society – hence the terms ‘distributive justice’ and ‘social justice’ were for some time used interchangeably. By the 1990s, social justice had become a mainstream concept, and dominated discussion at forums such as the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. At the Summit, the intertwining of social justice and human rights was made evident and received endorsement from developing and developed countries alike. In fact, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a global effort to strive for social justice through the eradication of poverty, increased opportunity and choice, and the protection and sustainability of resources.

### What is Social Justice?

While many schools of thought attempt to define social justice, there is no consensus on a single, all-encompassing definition. For the purposes of this policy brief, social justice is defined as a normative concept centered on the principles of fairness, equality, equity, rights and participation. It builds on the two key principles identified by John Rawls as fundamental to any discussion of justice: equal basic rights and equality of opportunity that must be of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged in society.

#### *Equality*

Fair access to goods and services is a fundamental principle of social justice. It implies that all people, regardless of their gender, race, age, class, language, religion, or occupation, are entitled to benefit from society’s public goods and resources. This includes access to education, information, healthcare, employment and job opportunities. In democratic societies the concept of equality also extends to the political sphere and ensures an equal voice for all citizens in the decision-making process.

#### *Equity*

The principle of equity derives from the recognition that equal or uniform distribution is not always fair, particularly in light of existing injustices that have prevented or reduced the ability of certain individuals or groups to gain equal access to public goods, resources or opportunities in the first place. With this in mind, equity implies appropriate treatment in line with the principles of fairness and equal opportunity for all. It further indicates striving to remove or overcome the barriers that hinder certain individuals and groups (e.g. people with disabilities and the poor) from fulfilling their potential, by maximizing their opportunities for advancement.

#### *Rights*

As a key principle of social justice, rights can be subdivided into (1) legal rights, which include inherited rights and other lawful rights such as the right to receive payment for one’s jobs according to agreed terms; and (2) moral rights, which include basic human rights, liberties and entitlements such as the right for people to have a say in the affairs that concern them (Smith 1994, 38) and the right of certain groups to particular geographic territories (Lee & Smith 2004). In socially just societies, moral rights, even if not without legal guarantees, are protected by adequate procedures, norms and rules, some of which are universally accepted, i.e. human rights.

#### *Participation*

Participation in the context of social justice means involving people in the decisions that govern their lives. This includes not only engaging them in decision-making processes on the kind of public services needed in their areas but also ensuring their full participation in political and cultural life. More specifically, the rationale for public participation is twofold: (1) achieving better distributive outcomes, and

(2) strengthening democracy. In this second respect, the notion of participation is linked to power, whereby participation is believed to shift existing power relationships as traditionally weak and marginalized groups and individuals move into a stronger position vis-à-vis other actors, including public and social institutions.<sup>1</sup>

In their definition, Jost and Kay stipulate that “Social Justice is a state of affairs (either actual or ideal) in which (a) benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle (or set of principles); (b) procedures, norms and rules that govern political and other forms of decision-making preserve the basic rights, liberties, and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c) human beings are treated with dignity and respect not only by authorities but also by other relevant social actors, including fellow citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Mechanisms of Social Justice**

It is difficult to agree on a single set of criteria to measure the effect of social justice in society. Conventionally, social justice principles are implemented through a variety of mechanisms at the policy level. These could include issuing a law for people with special needs; redistributing taxes through social funds; implementing subsidies or social security programmes; distributing cash transfers; or introducing social protection floors. Alternatively, at the local level, social justice initiatives can include better redistribution of social services; reallocation of development programmes to help the poor; or redistribution of water resources in peripheral townships. Therefore, social policy and social development are directly connected to the enhancement of social justice.

More concretely, social justice measures at the level of public policies and national development programmes attempt to address six areas of inequality: (1) inequalities in the distribution of income; (2) inequalities in the distribution of assets; (3) inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment; (4) inequalities in the distribution and access to knowledge; (5) inequalities in the distribution of health services, social security and the provision of a safe environment; and (6) inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation.<sup>3</sup>

Typical social policy answers to the above inequalities have included measures to reduce or eradicate extreme poverty resulting from unequal distribution of income by launching nationwide poverty reduction measures including better access to education, micro-credit programs and other similar initiatives. Measures such as limiting capital flight in Africa and instituting far-reaching and participatory land reforms in Latin America were introduced to reduce inequalities in asset distribution. Measures to promote economic justice such as improvements in the opportunities for work are considered effective mechanisms to counter inequalities in the distribution of work. India, China and a host of Eastern European countries attest to this fact through their gradual opening and transition towards *laissez-faire* economies, which have enabled young people to capitalize on their talents.<sup>4</sup>

The availability of quality education and ease of access to knowledge as well as improvements in enrolment ratios are considered necessary mechanisms for addressing inequalities in access to knowledge and education; this is especially the case for girls and marginalized groups. Similarly, policies designed to improve development indicators such as health indicators and life expectancy, decline in infant mortality and reduction in the vulnerability of poor people have been adopted to reduce inequalities in healthcare. One policy initiative adopted in many developing countries has been the improvement of free, public healthcare services for the poor.

---

<sup>1</sup> ESCWA (forthcoming) *Social Justice: Concepts, Principles, Tools & Challenges*. SDD Concept Paper.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Jost & Aaron C. Kay, 2010. ‘*Social Justice: History, theory and research*’. In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 1122. Available from: [http://www.psych.nyu.edu/jost/social Justice-History, Theory, & Research.pdf](http://www.psych.nyu.edu/jost/social%20Justice-History,%20Theory,%20&%20Research.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> International Forum for Social Development, 2006. *Social Justice in an Open World: the Role of the United Nations*. New York: United Nations, pp. 17-19.

<sup>4</sup> International Forum for Social Development, 2006, p. 33.

The transition from oppressive regimes towards more democratic modes of governance has helped to improve the opportunities for participation and civic engagement. This is a complex issue to measure; participation goes beyond voting in an election to the ability of citizens to actively take part in the decision-making cycle and impact the policy process.<sup>5</sup> Participation is about enhancing national ownership of development programmes and policy space, improving understanding of the politics of revenues and social expenditures, and ensuring Government accountability towards citizens. Effective social accountability mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and public expenditure tracking systems are effective ways of promoting citizen participation in public policy decisions.

Promoting social justice is not an issue limited to developing countries. There have been important examples of developed countries adopting social policies to reduce inequalities, improve equity and promote participation. Norway stands as a prime example of a society that has achieved high economic growth while reducing income inequality, unusual for a resource-rich country. Its sovereign wealth fund has been used to invest in such productive and high employment sectors as the seafood industry and to reform its pension fund to ensure more equitable distribution.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in an attempt to improve the quality of life of children raised by single parents (the overwhelming majority of whom are women), Australia introduced the Fair Work and Equal Remuneration Case, which has reduced the structural inequalities suffered by single parents. The Case included the prolongation of parental leaves and the increase in the proportion of salary pay.<sup>7</sup>

In the United Kingdom, in order to limit the problems of school truancy, juvenile delinquency and hostile youth behavior, the Government introduced the National Social Justice Strategy, which offers family counseling to the poorest families with relationship problems; provides nursing help to mothers; funds early childhood education; and increases childcare support via tax deductions and other tools. The Strategy involved many government agencies and became part of the Child Poverty Strategy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Challenges to Social Justice in the Arab Region**

From what has transpired over the past several years in the region, it is clear that social justice cannot be dealt with in a truncated and reactionary way. A holistic, integrated approach that involves not only single-themed reforms but a larger set of far-reaching national policies that give way to mid- to long-term solutions is needed. During the recent political uprisings, a rallying cry went up across the region for the improvement of social justice. Addressing issues of inequality alone is no longer a sustainable or workable solution. Emphasis on inalienable human rights for all is the key to an improved framework for social justice. This includes the right to work, education, security, liberty and the pursuit of well-being. Additionally, improvements to the climate of participation and opportunities to access decision-making is of utmost importance as Arab nations seek to redress, and in some instances rewrite, their social contracts.

A key challenge to social justice in the Arab region is the transition from rentier States to a more inclusive system of redistribution of the dividends of economic growth. The region is characterized by high unemployment (particularly among women and youth), large income inequalities, widening regional disparities, inadequate social services, strained infrastructure, institutional corruption, and repressive political regimes, in addition to issues arising due to conflict and displacement. Public discontent and a sense of social

---

<sup>5</sup> International Forum for Social Development, 2006, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Nina Berglund, 2011. Why Norway's welfare state works. News in English. January 2. Available from: <http://www.newsinenglish.no/2011/01/02/why-norways-welfare-state-works>.

<sup>7</sup> National Pro Bono Resource Center, 2011. What is Social Justice? Occasional paper #1, p. 16. Available from: [https://wic041u.server-secure.com/vs155205\\_secure/CMS/files/cms/Occ\\_1\\_What\\_is\\_Social\\_Justice\\_FINAL.pdf](https://wic041u.server-secure.com/vs155205_secure/CMS/files/cms/Occ_1_What_is_Social_Justice_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> *Social Justice: Transforming lives: One year on*, Social Justice Division, Department for Work and Pensions. London, April 2013, p. 13.

exclusion have been fuelled particularly by the biased allocation of resources, lack of transparency in governance systems, unfair competition for jobs, and the concentration of crucial national assets in the hands of the political and economic elites, with the majority of citizens denied their right to benefit from the dividends of economic growth.<sup>9</sup>

The Governments of a number of Arab countries have taken some steps to improve citizen participation in key areas of decision-making. National dialogues in countries like Yemen, Morocco and Tunisia are vehicles for increased participation and citizen engagement, particularly when they institutionalize the involvement of civil society, as has occurred in those three countries. With political transformations ongoing in the region, the counterpart of the State in pursuit of social justice mechanisms has been civil society. In various Arab cities where uprisings took place, the deafening uproar of civil society sought to ensure that social and economic rights topped the agendas for reform. Ensuring that civic groups have a place at the table in national dialogues has been the crucial demand of citizens across the region. Transparency and social accountability programmes must characterize state policies that promote national dialogue. Moreover, these policies must go hand in hand with the commitment of the State to the indivisible rights of citizens, most notably their social and economic rights.

Active participation by the State and society in national measures to combat extreme poverty and improve the redistribution of wealth should be a top national priority. Improving access to credit; encouraging small and medium enterprises through an intelligent subsidy programme that encourages sustainability; regulating the informal markets to introduce employment insurance, pension schemes, contractual formalities and legal protection; and reforming taxation are but a few of the issues that need attention today. Addressing them will require the integration of social and economic policies into a rights-based development model.

The Arab region faces the major challenge of ending the exclusion of marginalized groups. Failing to provide all citizens with the opportunity to participate equally in all aspects of social and economic life will only undermine efforts to promote social justice. Furthermore, exclusion will weaken any policy effort to redress socio-economic wrongs.

An additional goal, alongside ending exclusion, is fostering social cohesion, thus ensuring national unity. The events of the past three years have severely divided Arab societies along sectarian, tribal, regional, political and socioeconomic lines. With curfews, security incidents and other physical impediments to socialization and cohesion the threads that hold Arab societies together have been severely frayed. Reuniting communities and rebuilding social cohesion is an important task for Arab Governments and civil society alike.

Another challenge which also presents an opportunity is how Arab Governments may incorporate an unequivocal reassertion of inalienable human rights and a strong emphasis on socioeconomic rights into ongoing constitutional reform processes.<sup>10</sup> These should be clear and comprehensive declarations enshrined in national constitutions and should form a cornerstone of new and forthcoming social contracts. Here again, citizens and civil society must be given the opportunity to participate.

## **Policy Implications**

Land reforms in Yemen and Libya; informal market regulation in Morocco and Tunisia; extreme poverty in Egypt; and cross-cutting themes of social accountability and participation are only a few of the issues that cut to the heart of improving social justice in the Arab region.

---

<sup>9</sup> ESCWA, "Social Justice: Concepts, Principles, Tools and Challenges". Working Paper. Available from: [http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div-editor/Download.asp?table\\_name=divisions\\_other&field\\_name=ID&fileID=1590](http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div-editor/Download.asp?table_name=divisions_other&field_name=ID&fileID=1590).

<sup>10</sup> Arab Watch Report 2012. *Governments Forget Their Pledges on Basic Rights*, ANND, September, p. 18.

Invaluable opportunities for national dialogue exist in the region today to provide a platform for collaboration and interaction between Governments and civil society. Yemen, Tunisia and Morocco have already paved the way with their national dialogues; Libya is on its way to organizing its own dialogue. These processes need to turn into addressing substantive matters as soon as possible and ensure that they become credible platforms for serious reforms.

The failure of the prevailing development model to address the six inequalities outlined above makes it imperative to rethink a new integrated socioeconomic paradigm that improves public policies on the six levels of inequalities. This will require the collaborative efforts of citizens, Governments and international partners such as financial institutions, the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions with the purpose of promoting social justice as the major theme.

It will be incumbent upon the Governments of the region to increase mechanisms of social accountability and participation if it were to meet all of the above challenges. Beyond ensuring fair and free elections, states need to introduce legal frameworks that allow civil society to rise and operate freely; enhance the participation of all groups in policy making; and expand the use of such social accountability mechanisms as score cards, public expenditure tracking systems and other instruments.<sup>11</sup>

Enacting and enforcing legislation that combats corruption, promotes good governance and enhances the democratic process is key to the achievement of social justice. This is the best way to respond to the millions of Arab citizens who took to the streets demanding political change.

Finally, social justice requires more than providing poor and vulnerable groups with basic services, housing subsidies, land grants, basic education and health care; it requires the adoption of a comprehensive national vision for development that can promote economic activity and simultaneously safeguard social justice values. These goals can be accomplished by (1) ensuring the fair redistribution of public goods and resources, and (2) acknowledging and recognizing people's most basic needs and rights. These include the right to decent work; adequate shelter; basic healthcare; and participation in social and political life.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> ESCWA, 2012. *The Role of Participation and Social Justice in Achieving Sustainable and Balanced Development*. 27<sup>th</sup> Session, May, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> ESCWA, "Social Justice: Concepts, Principles, Tools and Challenges". Working Paper. Available from: [http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div-editor/Download.asp?table\\_name=divisions\\_other&field\\_name=ID&fileID=1590](http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div-editor/Download.asp?table_name=divisions_other&field_name=ID&fileID=1590).