



**The month of February was an eventful month for the ICSW in both “UN cities”—New York and Geneva. The February edition of the Newsletter covers activities of the ICSW at the global level in the context of the 57th session of the Commission for Social Development held in New York. The ICSW actively participated in the general debate during the session, submitting a written statement and also making oral presentations. The ICSW also took part in the organization of the Annual Civil Society Forum held during the session of the Commission, helping to shape its agenda, select the speakers and facilitate the discussion on the substantive issues.**

**Together with its partners the ICSW also co-organized a side event on accountability and social protection. We publish here the abridged remarks of the participants at the side event, which may be of interest to our readership.**

***Sergei Zelenev, Executive Director and Editor of the Newsletter***

*continued on page 2*

continued from page 1



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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



Global Coalition for  
SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS



**SOSTE**

Social Affairs and Health

The side event ***Accountability Dimension: social protection as a tool for the reduction of inequalities***, co-organized by the ICSW together with its partners within the framework of the 57th session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD), was conceived with a view to discussing conceptual issues, as well as practical solutions pertinent to the priority theme of the session of the Commission for Social Development. Its aim was to promote reflection, debate and innovative thinking, including on emerging challenges to social protection as a tool for the reduction of inequalities. Apart from the ICSW the co-sponsors of the side event were SOSTE (Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health, member of the ICSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the UNESCO Management of Social Transformations Programme (MOST), the African Platform for Social Protection (member of the ICSW), and the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR). The side event was moderated by Sylvia Beales Gelber, Inclusive social development consultant and strategic advisor to the Africa Platform for Social Protection.

The presenters focused on the *accountability* dimension of social protection in designing and delivering accountable social protection schemes and on the links between social protection and human rights in reducing inequalities and explored the role of civil

society in social protection accountability monitoring.

The event was designed as a practical step towards strengthening the issue-based approaches of CSocD. The focus on accountability takes account of Agenda 2030's focus on universality and human rights and its call upon the global community to assess, monitor, evaluate, share and discuss progress towards the implementation of all goals and targets, including target 1.3 on social protection floors.

As shown by the latest evidence and recognized by target 10.4 of the SDGs, social protection is an absolutely critical tool for reducing inequalities, including economic and gender inequalities. To fulfil this role, social protection systems have to be carefully designed and aligned with human rights, so that their redistributive potential is realized, and they should challenge rather than reinforce existing hierarchies and prejudices. Despite the fact that the rights-based approach to social protection has been elucidated further in recent years, the prevailing approach to social protection by governments, major donors and international institutions has not kept pace with those advances. This event explored that tension and highlighted how social protection policies can in fact contribute to fighting inequality and poverty.

Celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the participants explored the accountability potential of human rights mechanisms for the universal implementation of social and economic rights that relate to social protection. The speakers addressed how this framework applied to all stakeholders, with duty-bearers and rights-holders being accountable for their roles in implementing the 2030 Agenda within their respective governance frameworks and scope of responsibility.

The importance of data collection practices and pertinent data measurement approaches used at all levels for evidence-based policy making in the field of social protection was also discussed.

**Vertti Kiukas**, Secretary General of SOSTE, Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health, Member of the Finnish Delegation to

the 57th session of the CSocD highlighted in his presentation many practical aspects of the work that SOSTE is doing on the road towards building a fair and responsible society. His organization supports a socially-oriented economy, with the genuine participation of the society at large, and advocates for the active role of civil society organizations in implementing and monitoring national welfare entitlements. SOSTE operates at the national, regional and international levels. Its membership in the ICSW facilitates its international activities.

Taking into account that many social investments are, by definition, of a long-term nature, SOSTE is keen to get involved in the monitoring activities dealing with social protection and health initiatives at the very early stage of their inception. SOSTE supports universal social protection schemes and believes that the State should play a decision-making role in social services provision, but civil society must have a strong impact in the conceptualization and monitoring of the commitments.

Finland is keen to try innovative schemes of social provision, such as “basic income”, carefully considering the implications of such schemes for society as revealed by evidence. Active labour market policy is viewed as an integral part of the national welfare model. Through the years economic policy has prioritized employment concerns and economic growth based on rapid technological change. The growth of the economy has been indispensable for the expansion of the welfare state. The recent reforms have emphasized extensive labour training and re-training schemes, given that the world of work is changing. SOSTE is convinced that long-term success comes when society is socially-bound, healthy and inclusive.

**Professor Lynne Healy**, Main Representative of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) at the UN, expressed appreciation of the themes suggested in the side-event concept paper, stressing that all are worthy of exploration. She has chosen mainly two specific themes for comment:

1. The accountability potential of human rights mechanisms for the universal implementation

of social and economic rights that relate to social protection,

2. And, briefly, some comments on inequality and measurement challenges

The IASSW is exploring the links between human rights and social protection, also noting the recent 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR identifies 6 social and economic rights: the rights to health, education, housing, food, work, and social security. Articles 22 and 25 are particularly relevant to social protection. Our current guidepost, the 2030 Agenda, has been lauded by some as promoting a rights-based approach but has also been harshly criticized for failing to emphasize rights in the wording of the social protection-related SDGs. Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, has been especially critical of the avoidance of human rights language, suggesting that it is precisely because of the power of the idea of rights. Why, one might ask, should Goal 3 refer to ensuring healthy lives rather fulfilling the right to health, already enshrined in international law?

What is even more concerning is the apparent neglect of human rights data in constructing the accountability and measurement system for assessing SDG progress. States collect vast amounts of data for the Universal Periodic Review and in their states party reports to CEDAW, the CRC, the Convention on Disabilities, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights—all treaties related to social protection. Can that data be captured and reflected in measuring progress toward the 2030 Agenda, including the social protection targets? Why has that been ignored in developing the accountability system? Last month, Mary Robinson underscored this point in a statement to the Human Rights Council. She said that the weakness of the 2030 Agenda is its use of accountability based on voluntary national reviews, rather than commitments made under the international law of human rights. She urged linkages between the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) and the Universal Periodic Reviews in the High-Level Political Forum.

In discussing accountability, we need to differentiate accountability of effort from

accountability of result or impact. The first—effort-- can be measured in terms of legislation adopted and programs launched, and the numbers of persons enrolled. A country may adopt a new law or regulation abolishing school fees, for example and cite that as a step forward toward social protection. Results or impact are more difficult to measure. Did the removal of school fees result in increased school enrollment? Do children remain in school? Who benefits—are there barriers that still prevent some children from going to school? Who are those children, and where do the responsibilities for the remaining barriers lie? And for those who go to school and remain in school, what is the quality of their learning? And, as a result of expanded schooling, are inequalities reduced? With each question, the challenges of measurement increase. We learned some lessons from the MDG experience, and we should further explore what can be learned from human rights reporting to inform and improve accountability.

Professor Healy recommended the work of Sakiko Fukuda Parr, Susan Randolph and Terra Lawson-Remer. They have developed an index to measure the fulfillment of social and economic rights, the SERF index. It is discussed in a book published in 2015 (*Fulfilling Economic and Social Rights*, Oxford Press). The SERF index is a summary measure of rights performance by countries—emphasizing outcomes in the areas promised in the UDHR. It is highly relevant to the SDGs related to social protection. Indicators are selected to reflect country achievement, using indicators with available data. Because social and economic rights are able to be “progressively realized,” the authors have also developed a tool to assess the level of available resources in a country. One of the interesting findings of their work is that for many indicators, performance tends to plateau at fairly low income levels. They conclude, therefore, that although resource constraints are a challenge for the poorest countries, “most poor countries can do much more to achieve higher levels of social and economic rights enjoyment and the lack of resources is not a convincing explanation for the shortfalls in social and economic rights realization” p. 215). This fits with the findings reported in various sessions of this Commission meeting

on the affordability of basic social protection provisions, even for poorer countries.

The authors of the book cited are critical of typical reporting in state human rights reports, as they often focus on measuring only effort. As could be argued for some targets, measuring effort would be enough to advance achievements and is indeed better than poorly selected quantitative measures. Professor Healy was particularly concerned about Target 3.4, which addresses non-communicable diseases and mental health by seeking “to promote mental health and well-being.” The only measure adopted for accountability on mental health is suicide mortality rate. That does not measure mental health promotion and will not encourage countries to improve their mental health social protections. In this case, a better measure would be the adoption of one or more mental health services or campaigns or revisions to existing health programs in order to incorporate mental health.

Finally, Professor Healy added a comment on the challenges of measuring improvements in the levels of inequality. The Grassroots Task Force of the NGO Committee on Social Development is about to launch a survey to measure inequalities at the community level and hopes to obtain data to show whether inequalities are being addressed and have been reduced since 2015. The IASSW found it very difficult to craft questions and to distinguish inequalities from deprivations. The proceedings of this Commission certainly underscore those challenges and have pointed out the need to look at macro-economic factors and their interplay with social and economic realities at the local level. Thus, we have work ahead in seeking to ensure accountability in assessing the impact of social protection in reducing inequalities.

**Cecilie Golden**, Programme Specialist, UNESCO- MOST, stressed that UNESCO has a human rights approach to development, and social protection is seen as a human right. The specific role of UNESCO’s Sector for Social and Human Sciences, in which the MOST programme is located, is to promote knowledge, intellectual cooperation and the development of standards in order to facilitate social transformation based on the universal values of justice, freedom and human dignity. The contribution of scientific knowledge and

data is essential for contributing to appropriate evidenced-based policies, which is the objective of the MOST Programme.

The specific aim of the Ministerial Forums organized by the MOST Programme is to bring Ministers of Social Development together so as to share knowledge, experience and best practices, contributing to policies informed by research and generated through a multi-stakeholder dialogue. Ministers are held accountable for policies in their countries, but other actors can also play an important role in finding the best policy mix, contributing to more effective conceptualization and delivery of social protection. In this sense, there is an urgent need for co-production of knowledge, both vertically and horizontally, which facilitates achieving informed policy-making in the social area, involving civil society at large. Accountability should be extended at every stage, and monitoring done by civil society organizations can play a decisive role in this connection. Mutual accountability matters!

Information was presented on the latest Ministerial Forum focused on "Social Protection Policies in Conflict and Conflict-Affected Arab States". The high-level participants convened in Cairo, Egypt, and underscored the importance of investing in social protection to achieve sustainable human development, given the multiple links between those two areas. Interruptions in service delivery resulting from financial constraints and infrastructure deficits as a consequence of the conflicts, as well as an increase in refugees and internally displaced people who need social protection have been recognized as substantial obstacles.

UNESCO had commissioned a research paper for the Forum, which points out the existing deficit in social science research and data in the region, and which hampers the measurement of the impact of conflicts on poverty, social exclusion, inequality or social protection gaps. On the other hand, spending on social protection schemes and systems has positive long-term effects, mitigating the conflicts in the region, particularly given that the entrenched social ills have devastating impacts on the human condition and development, and could be the trigger for political and civil unrest.

Apart from other initiatives in the area, the Ministers agreed to enhance national social protection policies based on the life-cycle approach and to concentrate their efforts on institutional capacity development. The evidence-based policy-making depends also on collecting quality data, disaggregated on gender, age, disability, geographic location and relevant socio-economic conditions.

**Helen Mudora**, Programme Manager, Africa Platform for Social Protection (APSP), highlighted various aspects of accountability in the context of the mission of the APSP, namely, to create partnerships with civil society and other organizations and to engage with governments and international development agencies to develop and implement social protection strategies and programmes.

Without the obligations set by national legislation and human rights frameworks, and the knowledge of them, accountability is weakened. The work of the Africa Platform for Social Protection demonstrates that monitoring the delivery of social protection services by civil society can help to hold government departments to account with regard to the standards that they have set for themselves. For the Platform, which operates in 27 countries across Africa, accountability is conceived as building the capacity for and knowledge of rights to social protection of both policy makers and the communities that 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 in their efforts to assess whether payments are made on time and how far people have to travel to payment points and to monitor transparency and the attitudes of civil servants providing the service and the response to complaints. The results of these assessments are taken into consideration in government negotiations about the benefit system that results in improved social protection programmes. Enhancing accountability in the management of cash transfer programmes through citizens' participation in Africa in conjunction with capacity-building within communities to constructively engage with the government and service providers, promoting effective

complaints and redress mechanisms, knowledge and awareness creation, data collection—all of these elements have become part and parcel of the strategy of the APSP.

**Sergei Zelenev**, Executive Director of ICSW in his presentation focused on the issue of social guarantees in the context of comprehensive social policy. While social guarantees to citizens can be provided exclusively by the state, using constitutional provisions or some other existing legal norms that define such guarantees and respective entitlements, the role of civil society is crucial in service delivery, the setting of higher standard of services, and monitoring the effectiveness of service provision and social spending at large.

A comprehensive, holistic approach to social policy, with equity considerations at the core, requires the integration of economic and social objectives at its inception. The socio-economic objectives of public policies-- from the reduction of poverty to ensuring environmental sustainability- should ideally form an indispensable part of any macroeconomic package, when such indicators as inflation targets, revenue increases or fiscal deficits are discussed at the inception stage. Under such framework the choice of policy instruments should be facilitated by using interdisciplinary analytical methods, where comparing trade-offs is part of the policy package conceptualization. When social guarantees are provided through exiting legal norms and represent part of the social contract, such guarantees could be seen an important instrument for building opportunities in society, strengthening human capital and facilitating equitable growth and upscale mobility.

As well known to specialists, ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation 202 -- based on a rights-based approach-- envisions four social security guarantees,<sup>1</sup> as defined at the national level, and also speaks about the

mechanism for the “progressive realization” of those standards within a social guarantee framework. In this sense Recommendation 202 builds upon the principle of the “progressive realization” of social and economic rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (ICESCR), stipulating that governments should be proactive in strengthening the enjoyment of rights over time (or, in the words of the ICESCR, should take steps in “achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized . . . to the maximum of available resources”.

The recognition of the social guarantees framework facilitates converting abstract notions of rights—in this case social and economic rights-- into tangible standards that are pertinent to service delivery. At the same time the existence of entitlements stemming from certain legal provisions should be seen in conjunction with legal provisions for redress; otherwise, the promised service delivery may not even happen.

If social guarantees are a well-established part of the social contract, well- recognized and maintained, they facilitate social dialogue, with monitoring and accountability as part of the policy process. There has to be a commitment on the part of duty-bearers (governments) to effective delivery in accordance with entitlements and equity.

That’s why the availability of effective means of redress plays such an important role in the system of democratic governance and service delivery. When governments fail to deliver services to which they have committed themselves, owing to resource constraints or organizational problems, such a situation cannot but compromise the idea of social guarantees. If the systems of redress are weak or non-existent, the realization of socio-economic rights becomes highly problematic.

<sup>1</sup> 1. access to essential health care, including maternity care;

2. basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services;

3. basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability;

4. basic income security for older persons.

**Kate Donald**, Director of Economic and Social Policy, Center for Economic and Social Rights in her presentation focused on some specifics of a human rights approach in the context of social protection debate. While this debate is welcome, it is important to note that sometimes the human rights language has been co-opted by a lot of major actors in the social protection space, whose actions and policies are not necessarily aligned with human rights. Social protection/social security has been recognized as a human right in the major international documents such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Citing the existing evidence, she underscored that social protection is crucial for reducing economic inequality. For example, in OECD countries 1985-2005, direct income taxes and social transfers reduced income inequality by about one third, with non-means-tested social transfers including public pensions and child benefits accounting for the bulk of this redistribution in most countries. In South Africa, social protection measures introduced by the government reduced the Gini coefficient from 0.63 to 0.60 in 2000. Social protection measures can also be crucial for tackling gender inequality.

What is important is a holistic approach to social protection: a lot depends how social protection schemes are designed and implemented. If done badly, such schemes can leave certain inequalities untouched, or even exacerbate them. For example, some seminal studies on Latin America confirm gendered impact of conditional cash transfer programs, reinforcing stereotypes about women's caring role and increasing their burden of unpaid care work (see e.g. Tara Cookson, *Unjust Conditions*).

From a human rights perspective, universal social protection programs are best. They equalize upwards, reduce social stigma, and minimize exclusion errors - which are a huge problem in many targeted programs. For example, in CESR [research with partners in Egypt](#), we have found that the three major SP programs together [cover only about 49%](#) of those considered poor. Two of these are targeted cash transfer programs, supported by IMF and World Bank. One was found to have a 59% exclusion error.

Recent [research](#) from Development Pathways highlights the inefficiency and inaccuracy of targeted programs - even ones conventionally considered success story. Also, targeted programs can worsen outcomes for non-beneficiaries - see for example recent [research](#) findings in Philippines, showing that targeted CCT worsened stunting for local non-beneficiary children.

However, despite mounting evidence, and the lip service paid to universality, it is this targeted approach that is being pushed by World Bank and IMF, as well as many governments. This approach - prioritizing targeting, means-testing and various conditionalities - is not human rights-based, despite their appropriation of some of the language of the human rights. Their approach is based on the 'safety net' idea, which essentially seeks to provide minor reparations for those affected by the worst ravages of the prevailing neoliberal economic model or the austerity pushed by these same institutions, through what has been termed "[social bribery](#)" (by SID).

To be truly transformative and rights-based, social protection needs to be part of a wider, redistributive economic model that prioritizes substantive equality.

For example, in order to ensure that social protection programs are redistributive, we need to examine how they are funded. (In compliance with ICESCR obligation of devoting maximum available resources to the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights (art 2.)). If they are funded through regressive taxation, for example, their potential to tackle inequalities will be thwarted. Brazil is a particularly salient example of this phenomenon.

To conclude, one can highlight three features of a human rights approach to social protection that are particularly relevant in the context of inequality reduction.

1) In essence, a focus on human rights makes the difference between the palliative, "safety net" approach which essentially distributes crumbs to the poor to make up for the way the economic model has failed them, and **universal**, comprehensive social protection

that explicitly aims to **redistribute** resources, opportunity and power.

2) Need to put **dignity** at the heart of SP design and implementation, and make SP '[shame-proof](#)'. This means getting rid of conditionalities and sanctions, and moving away from myths of "undeserving poor" and "dependency".

3) Necessity for **accountability** mechanisms represent a core part of human rights approach. These mechanisms are important for many reasons, not least because they can help us identify inequalities and disparities in how social protection schemes are being experienced by rights-holders. These are often invisible otherwise.

### Social Protection Week in Geneva

Geneva once again stood out as a global community hub for rights-based humanitarian and social development throughout February 2019.

Events related to **Social Protection** scheduled early in February 2019 included the annual **Social Protection Inter-agency** Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) meeting that takes place alternatively in Geneva and New York. The meeting of the Board was associated with a series of other meetings, of SPIAC-B committees and working groups, as well as with the OECD's **High-Level Conference - Together to achieve Universal Social Protection by 2030** to promote the **Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (USP2030)** the 3-day **International Conference on Universal Child Grants** driven by UNICEF and the Overseas Development Institute in partnership with the ILO.

Dr **Odile Frank**, Special Representative of the ICSW at the UN Office in Geneva and the Specialized Agencies in Geneva reported on some key details of the above activities in Geneva.

The full text of her article is published on our website—[ICSW.org](http://ICSW.org)



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