Changing forms of Relationships amidst growing Inequalities: Challenges and Prospects for Social Workers
By
Prof. P.K. Shajahan
Vice President, International Council on Social Welfare
(shajahan@icsw.org)

Panel: Social Relationships between peoples, Essential Relationships with each other.

With great sense of gratitude for the honor bestowed on me by inviting me to the WSWD 2019 celebration of the Asia Pacific Region, I wish to extend my warm greetings to all gathered here and all those Social Workers and social activists who continuously and tirelessly work towards building a society of mutual respect, dignity and protect the rights of all, most importantly the marginalized and the disadvantaged. I am thankful to the organisers of this conference, The Department of Social Development and Welfare, Government of Thailand and also to Mr. Chinchai Cheecharoen, Regional President of ICSW – South East Asia and Pacific for this great honor you have shown to me.

We are discussing social relationship at a time in history where there are significant challenges before us to protect social harmony and social cohesion. We need to see this at a time when the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development evolved by the three global organisations IFSW, IASSW and ICSW concludes the Agenda with the last pillar "Promoting Human Relationships". The last pillar of the global agenda needs to be seen in the context of having completed the previous three agendas though the Joint World Conferences and concomitant actions by social workers and social work organisations. They are (i) Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities, (ii) Protecting the Dignity and Worth of People and (iii) Promoting Environmental and Community Sustainability.

My attempt here is to locate the idea of Social Relationships from a socio-political perspective for which it is essential to connect all the three pillars of the Agenda. Being a representative of ICSW, I would also like to connect this to the broad focus of ICSW as Social Protection and Progressive Social Policies and its relevance to this discussion.

Social Relationships and Growing Inequalities

What do we mean by social relationships? From a socio-ecological perspective, humans need to belong and are interdependent and hence social relationships are essential aspect of human life. And in social work parlance, this is amplified by the "person-in-environment" approach. If forming social relationships are inherent to human existence, then why are we seeing break down of social relationships and emergence of several social conflicts throughout the world today? I think we have some answers in the first three pillars of the Agenda – growing inequalities, lack of dignity and worth of people and lack of, community and environmental sustainability

Researches have shown that social and economic inequalities around the world are playing significant role in breaking social relationships. The UNESCAP Report (2015) titled "Time for Equality: The Role of Social Protection in Reducing Inequalities in the Asia and Pacific" exemplifies this by analyzing issues of inequalities in different countries of the region. The report presents with evidence that 'despite impressive economic growth and significant progress in poverty reduction, inequality persists in the region, and in some instances has intensified." Further it states that inequalities undermine human dignity and social justice – a clear reference to the second pillar of the agenda. There is growing belief that there is no automatic trade-offs between growth and equality; that market led growth alone is not enough to achieve sustainable development. While there is no universal pattern in inequality trends, adverse consequences of inequality for human well-being, including life expectancy, health care, nutrition and educational attainment are well known. Vulnerable groups here are affected more than others. High levels of inequality have proven negative impact for future economic growth, generating also greater market instability and volatility. These negative consequences cannot but affect human relations in the short and longer terms.

People living in extreme poverty are forced to engage in livelihood activities which robs them of their dignity and worth. In India communities belonging to the lowest social strata (also belong to the lowest economic strata) undertake manual scavenging jobs, one of the most undignified jobs human beings can ever engage in for their livelihood. Persistent social and economic inequalities push them to such vocations and they get trapped in the poverty cycle with no possibility of escape. The later report of the UNESCAP titled **Inequality in Asia and the Pacific in the Era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** states *Inequality (also) undermines social cohesion and stability by weakening social bonds and public trust in institutions, which can raise social and political tensions and even lead to radicalization and crime. Inequality also negatively impacts the environment. When ownership of land and natural resources is concentrated in the hands of a few, it provides unchecked freedom to cut, mine and farm lands in ecologically unsustainable ways – often with a disproportional impact on the poor and marginalized* (UNESCAP 2018). Both the reports undoubtedly present a compelling argument of the disastrous impact of growing inequality in the Asia Pacific region as exemplified in the following diagram.
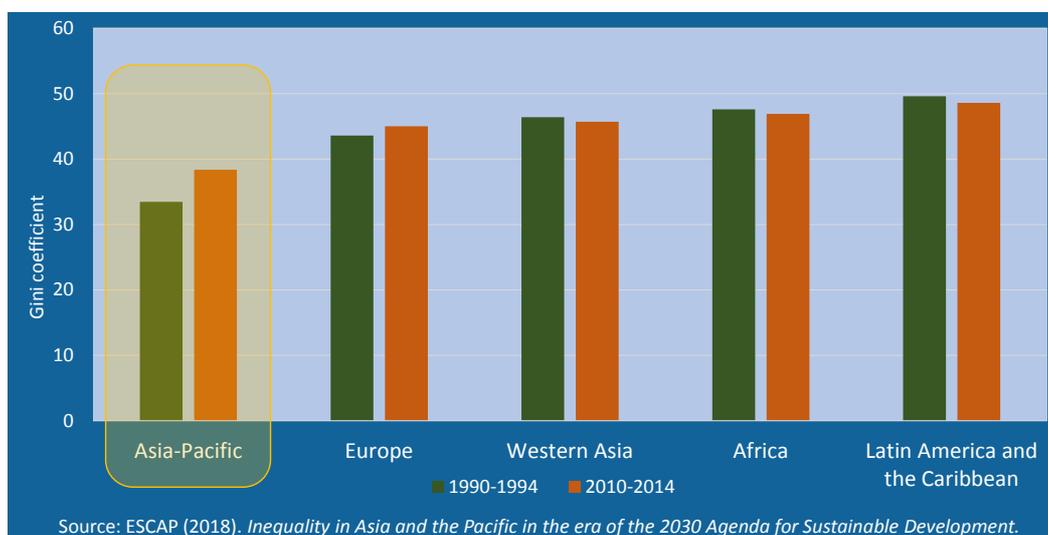

Figure 1: Growing Inequalities in Asia Pacific

What kind of relationships are we talking about?

Having stated the premise of my discussion and foregrounding growing inequalities as a significant contributor to heightened social tensions and breakage of social relationships, I would like to dwell a bit further on the nature of relationships and the changes happening in the context of a globalsing world. Let me explain this with the relationship exixting among the people, state and market.

To begin with, let me stat that in my opinion state and market exist for the people and not the other way round. In such a situation the developmental and welfare functions of the governments are mediated by the predominant relationship exists among the three actors which are equally important. **Economic** relationship between the market and the state and the **consumer** relationship between the people and the market as well as **citizenship** relationship between the state and the people as presented in Figure 2 below. When individual members of the society are subjected to economic conditions the citizenship relationship existing between the people and the state is expected to mediate the process of protecting the interests of the people through progressive social legislations and policies including social protection.
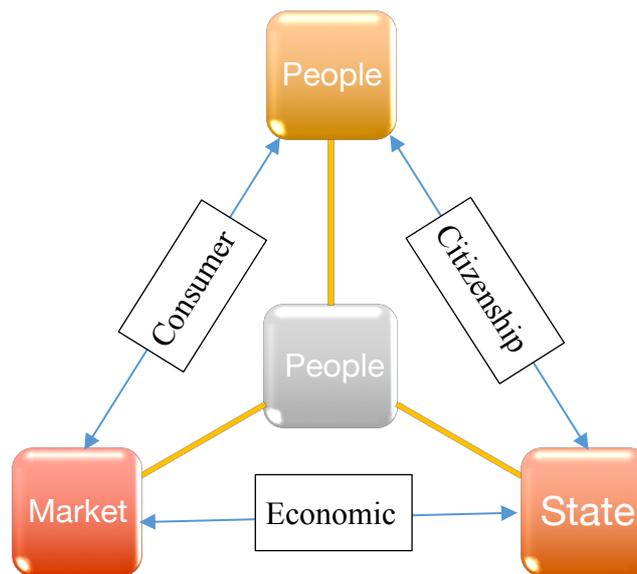

Figure 2: Traid of Relationships between People, State and Market

However, as we all know, in reality, such relationships as given in the diagram above are never equitous. In a neoliberal economy, these relationships are getting redefined and the somewhat equal importance attributed to these relationships and the actors are transformed into a situation where the Market becomes the predominant driver of social and economic policies. The bloated role of the Market in governance, welfare and development have significantly redefined the three relationships and inequality became a cause and effect in the process.
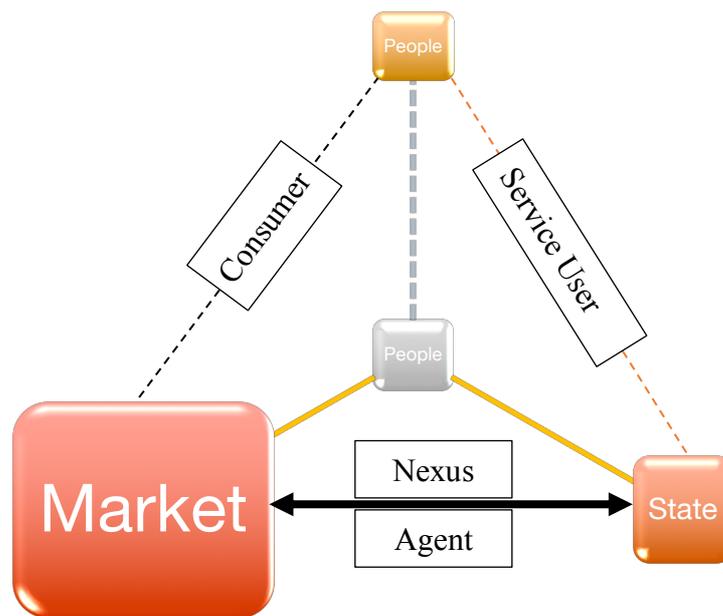
Figure 3: Altering Roles of actors and changing form of relationships in the People-State-Market Triad

The state – market nexus has exacerbated the commodification of relationships in all the three dimensions. The consumer has become a subject of market conditions and its erratics. Several state policies are mediated by the nexus between Market and the State where the state quite often becomes the agent of the Market and vice versa. In the process, the welfare and development relationship existed between the people and the state got transformed from a citizenship relationship which is vested with indomitable power of rights into one of a service-user, a mere recipient of the welfare doles. This is where the relationship between people, people with the state and the state with the market get redefined pushing several people into an unequal situations of income and opportunities. Such inequalities stifles economic dynamism, it undermines social cohesion and solidarity (UNESCAP 2015). A growing divide between the rich and the poor is often a factor in rising levels of crime and social unrest, as it undermines trust and weakens bonds of solidarity (Khatiwada, n.d as cited in UNESCAP 2015). In cases where overlapping inequalities on economic and socio-cultural lines exists, the divisions lead to polarisation, radicalisation and sustained social unrest. Further, in societies where inequalities abounds, collective action is trumped by the pursuit of individual or group interest (UNESCAP, 2018). It is not only the collective action that gets hampered, functional social relationships existing between the people also get affected leading to social conflicts and unrest. Thus, it is clear that when we talk about **Social Relationships between peoples, Essential Relationships with each other** – the theme of the panel today, addressing growing inequality has to take centre stage of discussions. If social policies are not part of the macroeconomic package when it is conceived, it is difficult to hope that the outcomes would be beneficial for the people in terms of generating decent jobs required to reduce poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Universal Social Protection as a tool for reducing inequalities

Social protection includes a set of policies and programmes to ensure that all those who are poor and marginalised are assured of certain basic level of income, services and opportunities to lead life of dignity and justice. Social protection is anchored in the universal rights of everyone to social security, and to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families (ILO, 2010a). Social protection (SP) is a powerful tool for the reduction of (gender and socio-economic) inequalities, and for the promotion of SDG-targets 1.3., 5.4. and 10.4.

We, at ICSW, believe that it is not only the bottom 10-20 percent of people who are deprived of income and opportunities provided with social assistance and the top 10 percent or so who are covered by formal employment and social insurance are the focus of social protection. Rather universal social protection also covers the "missing middle" who are at the risk of falling through the crack due to their precarious living and livelihood conditions which put them into potential vulnerabilities and risks. A large number of them are in the informal sector with no or minimal social protection. The work by African Union (AU) in this connection is worth mentioning where the campaign for SPIREWORK (SP for Informal and Rural Economy) aimed at calling for "improving an strengthening the existing social protection schemes and extending them to workers and their families currently excluded.

Universal Social Protection (USP) ensures a wide coverage and future risks. USP includes the people who are currently in precarious situations with poor income, health and other social development parameters. USP also ensures that the future risks of loss of employment and livelihood, poor health, depleting environment etc. are considered for coverage under SP Hence USP is a futuristic tool aiming at reducing inequalities and addressing poverty. It is important to recognise that the contribution of SP in building sustainable and inclusive economies. This can also empower the poor, women and other marginalised groups by making SP a right to ensure basic income, health, education etc. Adopting the theme of "addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies" for the 57th session of the Commission on Development 2019 exemplifies the relevance of Social protection in closing the inequality gap. ICSW has organised a side event at the session titled Accountability dimension: Social Protection as tool for the reduction of inequalities. The event explored the tension existing between the conceptual and global social policy debates with that of the approaches by governments, donors and international institutions which have not effectively kept pace with the rights-based approach to social protection. However, some impact evaluation studies eg., by UNICEF and FAO and ODI reveals that there is empirical evidence to show the tangible and intangible benefits of SP which far outweigh the cost involved in financing and operationalising the same.

There are different approaches available for using social protection as a development tool in addressing the inequalities. UNESCAP (2019) Report titled **Inequality in Asia and the Pacific in the era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** further presents eight different actions for smooth adoption and implementation of social protection in Asia and the Pacific as outlined below;

1. Anchor Social Protection in a rights-based foundation
2. Design Social Protection systems to create synergies
3. Prioritise and increase investment in social protection
4. Strengthening taxation systems for financing social protection
5. Explore innovative ways of financing social protection
6. Promote social dialogue to foster public support for SP
7. Promote productive and decent work.
8. Enhancing the evidence base on inequalities and social protection

There is a need for promoting USP as a powerful tool and engage with the national governments to ensure that adequate investments in social protection are made. Social Workers, activists and development practitioners have important role to play in promotion and operationalisation of USP.

Call for social workers to address structural roots of inequality and build strong relationships
Social workers around the globe are currently engaged in a variety of policy, advocacy and networking on several issues. Such structural perspectives, though limited, has opened up tremendous possibilities for social workers to make major contributions towards transformatory processes. Embedded in the social work profession's theoretical and practice understandings is that individuals cannot live sustainable, fulfilled lives unless they are interdependently connected in a social framework. Thereby an essential aim of the (social work) profession is to enhance social protection systems so that people are able to live in social environments confidently, securely, with dignity and with the full realisation of their rights (IFSW, 2016). The PPP+T[1] framework of social protection provides the broad conceptual functions of social protection. These approaches too are highly compatible for Social Work engagements around the world. A profession founded on humanitarian values and in strength perspectives, social protection with its rights-based approach will lend itself a clear grounding for social workers to identify themselves in addressing one of the biggest developmental challenge – addressing inequality. The eight action points discussed in the previous section, could very well be matched with social work profession and the synergies analysed.

While the first two action points on anchoring SP in a rights-based perspective and designing SP systems to create synergies are related to the direct practice with people, action points 3,4 and 5 deals with the financing part of SP. Social workers through advocacy and networking may influence politicians, political parties and the bureaucracy to allocate necessary resources for SP. In addition to the state support for SP, corporate houses through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can also be explored as potential resources for co-financing SP. Further at the field level it is essential that synergies of different kinds can be brought by using an integrated approach in bringing several policies and its functions. Complementarity between contributory and non-contributory programmes could also be ensured.

---

[1] Social protection is presented to have four functions proposed by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) as Protective, Preventive, Promotive and Transformative. This is known as the PPP+T framework.

The action point of promoting social dialogue to foster public support for SP is to be achieved through campaigns and building national consensus and fostering political will for expanding social protection. National associations of social work, collective of social work institutions etc. could work towards developing a positive public opinion in favour of SP. The next action point on promoting productive and decent work resonates with the second pillar of the Global Agenda (2012 – 2020) on worth and dignity of people. The last and final action point on enhancing evidence base on inequalities and SP is a clear function of social work research.

Social Workers of 21st century need to get abreast with the current societal needs emerging from the contemporary social, economic and political realities. Social protection, if used with its rights-based perspective, is a broader framework which will significantly reduce the vulnerabilities of several marginalised groups. Further social protection with its PPP+T perspective provide a larger canvas for social workers to intervene in human situations of extreme vulnerabilities. By bringing social protection to the centre stage of polices, it can promote social harmony and cohesion thereby strengthening relationships. This process of engagement will also strengthen the relationship between the people and the state as well. People in such situations will be able to effectively tap the opportunities offered by the market through better linkages.

I conclude by exhorting social workers of today and tomorrow to adopt Universal Social Protection in your agenda to be better able to link our work to be significantly contributing to the 2030 agenda of *leaving no one behind.*

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts on the occasion of World Social Work Day 2019 Conference of Asia and the Pacific.

P.K.Shajahan
Vice President, ICSW