

Concept Note

Introduction: Forging an Understanding of “Social Policy”

The concept of “social policy” has often been misunderstood or misrepresented in recent development literature, relegated a secondary order of importance after economic policy. It has been depicted as a reactive tool to address the social consequences of market failures or social casualties. This conventional view that social policy is concerned only with social sectors such as education, health, and social security has restricted social policy and confined it to a role that responds to social consequences of market failures or social casualties.

To be sure, social policy must concern itself with ensuring equitable access to social services such as healthcare and education, and must also respond to social challenges and market failures by providing social security systems and structures to support vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. But social policy is much more than that. It goes beyond policies traditionally viewed as “social” to influence the design and the institutional provisions required to integrate social equity and human rights parameters in every public policy. Within this understanding, social policy is an approach or an agenda to social equity that requires the mainstreaming of social equity concerns within all public policies and programs. This includes, for example, not only ensuring that primary education and health care are available to all citizens, but also that tax policy has a redistributive effect and does not hurt the poor, or that transport policy takes into account the needs of individuals in rural areas or vulnerable groups such as the disabled.

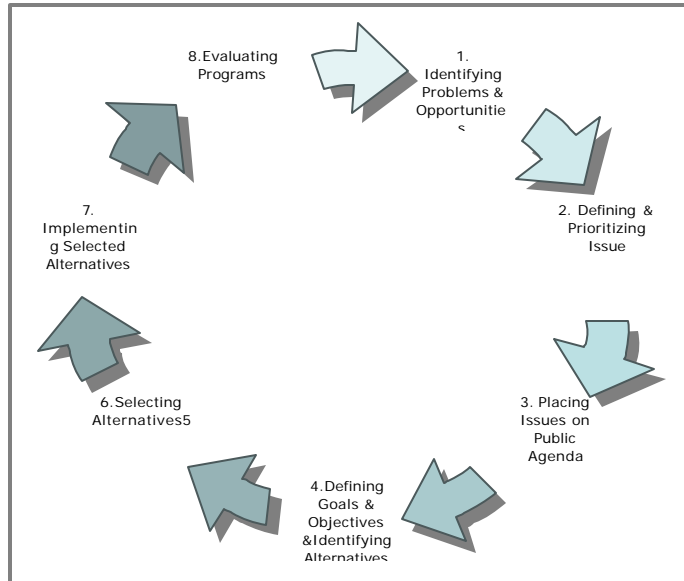
Thus, social policy is about bringing people into the centre of policy-making, not by providing residual welfare, but by mainstreaming their needs and voice across sectors thereby generating stability and social cohesion. Recent research has shown that if promoted in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner, economic and social policies yield sustainable human development and growth. According to recent work by the UN Research Institute on Social Development, social policy is directly concerned with issues of redistribution, production, reproduction and protection. Broadly defined, social policy is *“concerned with the redistributive effects of economic policy, protecting people from the vagaries of the market and the changing circumstances of the age, enhancing the productive potential of members of society, and reconciling the burden of reproduction with that of other social tasks, as well as sharing the burden of reproduction”*¹.

Background

Equipped with this understanding, the Integrated Social Policies Project launched by ESCWA’s Social Development Division in 2002 seeks to link a holistic understanding of social policy to comprehensive development in the region. The project promotes the incorporation of human-centric policies that insure the basic needs for a decent living for all citizens. One objective of the project is the research and publication of a series of policy reports and best practice case studies ([click here](#) for list).

¹ Transformative Social Policy: Lessons from UNRISD Research, October 2006, UNRISD Research and Policy Brief 5.

Social Policy Report I: In 2005, the Social Development Division (SDD) published a flagship study on social policy in the region entitled "[Towards Integrated Social Policies in Arab Countries: Framework and Comparative Analysis](#)". The study defines the social policy concept and provides options for policy implementation, highlighting the characteristics of social policy in Arab countries. It outlines the functions of policy in development and proposes a comprehensive eight-phase policy strategy model for policy practitioners to follow. The model suggests a process involving a cycle of phases that flow into each other. The report outlined eight phases: (1) identifying problems and opportunities; (2) defining and prioritizing issues; (3) placing issues on the public agenda; (4) defining goals and objectives and identifying alternative approaches; (5) evaluating alternative approaches; (6) selecting alternatives; (7) implementing selected alternatives; and (8) evaluating programmes. The study identifies the enabling and inhibiting conditions that affect policy formulation, implementation and monitoring based on experiences of other countries.



Social Policy Report II: Taking the findings of this initial study on integrated social policy a step further, SDD is proposing the elaboration of a second report on Integrated Social Policies focused on specific enabling processes, instruments and mechanisms that help to foster inclusive social policies. This second report, Operationalizing Social Policy in the ESCWA Region, would examine the different steps involved in the genesis, identification, elaboration, implementation and evaluation of socially responsive public policy in the ESCWA region. The report would submit to member states a set of comprehensive normative and practical recommendations.

As per the proposed outline, attached as Annex I, the report would provide a situation analysis and an in-depth review of the status of social policy in the region. The report would examine more closely the processes, mechanisms and instruments involved in setting socially inclusive and equitable public policies and operationalizing them, including issues of strategic planning and visioning, priority setting, coordination, financing, capacity for implementation and monitoring, checks and balances, and inclusion and participation. In reviewing these processes and instruments, the report would focus specifically on opportunities and constraints for the integration of social concerns across all public policies. Special reference will be made to economic and vital sectors of relevance such as employment, education, health and social protection. The report will finally draw relevant conclusions and recommendations.

In order to jump start the preparation of the report, a one-day Peer Review Meeting (PRM) is proposed to be held in Beirut on 22 June 2007. The PRM will seek to bring together leading social science and public policy researchers and practitioners from the region to review the Report concept and framework and to support SDD in

validating the proposed outline. By the end of the meeting it is hoped that a consensus can be reached on the overall direction of the Report, and its research parameters, and agreement reached on an annotated outline. The PRM will also guide the work of SDD by contributing specific case studies and country experiences.

Selected Issues for Consideration

Mapping Social Welfare in the ESCWA region: The report should begin with an examination of the current status of social well-being in the ESCWA region. The objective of this section should be to get a snapshot of social welfare in the region with an eye to where public policy has succeeded and where it has failed to ensure social equity and the provision of basic needs to all. This includes an examination of the structural, political, economic, social, environmental and cultural factors that have led to exclusion and marginalization, taking into account the diversity of the different groups and their different resources and problems.

Social Policy Making Institutions in the ESCWA region: The report should provide an overall review of the official institutions in ESCWA countries responsible for designing and formulating public policy and programmes. Government Ministries, including sectoral ministries such as Ministries of Education, Health, Labour are often responsible for drawing up sector strategies and policies, but these institutions may not always be equipped or empowered to mainstream social equity concerns. In this regard it is important to examine the role of Ministries of Social Affairs, so often weakened and sidelined within the Government. Other institutions such as the legislature, special councils and public bodies should also be reviewed in so far as they are responsible for setting social policy and programmes.

Related to this is the need for coordination and clear division of responsibilities among public institutions. The segmentation of public policy along administrative and sectoral lines without sufficient coordination and common goals has been a major reason behind the lack of focus and cohesion in social policy in the region. Given the breadth of policies which relate to social development and welfare, a large range of governmental policy actors and institutions are involved, creating a major challenge for government structures in terms of policy development and coordination. To ensure greater coherence and coordination requires an integrated perspective on social policy that takes into account broad stakeholder consultation and a common agreement on priorities of the public sector. For this, a country's political leadership must provide direction, guidance and vision.

Social Policy Making Processes in the ESCWA region: In-depth diagnosis is a starting point for any public policy or programme. The design of social policy should start from the needs, realities and priorities of the groups which are intended to benefit. Starting from the premise that all citizens have a right to a decent life, the diagnosis should identify and map the gap between the reality of citizens and their potential well-being. The report should explore how the social diagnosis is undertaken, by whom, using what instruments, and how the findings feed into priority setting and policy making.

This section of the report on processes is particularly important as it reviews how public policies are made, and how social equity concerns are, or are not, integrated into the original design. This section should provide important insight into why social policy has failed in many countries in the region, and what mechanisms exist to integrate and mainstream social equity concerns across social policy.

Who makes social policy? Does it emerge from sector ministries? Parliament? Lobby groups? Is it part of an integrated package of public policy, or are social policies mostly formulated to respond to specific needs? What are the capacity constraints for policy making? Where is the final decision? Who can influence the decision?

“Engaged governance” is a concept recently coined by UNDESA to refer to *“an institutional arrangement that links citizens more directly to the decision making processes of a state so as to enable them to influence the public policies and programmes in a matter that impacts more positively on their social and economic lives.”* It ensures inclusiveness and goes beyond the sharing of citizen opinions and information to more actively involve citizens and communities in planning, programming, budgeting and auditing. In this regard, social compacts have played an important role in shaping social policies in a number of countries.

The proposed report would examine the opportunities for engaged governance in the ESCWA region. The report would probe into questions including: How participatory and consultative is the process? Are all major stakeholders represented, including civil society, Media, NGOs, and Trade unions? What is the role of observatories, statistics offices, think-tanks, etc in shaping informed public policy? What kind of forecasting is done? What is the role of donors and development organizations in influencing and shaping priorities for social welfare? Do marginalized and vulnerable groups have an opportunity to influence the policy debate through formal or informal channels? What kind of checks and balances instruments exist? Are they effective? Who reviews and monitors policies to ensure they are socially equitable and aligned with government vision and priorities?

Social Policy Instruments: A wide range of instruments may be used to reach different social goals, such as fiscal policy, land reform, social legislation, classical welfare measures, regulation of the private sector and so on. The choice is often dependent on the political and ideological frameworks in each country. This section will review the different instruments available to policy makers and whether these instruments are used to promote social welfare in the countries of the region.

This section will make special reference to financing social policy. Real commitment to inclusive social policy can be measured in monetary terms. Without adequate funding it is difficult to advance towards a policy model based on social inclusion and universalism. Where does the money come from to finance social services in a sustainable, effective and equitable way? How are priorities set? and what kind of tradeoffs must be made? How are issues of finance being shaped by the general regime governing economic and social policies? How does the fiscal sphere interact with the general macroeconomic framework and what options and constraints emerge from this relationship? ² What are the specific opportunities and challenges for countries of the region?

Social Policy in the Context of Globalization: By the late 20th Century a global system had emerged in which inequality both between and within nations had increased many-fold. The economic benefits of globalization have been reaped by a few countries, companies and individuals. Today, the world’s richest 10% receive 51% of total world income while the poorest 80% get only 17% of it. Some recent studies have indicated that inequality is less among countries of the Arab region than

² Hujo, Katja, 2006

in other developing and developed countries³, however an ESCWA study dating back to 1999 found that among countries such as Jordan, Egypt and Iraq there is a clear trend of increasing inequality where the poorest 20% of the population are getting relatively poorer and the richest 20% are getting relatively richer. In this context, the importance of effective policies that redress poverty, inequality and lack of opportunity becomes even more vital. Social policy, as an integral part of public policies, can *“provide a set of instruments to regulate and supplement market institutions and social structures, ensuring the participation of civil society institutions, redistribution, protection, cohesion and social justice”*⁴. If the process of globalization cannot be stopped, then appropriate mechanisms and instruments should be designed to buffer the potential negative impact on vulnerable groups and help create conditions that will allow globalization to benefit all, instead of a few.

³ AHDR, 2003

⁴ Ortiz, Isabel, 2006

Annex I

Social Policy Report II: Operationalising Social Policy in the ESCWA Region

Proposed Outline*

I. Preface

II. Introduction

Objectives of the report; Approaches, methodologies and resources and organization of the report

III. Mapping Social Welfare in the ESCWA region

- a. Equity/ inequity in the region
- b. Poverty in the region as an expression of inequity
- c. Magnitude of mal-distribution: incidence, prevalence and affected groups
- d. Marginalization & marginalized population groups

IV. Brief overview of Integrated Social Policies: Definitions and concepts

- a. The concept(s) of Integrated Social Policies
- b. The social policy making process
- c. The importance of operationalizing social policy
- d. Definitions of social policy frameworks and instruments

V. Status of social policy making in the ESCWA region: What is the current situation?

- a. National social policy plans and initiatives & national development plans
- b. Institutions of social policy

VI. Social Policy Making Processes

- a. Social Policy Analysis
- b. Policy Making Processes
- c. Constituents
- d. Engaged governance

VII. Social Policy Instruments

- a. Social Policy Instruments and good practices
 - i. Employment and Labour
 - ii. Education
 - iii. Health
 - iv. Social protection
- b. Financing Social Policy

VIII. Social Policy in the Context of Globalization

IX. Enabling Factors and Constraints in the ESCWA region

X. Conclusions & Recommendations

* Success case studies (stories) from the Arab World: to be inserted as "boxes" within the text