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Human dignity and social protection: International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) approach

Highlighted in the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* as one of the priority areas, human dignity is instrumental in conceptualization and implementation of social policy. Human dignity is the quintessential core of human rights; many references to human dignity in human rights and constitutional law begin with the intrinsic or inherent dignity of all individuals.¹ In a broad sense, dignity often stands for what is important and valuable for both individuals and society at large.

It is worth mentioning that the international efforts to protect human dignity started with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proudly declared ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. But even before, the Universal Declaration: The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 referred to ‘the dignity and worth of the human person’. Both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognize the ‘inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’ as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. The respect for dignity as one of the core values has been enshrined in many constitutions throughout the world.

Human dignity of course has not only moral and legal dimensions but also socio-economic dimensions. Embedding the concept of dignity in policymaking entails respecting the needs of all, including the most disadvantaged members in society. Social exclusion, unfortunately, is not an abstract but a very real concern for millions of people who face multiple deprivations in society, who are not well-educated, well-nourished, or well-sheltered, who often have to cope with consequences of ill health, and whose dignity is being violated on a daily basis. There is a growing concern with the visible weakening in social cohesion in many countries and regions and about the adverse situation of marginalized social groups and communities. Vulnerability to environmental degradation exacerbates poverty and existing inequalities in countries both poor and rich.

The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), a global non-governmental organization devoted to promoting social justice, social welfare, and social development strongly believes that addressing the issues of inequality and poverty reduction in a comprehensive manner requires linking human rights with social protection of individuals and communities. There is strong evidence at the country level that universal access even to basic social protection is beneficial not only for vulnerable groups but also for society as a whole.

Social protection of course is not a panacea and cannot solve all problems of the world at once, but it is a very important, truly vital element of progressive social policy attuned to the needs of people today and projected to the future. Universal social protection is an important enabling factor conducive to protecting human rights, developing human potential, and reducing income inequalities. Highlighting importance of essential material conditions required for living with dignity, social protection facilitates upholding human dignity as a value and a legal principle, firmly linking

it with social and economic rights. Moreover, it is an essential material prerequisite for the effective empowerment of people.

We believe that strengthening social protection is not only one of the best ways to reduce insecurity and deprivation in the world, but also an effective means to reinvigorate the development agenda and come up with new solutions to a range of old and new social ills.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, as well as the preparatory process leading to the Agenda, provided a boost to the social protection discourse, moving it forward on both the national and the international levels. The international community recognized the most important role played by social protection in eradicating poverty and achieving various sustainable development goals. Social protection was referred as a fundamental element contributing to outcomes across the area of health, gender, decent work, and inclusive growth and inequalities. The Universal Social Protection Initiative, launched by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank in 2015, was highly appreciated as an important collaborative effort to support countries in their quest for providing universal coverage. Many stakeholders are exploring synergies and other ways to enhance intergovernmental collaboration in the area of social protection in the longer run.

The impetus created by the adoption of the 2030 Agenda signifies a new window of opportunity for all stakeholders in finding innovative solutions to the most pressing development challenges, including universal social protection. In this light, a new high-level political ‘push’ at the international level aimed at upholding social protection as a stand-alone issue would be highly desirable, particularly in the context of the intergovernmental policy dialogue and negotiations conducted at the UN in the wake of the adoption of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Such an outcome of the multilateral negotiations would make it possible to capitalize on the growing recognition of the significant role that social protection plays in society.

The adoption of a dedicated UN resolution on social protection would be most important in focusing attention to some key issues pertinent to universal social protection, including floors, and its multiple benefits for society, thus reinforcing a political impact of ILO Recommendation No. 202 concerning National Floors for Social Protection adopted in 2012.² Such a dedicated UN resolution would become a testimony to the high-level political commitment to advance social protection at all levels. At the same time, the UN-negotiated resolution would address a different political constituency, also entailing a system-wide consistent monitoring of the agreed conclusions.

In that vein, a proposal has been put forward by the ICSW to the UN Member States working within the remit of the 54th session of the Commission for Social Development, namely, to consider elaborating a draft Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution on national floors of social protection as a necessary political step toward universal and comprehensive social protection for all, taking into account that once social protection floors are established and become operational at the national level, the achievement of several core targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comes within reach. What specific outcomes could be achieved if such negotiations on a dedicated resolution take place is a matter of political trade-offs. Obviously, further advocacy work on the part of civil society organizations is required to start the ball rolling.

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Notes

1. Rao, N. (2011) ‘Three Concepts of Dignity in Constitutional Law’, *Notre Dame Law Review* 86(1): 183–271.
2. http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:3065524