

57th Session of the UN Commission for Social Development

Accountability dimension: social protection as a tool for the reduction of inequalities

Side Event: 14 February 2019, United Nations

Sponsored by the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors and coorganised by SOSTE, the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health, The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), The International Association of the Schools of Social Work (IASSW), The African Platform for Social Protection (APSP), UNESCO-MOST, and The Center for Economic and Economic and Social Rights (CESR), this side event was organised both to discuss emerging challenges on social protection as a tool for the reduction of inequalities and to look at both conceptual issues and practical solutions. The presenters explored the accountability dimension in designing and delivering social protection schemes; the links between social protection and human rights in reducing inequalities; and the role of civil society in social protection accountability monitoring.

The focus on accountability was seen as a practical step towards strengthening the issue-based approaches of the Commission on Social Development, taking account of Agenda 2030's emphasis on universality and human rights and mindful of its call to the global community to assess, monitor, evaluate, share and discuss progress towards the achievement of its goals and targets.

Presentations were made by Vertti Klukas – General Secretary of SOSTE, the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health; Professor Lynne Healy – Representative to the UN of the International Association of Schools of Social Work; Helen Mudora – Programme Manager, Africa Platform for Social Protection; Cecilie Golden – Programme Specialist, Management of Social Transformation (MOST), UNESCO; Kate Donald – Director, Economic and Social Policy Program, Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) and Sergei Zelenev – Executive Director, International Council on Social Welfare. The event was moderated by Sylvia Beales Gelber, Director Beales Gelber Consult, Strategic Partnerships Advisor to the Africa Platform for Social Protection.

Key conclusions of the session

- Social protection, social security and social guarantees are embedded in the human rights framework, requiring cooperation between rights holders and duty bearers for implementation. Social protection measures, when properly designed and implemented, have a positive impact on inequality and deprivation.
- Evidence and research from many countries and contexts show that universal approaches are preferable to targeted and conditional approaches. Certain forms of conditionality disempower women, and targeting is not compatible with the human rights approach.

- Measurement matters: without accurate data governments cannot be held to account. Tools exist to measure both rights performance of countries and fulfilment of the right to social protection and can be used more extensively in the Agenda 2030 process.
- Civil society has a crucial role in documenting performance of duty bearers to deliver social protection. There are practical examples of government and civil society collaboration in social protection reform and ensuring government delivery of social protection services.
- Adequate resources underpinned by political will to deliver on universal approaches are needed.

Presentations, detail of which can be seen in the February newsletter of the ICSW http://icsw.org/images/docs/GlobalNewsletter/2019/2019_02_Global_Cooperation_Eng_February.pdf highlighted the following issues:

Human rights, social protection and accountability

The Human Rights Charter establishes the right to social security together with other social and economic rights and social guarantees. ILO Recommendation 202 sets out standards on social protection floors, a key feature of Agenda 2030 goal 1 target 1.3. However, the reality of social protection implementation varies wildly between countries. Without obligations set by national legislation or human rights frameworks, and knowledge of them, accountability is weakened. The work of the Africa Platform for Social Protection demonstrate that monitoring the delivery of social protection services by civil society can help to hold government departments to account with regard to the standards which they have set for themselves. For the Platform, which operates in 27 countries across Africa, accountability is conceived as building capacity and knowledge of rights to social protection of both policy makers as well as communities which they serve. Bringing the voice and experience of the grassroots and the disempowered to policy makers improves performance and supports long term change. The Platform has therefore developed a social protection accountability tool to support communities to assess whether payments are made on time; how far people have to travel to payment points; to monitor transparency; the attitudes of civil servants providing the service and the response to complaints. Results of these assessment are taken into government negotiations about the benefit system that results in improved social protection programmes.

UNESCO adopts an explicit human rights approach to obligations arising from Articles 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration. It considers social security to be the essential building block for a decent life and supports programmes such as Ministers Forums that bring ministers, researchers and civil society together for the coproduction of knowledge and best practice.

The definition and widespread communication of rights and standards are essential for effective accountability. There has to be commitment on the part of duty bearers (governments) to effective delivery according to entitlements and equity. For this reason there should be effective means of redress when governments fail to deliver services to

which they have committed themselves. There are acknowledged difficulties and challenges in linking human rights obligations to the SDGs. However, the SIRF index on social inclusion provides data which are relevant to social protection and can be used to assess rights performance by countries.

Importance of universality

Universal programmes are the way forward for the achievement of human rights because they advance human rights, leave no gaps and do not exclude anyone. They also have lower administration costs than targeted and means tested programmes which seek to establish dividing lines and thresholds between eligible and non-eligible recipients. Conditional cash transfers targeted on women can reinforce traditional gender roles and can prevent women entering the workforce and gaining a measure of autonomy and independence. Targeted programmes are both expensive and inefficient; examples were given of a programme in Egypt which provided benefits for only 49% of the eligible poor population and another in Philippines which worsened stunting of children among the non-targeted population. Attention also needs to be paid to the impact of fiscal policies on beneficiary populations. In Brazil, for example, research has shown that the flagship Bolsa Familia programme does not compensate poor families for the resources ‘lost’ by them in regressive taxation.

In Finland social protection measures have evolved piecemeal, often in response to lobbying for particular beneficiary groups. This has had the result that programmes can be inconsistent and can be counterproductive. Finland has over 100 benefits which are delivered nationally or through local municipalities and they interact with each other – through means testing or migration from one system to another – which may deprive individuals or families of the benefits which they desperately need. There is a broad consensus that the level of social security is too low and that the current basic system does not ‘accord with what happens in life’. There is agreement that reform to deliver ‘flexible social security’ is needed and requires greater resources. The government has embarked on an open and participatory process of reform involving civil society with the aim of a new system in place by 2030. With transparency a key feature of the reform process, all papers relating to it are published on the government website.

Data and accountability

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals avoid human rights language – for example, as Philip Alston¹ asks, why does Goal 3 talk about healthy lives instead of asserting the right to health? Data collected by states on human rights could be used to assess progress towards the SDGs. Obligatory reporting on rights commitments could reinforce the voluntary reporting required by Agenda 2030.

Indicators chosen to assess SDG progress have been criticised because they measure effort rather than outcome (for example, numbers of children in school rather than learning outcomes) or because they are simply inadequate – for example, suicide mortality rates do not adequately reflect mental health. Much more work needs to be done on

¹ Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Deprivation of the Office of UN High Commissioner on Human Rights

measurement to strengthen SDG accountability. One particular challenge is that it is difficult to distinguish inequality with deprivation.

It is possible to provide summary measures of the rights performance of countries using readily available data, which would be relevant to social protection commitments made in the SDGs. The SIRF Index is one example of how to measure governments progressive realisation of social protection. It should be possible to develop a tool to assess the level of data available in countries according to the resources available.

Design matters

Design which is 'pro poor' favours the principle of entitlement based on the human rights framework. A key issue is universal rather than targeted as discussed above. To underpin the rights based approach to social policy it is also important to accept social guarantees as the key driver of rights based policy change. This requires a better and more widespread understanding of rights both within governments and civil society, political will to ensure equitable delivery of rights, and the availability of redress mechanisms.



www.iassw-aiets.org
International Association of Schools of Social Work
Association Internationale des Ecoles de Travail Social
Asociacion Internacional de Escuelas de Trabajo Social



CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS
TWENTY FIVE YEARS FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS



SOSTE



Global Coalition for
SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS