



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL
ON SOCIAL WELFARE
A World Organisation Promoting Social Development

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Social Protection and Empowerment: The role of Civil Society

Statement¹ at the NGO Forum

- *To be checked against delivery* -

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I will use the few minutes I have to make the case for empowering all people through social protection and call on civil society to take its share of the responsibility to make that a reality.

Social Protection is a prerequisite for the empowerment of people...

Social protection is a social, economic and societal necessity. Only people who are well nourished, well educated, as healthy as possible, and have been brought up in socially secure families will in the long run be productive contributors to national and the global economies and constructive,

¹ This statement builds on a more elaborate contribution to the January 2013 edition of the ICSW newsletter, cf. <http://www.icsw.org/>

participating and responsible members of societies who can forcefully make their voices heard. Social Protection, notably a floor of social protection, is thus a perquisite investment in the empowerment of people.

The global community has set an ambitious social justice agenda for itself...

Perhaps the potentially most powerful new policy device for the extension of social protection and the promotion of social justice that emerged from the aftermath of the crisis and a long debate on social protection during the last decade is the concept of national Social Protection Floors (SPFs). The SPF Initiative of the UN, launched at the height of the crisis in 2009, simply made a convincing case that there is virtually no society that cannot afford at least a basic level of social protection for all, thus affording basic subsistence and a minimum of dignity for all.

In June 2012 the International Labour Conference (i.e. governments, workers and employer delegations from more than 180 countries) unanimously adopted a new legal international instrument, i.e. Recommendation 202 “on national floors for social protection”. More than 50 civil society organisations have supported the Recommendation. The Global Labour Movement has firmly aligned itself behind the concept.

The contents of Recommendation 202 are much more comprehensive and far-reaching than initially meets the eye.

The Recommendation defines the SPF in terms of four essential social security guarantees that basically provides core content for the human right to social security as expressed in Articles 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: i.e. access to essential health care for all residents, income security for all children, people in active age and people in old age. However, it also puts the SPF initiative in the context of wider social security extension strategies that countries are required to adopt and identifies a set of principles for national social security extension strategies. These principles essentially describe the characteristics of national social protection systems to be ensured under the primary responsibility of the state and range from the principles of universality of protection, adequacy, the obligation to define benefits by law, non-discrimination, progressivity of implementation, acknowledging the diversity of methods and approaches, and the need for tripartite participation and public consultation on benefit levels and conditions, demanding respect for dignity of people covered, efficient complain procedures, transparency, and financial, fiscal and economic sustainability. In many ways R. 202 it is a *Magna Carta* of social protection.

Recommendation 202 is an unparalleled document of Good Will. Never before – or perhaps since the period of the great depression or the period of economic and social reconstruction after WWII - has there been that much public support for social protection and more acknowledgement for its role in national development strategies as well as in the management of economic, social and political crises.

However, there are serious signs that the window of opportunity for the real improvement of social protection worldwide is already closing again. As soon as the economic and financial crisis turned into a fiscal crisis, austerity measures strongly resembling the policy recipes that had sprung from the Washington Consensus—believed to be long dead-- took the top slot on the political agenda again and social protection spending is under attack again in many countries.

...and it is our turn to seize the opportunity ...

We have to act now. What creates and maintains social protection systems is in essence political will. Political will has to be articulated and negotiated by the societies demanding certain policy action. Real action has to be taken on the national level.

Political will on the national level cannot be created by International Organisations which are ultimately owned by national governments. Articulating a global agenda, these organizations have carried the ball as far as they could.

The demand for social justice has to be articulated by the people themselves. The most likely representatives of people are civil society organizations such as NGOs and independent trade unions. Civil society and trade unions are natural agents of political will, natural advocates of the right and empowerment of people. They can build strong cases for more social justice, more participation, more opportunities through social protection. The global consensus on the Social Protection Floor provides moral guidance and legitimacy as well as a political shield for national demands. The global community of nations has decided that everyone should enjoy a minimum of social protection and that societies should gradually build higher levels of social security on the basis of strong principles. And it has decided so unanimously. There is nothing that should stop national pressure groups from reminding national governments of that consensus whenever necessary and demanding the establishment or safeguarding of social protection floors at the national level.

.. and demand concrete action.

On the national level we can take governments by their word. We, national NGOs and trade unions, and civil society at large, can build pressure groups and simply start monitoring the extent to which the four social security guarantees of the SPF are implemented in their country. We can establish whether all children, adults in active age groups and people in old age enjoy a minimum decent level of income security that ensures access to essential goods and services and whether everybody has access to a minimum level of health care. We can document gaps and even calculate the cost of closing these gaps, and can indicate where resources can be found. That will empower us - speaking for the people who are either living in or are threatened by misery - to shame governments into action.

On the global level we can jointly push three things.

First, we can make sure that social protection and, realistically speaking, national Social Protection Floors play an important role in the post 2015 development agenda debate. The establishment and maintenance of SPFs provide a tangible development policy tool.

Second, we can support the demand of a Global Fund for Social protection that the UN rapporteurs for the Right to Food and Human Rights have jointly issued² and help to ensure that the Fund concentrates on sponsoring national action to implement the SPF.

Third, we can support the International Financial Transaction Tax and demand that it feed the Fund and support the few countries that really cannot build floor levels of social protection by their own means.

We demand action from governments now.

...do things ourselves.

But at the same time, demanding action from others is never enough. The most powerful tool in policy implementation is simply taking the first steps, without waiting for any form of national or global blessing. National pressure groups can be built and national monitoring can begin now.

² OLIVIER DE SCHUTTER, UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPOREUR ON THE RIGHT TO FOOD, MAGDALENA SEPÚLVEDA UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPOREUR ON EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: Executive Summary A Global Fund for Social Protection (GFSP), October 2012

The Global Fund can be started by asking the members of the Global Civil Society Coalition on the SPF to contribute to a preliminary Trust Fund that allows us as civil society to support national interest groups to articulate social protection demands, pilot benefits and empower them through advice and capacity building³. There are a few fearless women and men in a small NGO in Luxembourg that started a Global Social Trust Project. Their commitment shows us that it can be done.

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung leads the global coalition of NGOs for the SPF. Let us all get together, support that coalition to map out concrete action and just start now. There is no more convincing argument than action.

³ The NGO OGBL Solidarité Syndicale in Luxembourg, for example, supports the testing of a new maternity and child support cash benefit in Ghana by contributions from the Luxembourg Trade Unions. For more details see <http://www.solidaritesyndicale.lu/glst.php>