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REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE DRAFT SOCIAL POLICY REPORT II: FROM CONCEPT TO PRACTICE AMMAN, 17 JANUARY 2008

Summary

The Draft Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice was the subject of a one-day Expert Group Meeting in Amman on 17 January 2008. Organized by the Social Policy Framework and Instruments Team of the Social Development Division (SDD) of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Meeting was an opportunity to gather feedback and suggestions from regional and international experts. Discussions focused on the conceptual strengths of the Draft Report, and on the appeal to regional policymakers of the concept of integrated social policy.

While noting the challenges specific to the ESCWA region, namely, political instability, pressures of macroeconomic policies on national Governments and weak civil society, the Meeting stressed the policy, planning and regulatory role of the State and the importance of social observatories and social and economic councils as independent monitoring bodies. The Meeting also delved into specific suggestions for refining the approach and scope of the Report and for identifying the necessary aspects for an enabling environment that could support an integrated social policy approach.

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Introduction

1. The one-day Expert Group Meeting on the Draft Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice was held at Le Meridien Hotel in Amman on 17 January 2008. The Meeting was organized by the Social Policy Framework and Instruments Team of the Social Development Division (SDD) of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to provide an opportunity to gather feedback and suggestions on the Draft Report from regional and international experts. Despite a number of last-minute cancellations, 12 leading regional and international experts took part in the Meeting. A list of participants is contained in the annex of this report.

2. After brief opening remarks and an introduction of the participants, Mr. François Farah, chief of ESCWA-SDD, delivered a presentation on the conceptual framework and objectives of the Draft Report. That was followed by an elaboration on its normative framework, findings and recommendations by its main author, Ms. Souad Dajani. A detailed review of the Draft Report was subsequently presented by two discussants, Mr. Shiva Kumar, an independent expert, and Ms. Hania Sholkamy of the American University of Cairo. The remainder of the Meeting was dedicated to facilitating open discussions, where all participants were given the opportunity to comment and interact.

3. Structured around the main topics of discussion for the Meeting, this *Report* attempts to synthesize the intense and prolific debate that took place, and summarizes the conclusions and recommendations for the way forward.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Several suggestions were made during the Meeting regarding what steps to take and amendments to carry out in order to finalize the text of the final version of the Report. The recommendations by the participants in that regard are set forth as follows:

(a) The incorporation of comments and suggestions presented at the Meeting in the final draft of the Report, taking into consideration the possibility of some restructuring of the document;

(b) The translation of the final draft of the Report into Arabic, and a review of the final draft, either at a second meeting or by a virtual panel of experts;

(c) The finalization of the Report in both the English and Arabic languages, and its launch at a regional forum, as well as its dissemination among key policymakers and ministries of social development;

(d) The partnership with the League of Arab States and other key development players in the region to promote the concept and approach of integrated social policy;

(e) The piloting of specific social policy tools and instruments, including social observatories, in ESCWA member countries;

(f) The initiation of work on a third report on social policy, taking into account some of the gaps identified in the finalized version of The Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice.

II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

A. INTEGRATED SOCIAL POLICY CONCEPTS

5. Participants explored at length the conceptual framework of the Draft Report, examined the validity and strength of its main pillars, and endorsed the broad definition of social policy as stated. It was stressed that social policy is more an “outcome” than a “product” and, as such, can be seen as an outcome of

equitable policies, effective instruments and shared consensus. In particular, emphasis was placed on reviewing the growth-first mindset and on reconciling economic and social objectives.

6. There was consensus among participants regarding the failure of the growth-first model and the trickle-down theory, with examples from countries in the region and elsewhere to illustrate that failure. It was noted that those promoting a growth-first approach were motivated by considerations unrelated to equal opportunity, cohesion and stability. Furthermore, that approach ignores the environment, often leading to compromising the livelihoods of farmers, for example.

7. Participants were generally critical in their assessment of the impact of the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s on social equity and development. Policies of the Bretton Woods institutions were criticized for creating social dislocation, poverty, exclusion and dependence on foreign aid, and for destroying capabilities. Thus, while the Arab region has relatively low levels of income poverty, human poverty stands among the highest in the world. Human poverty can be defined as the deprivation of essential assets and opportunities to which every human being is entitled, and includes such variables as living standards, education and literacy, longevity, economic provisioning and access to health care and safe water. In its more expanded definition, human poverty also includes political freedom and personal security, inability to participate in decision-making and threats to sustainability and intergenerational equity. Participants argued that an understanding of the challenges and causes of human poverty is particularly relevant, and that policies should be designed to enlarge people's choices.

8. However, participants raised the question of how to move beyond the critique to make the transformation towards a pro-poor market and growth. They recommended that the final Report should highlight the importance of economic growth in promoting social development and financing social programmes and policies. Ms. Mary Murphy, lecturer at the National University of Ireland, called for an equity model that tackles the nexus between economic growth and social development, with focus on ways of engineering pro-poor policies and nuanced analysis.

9. Rather than using the term "income poverty" and applying the variable "minimum wage", participants found it useful to speak of "minimum decent living", where human poverty is defined in a more holistic and integrated fashion. In that regard, the example from Ireland of 12 indicators measuring "decent living", with their absence causing distress, was presented. Participants called for a similar set of indicators to be developed in the Arab region.

10. In general, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were seen as providing useful parameters for specific achievement targets, and additional links should be made to them in the final Report. However, some MDGs were regarded as being too narrow and sectoral, and not necessarily relevant to middle-income countries, with their poverty focus and fractured approach drawing attention away from a preventative and more integrated stance.

11. A discussion on universalism and targeting concluded with a general agreement to promote a methodology where a universal approach to services is tailored according to such specific characteristics as age, area and status. It is important to move away from traditional social security nets for vulnerable groups, and instead consider Health for All or Education for All where interventions are not limited to a few.

12. The human rights framework was also closely examined. Most participants agreed that individuals have clear entitlements where the State is the primary duty bearer and citizens are the rights holders. The rights-based framework of the United Nations was seen as particularly relevant and valid in providing an understanding of rights and responsibilities. In her discussant comments, Ms. Sholkamy argued that underlying the social policy approach was a social contract or bill of citizenship rights, and that those rights were enshrined in most national constitutions in the region.

13. As a way of analysing social policies, a checklist had been proposed in the Draft Report. It was termed the “Three Rs” and comprised the following issues: rights, regulations and redistribution. To that list, participants suggested adding “respect”, “representation” and responsibility.

14. The relationship between social policy and social cohesion and political stabilization was also explored. Ms. Nabila Hamza of the EUROMED Role of Women in Economic Life Programme, spoke of social policy as a form of political stabilization policy able to regulate and balance the structure of power relations. She argued that social policy should not be seen as charity, but rather as a necessary tool to achieve political, economic and social stability. Moreover, gender dimensions should be more explicitly addressed in the Report, including the use of gender budgeting as a specific example.

B. SOCIAL POLICY ACTORS

15. Three principle social policy actors were debated during the Meeting, namely: (a) the State; (b) civil society; and (c) the private sector and/or market. Particular emphasis was placed on clarifying the role of the State, considering more creative and innovative relationships between the State and the private sector and/or market, strengthening civil society, and clarifying the concept and operation of social observatories.

1. *The State*

16. The general consensus at the Meeting was that the State plays a strong role in generating and implementing social policy, and also in enforcing the necessary regulatory mechanisms in the marketplace. The retreat of the State, due in part to the pressures of structural adjustment, has resulted in some cases in the withdrawal of regulatory instruments and institutions. Tunisia was given as one example where the Ministry of Planning and Finance became the Ministry of Economic Development, with the consequence that the idea of planning was dropped altogether.

17. The role of ministries handling the portfolios of social development, social affairs and solidarity was also much debated. Participants were in concurrence that those ministries in the region were generally ill-financed and possessed weak capacity. The integrated social policy approach requires the integration of the ministries of economy and finance in adopting a holistic approach to social policy design, implementation and monitoring. The ministries of social development are the principle counterparts of ESCWA-SDD in the region; hence, the onus is on that Division to work to strengthen their hand in promoting an integrated approach to social policy.

18. The role of the State in financing various programmes and services is also critical and, thus, necessitating a more conciliatory approach of engaging State actors. In that regard, points of interaction and coordination between the State and the market and/or private sector must be sought. Mr. Kumar pointed to an “over-focus” on private-sector regulation and an “under-focus” on State accountability. Considering a more innovative approach to State and private-sector relationship would result not only in better systems of accountability, but also in more creative identification of financing sources. In that same context, a better understanding of social services delivery was needed, as non-State actors, namely, the private sector and non-governmental organizations, filling the voids left by the retreat of the State.

19. It was suggested that social policy investment in more just outcomes could lead to better examination of financing strategies. Social policy should consider not only how a Government budgets, but also assess the focus and breakdown of that budget, thus allowing stakeholders to monitor distribution and outcome. How the State allocates its resources is of fundamental importance and should be the focus when assessing social policy. An example was drawn from Egypt, where the budget allocation for education had resulted in more resources having been spent on overhead expenses than on students and teachers. A recommendation was made to include similar, illustrative examples in the Report.

20. The role of the State must be emphasized and clarified regarding financing, regulating and planning. However, countries in the region are neither politically nor economically homogenous; thus, the focal points for generating policy, for example parliament versus the head of state, might also differ. Those differences must be taken into account when reviewing the role of the State in relation to an integrated social policy.

2. *Civil society*

21. A stronger role for the State necessitates stronger measures of monitoring and accountability. Regulatory mechanisms were mentioned as one antidote to corruption, as was a strengthened civil society.

22. Since the State is limited when it comes to monitoring and assessing outcomes, it is the role of a vigorous civil society to offer such tasks. That was noted as particularly challenging in the ESCWA region, where, as most participants agreed, civil society institutions are weak.

23. Two points were raised in that context, namely: (a) the vacuum that may be created in the absence of a social policy, leaving other elements in society to assume the role of service provider; and (b) the need to focus on good examples of social mobilization that engage various actors in society. An example of the latter was provided by Mr. Kumar of how some schoolchildren in India had organized a boycott of firecrackers to protest against the exploitation of child labour used in their manufacturing. Similarly, campaigns to boycott plastic bags and other products and produce are further examples of how the engaging of different actors may lead to more creative social activism.

24. Suggestions of a more clearly defined relationship between civil society and the State were provided, including such examples as the signing by civil society organizations and Government actors of a pact or a social commitment on support and obligations.

C. SOCIAL POLICY INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS

25. Social observatories and economic and social councils were highlighted numerous times during the Meeting as relevant institutional structures that support the design and monitoring of social policy.

26. Social observatories were viewed by participants as concrete tools of social policy and their importance was unanimously underscored. However, the need to clarify their role and operation was highlighted, especially the tension surrounding their relationship to the State in terms of make-up and assessment. Participants emphasized the need for social observatories to be independent bodies, specifically when it comes to the appointing of delegates, to the forms of coordination with other institutions and to monitoring. The State cannot monitor itself, and State involvement has to be limited to allow for objective assessment of policies and outcomes. However, it was not clear as yet how such limits could be set with the unambiguous view that if social observatories were to succeed, they must seek some form of Government cooperation. Ms. Sholkamy went even further when suggesting that a social observatory “has to be required by Government”, and that there was a “need for reciprocity of needs and obligations” in that the Government requires and needs the input of a social observatory. Thus, the social observatory must become a mandated part of policymaking.

D. ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

27. Creating an enabling environment for an integrated social policy approach demands attention be paid to general frameworks, as well as to contextualizing elements specific to the region. Such contextualizing elements manifest themselves mostly through points relating to terminology. “Good governance” was suggested as a more acceptable term in the region than “democracy”; “inclusive governance” was seen to be a “gentler” way of incorporating the concept of citizen rights, or bill of rights; and “representative democracy” was also presented as a less threatening concept than “participatory democracy”, since that phrase emphasized the importance of State actors.

28. However, each of those terms provides an organizational framework for a more inclusive political process. They all demand a partnership between State actors and civil society actors built around entitlement and accountability, and they all pertain to a long-term investment in that partnership.

29. In particular, an integrated social policy approach targets not only inequality of income, but also inequality of opportunity. Opportunity must be understood as social, economic and political, and a discourse of equality of opportunity necessarily triggers notions of justice and fairness, inclusion and exclusion, as well as “unfair inclusion”. To enable such a framework where those ideas and notions could be nuanced and supported, a public domain must be patiently and persistently established which would include the factors set forth as follows:

(a) Creating the legal framework and the public space in the region to debate those ideas, especially since they are often presented in an English vocabulary, for example “equity” or “empowerment”;

(b) Improving the quality of public discourse generally, and creating the opportunity for people to speak out and participate. The emphasis could be on public leadership and public vision, rather than political leadership and political vision;

(c) Emphasizing public monitoring and reporting through social audits, public hearings, opinion polls, independent research centres and the media; emphasizing accountability through “right to information” bills that explain resource allocations and processes of distribution;

(d) Establishing new frameworks of monitoring, and how to measure human outcomes from an equity perspective;

(e) Supporting academic and research facilities and centres of excellence, including national commissions for human rights and for those of women and children. The foundations of social policy must come from social research institutions and civil society organizations.

30. In the ESCWA region, however, a number of challenges were noted, namely:

(a) Mal-governance and corruption are linked partly to such macroeconomic policies as structural adjustment, creating a disabling environment;

(b) Social policy outcomes and investment have a long gestation period and that, in turn, requires a stable long term, something which is among the most perplexing impediments to development in the region;

(c) Civic participation requires further study, as it was not clear whether participation would be community-based and inclusive of the marginalized.

E. CRITIQUE OF THE DRAFT REPORT

31. Many of the comments and interventions made by participants throughout the Meeting related to the relevance and usefulness of the Report in its approach, language, target audience and specific evidence-based illustrations and country examples.

1. *Approach*

32. There was consensus among the participants that the motivation, thrust and concern expressed in the Draft Report were not only legitimate, but needed in order to change mindsets from poverty reduction to social equity and cohesion. However, it was generally felt that the Report should reconcile between the advocacy and information components of the document.

2. *Language*

33. Participants generally felt that the concept of integrated social policy was clearly presented and mostly free of the jargon that so often plagues similar documents. However, some participants felt that further work could be done, through the use of simpler, less academic language, to ensure the Report would be more hard-hitting. In addition, a recommendation was made to avoid using normative discourse and prescriptive language, for example “should”, as that was deemed unhelpful to both policymakers and activists. Instead, the final Report should seek to show evidence of results of inaction or lack of attention to the social dimensions. Specific recommendations were also made regarding the use in Arabic of terms such as “social solidarity”.

3. *Purpose*

34. Ms. Sholkamy argued that the Report should develop and promote a model of public policy and development based on the notion of citizenship and the rights of different groups. Such a model would stand in contrast with those being promoted by Bretton Woods institutions, and would clearly identify trade-offs. She proposed that the Report should concretely present certain aspects of integrated social policies as an attractive scenario. However, such models would make sense only when an overarching framework was in place. The Egypt Human Development Report 2005: Choosing our Future; Towards a New Social Contract, issued jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Egypt and the Ministry of Planning and Local Development, was given as an example of a hard-hitting document that provided three scenarios and recommendations of related programmes and policies.

35. The importance of acquiring an evidence base for the testing of policy within a framework of continuous review, change and improvement, was also highlighted; while other participants spoke of the need for knowledge-based policymaking, and posed questions on the appropriate evidence-based policies, indicators and analysis for the region.

36. Participants felt that the Report would benefit from the use of illustrations of specific examples of successful social policy interventions and mechanisms. Nonetheless, it was noted that context and specificity were of particular importance and that, in some of the most successful countries, policies and approaches were being designed as the process was progressing through continuous monitoring and checking.

4. *Content*

37. Several participants recommended an introductory chapter be added that would address “the social development reality of the ESCWA [member] countries”. Such an addition was seen as necessary to contextualize the normative parts of the Report. The four-part annual series by UNDP, the *Arab Human Development Reports*, were flagged as an example of regional analysis of current development challenges and priorities.

38. In that regard, the different policies and challenges of the region were repeatedly cited by the participants, namely: (a) paucity of data and indicators of social development; (b) challenges of inequitable growth and the changing structure of demographic growth; (c) youth unemployment and, in particular, female unemployment; (d) political tensions and civil strife; (e) problems of governance and accountability, and of political and civil freedom; (f) weak institutions of the State and civil society; and (g) negligence of the agricultural sector, the informal sector and the masking of unemployment.

39. Some participants called for the developing of a typology, or taxonomy, clustering countries with different development characteristics and operationalizing the concept of integrated social policy, allowing the Report to develop different scenarios based on the typologies.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

40. The Expert Group Meeting on the Draft Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice was held at Le Meridien Hotel in Amman on 17 January 2008.

B. OPENING

41. Mr. François Farah, chief of ESCWA-SDD, gave a brief opening address welcoming and introducing the participants. He then delivered a presentation on the conceptual framework and objectives of the Draft Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice.

42. Ms. Souad Dajani, expert on sociology issues and main author of the Draft Report, elaborated on its normative framework, findings and recommendations. That was followed by two discussants, Mr. Shiva Kumar, an independent expert, and Ms. Hania Sholkamy of the American University of Cairo, giving a detailed review of the Draft Report.

C. PARTICIPANTS

43. The Meeting was attended by 12 experts from five ESCWA member countries and Tunisia, as well as from India, Ireland and the United States of America, in addition to the six staff members from ESCWA-SDD, organizer of the Meeting. A list of participants is attached as annex to this *Report*.

D. AGENDA

44. The agenda of the one-day Meeting is summarized and set forth as follows:

- (a) Introduction and presentation of the objectives of the Meeting;
- (b) Presentation of the Draft Report;
- (c) Discussant comments;
- (d) Open discussion;
- (e) Concluding remarks and recommendations;
- (f) Closing session.

E. EVALUATION

45. Results of the evaluation of the Meeting indicated that all participants rated the Meeting as either “excellent” or “very good”, and most were highly satisfied with both the preparations of the event and the proceedings.

F. DOCUMENTS

46. Background information and all documentation pertaining to the Meeting, as well as the full agenda and detailed minutes of the proceedings, are available at: <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meeting/details.asp?referenceNum=631E>.

Annex*

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