

Translating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into local circumstances: principles and trade-offs

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Remarks by Sergei Zelenev, Executive Director ICSW at the international conference ‘Human well-being, social cohesion and sustainable development: the quest for the responses to contemporary challenges’, 18-19 May, Moscow, Russia

Many thanks for the invitation, it is a pleasure for me to address this distinguished audience. I would like to share with you my thoughts on the role the ICSW and other organizations of the civil society could play in translating commitments of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into action at the regional and local levels.

Conceived as a universal and transformative global plan of action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in its practical application depends on *national capacities* to translate commitments into results. It sounds like a truism, but in fact it is a huge challenge. The role of civil society is indispensable here, along with other key stakeholders – governments, business sector and cities.

I will not be turning a new page if I say that the implementation of 2030 Agenda is everybody’s business – because the Agenda addresses issues of a vital importance for our planet and for all of us, for our children and grandchildren. At the same time, we cannot but notice that the level of the *national acceptance* of the need to adapt to climate change, or urgency in reframing national development priorities in order to reflect the threat of climate change, varies significantly from one country to another. Despite all available data and very convincing accumulated evidence regarding greenhouse gases, despite melting ice-caps and severe climate disruptions such as severe storms or draughts, there are climate-change doubters, some of them are among the influential heads of government. This fact alone can have significant implications for policy making, bringing, for example, reduction in spending on renewable energy. The temptation to continue with the business as usual, or even to ignore the internationally agreed goals specified in Paris Agreement on climate change, aimed at a more sustainable future, is clearly detrimental for global development.

In my opinion ICSW should be very open and transparent in our attitudes to this issue. We should stand together with those organizations, business and city leaders, who support the new 2030 Agenda of the United Nations and Sustainable Development Goals. We see the Agenda as a future-oriented, carefully crafted international policy document, promoting complex solutions to complex issues, created in an inclusive way for the benefit of the planet, for all people. The adoption of this document, as well as the preceding outcome documents of the Paris Conference of 2015 represented a recognition by the policy-makers of the vital importance of the scientific evidence regarding the impact of the carbon emissions on the Earth climate collected by scholars from numerous countries over many years. In a certain sense the acceptance and adoption of the Paris conference conclusions and recommendation, reflected a willingness at the highest levels of government to trust scientific community, even when some important conclusions seem very technical

and might not be clear to the public at large. The conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) contained in the Fifth Assessment report of 2014 confirmed that ‘... warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia... It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming.’

While diplomats and climate experts from many countries are now trying to create technical guidelines for implementation of the Paris Agreements, there has appeared a high level on uncertainty if the climate change adaption will be moved further – even if the Paris Agreement commitments do not officially begin until 2020. As organization ICSW should not be hesitant to take sides, placing our efforts and making our voice heard among those *who support* the new 2030 Agenda of the United Nations and Sustainable Development Goals. This is a matter of principle.

But as ICSW is not an ecological organization, our experience (and international recognition) are located elsewhere, first of all in the area of human well-being. In my view a clear entry point for ICSW in the context of 2030 Agenda is striving to improve well-being of people and our long-standing principled support for *social protection* as a global public policy priority.

Social protection is an investment in people, in the development of their capabilities. It is beneficial for individuals, for families and for society at large.

As is well-known social protection is addressed in the 2030 Agenda several times, starting as a way to deal with global poverty eradication: the main provision of relevance in the document call upon States to ‘implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage for the poor and the vulnerable’ (target 1.3).

But in an effort to make global efforts more comprehensive social protection is identified in the document as a means by which one can recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work (target 5.4), and is put forward as a means of promoting greater equality, along with fiscal and wage policies (target 10.4).

Many of us agree that the new impetus to the efforts aimed at promoting social protection worldwide was provided when Recommendation 202 on national floors of social protection was unanimously adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 101st session in 2012. There is an increasing recognition of the fact that the implementation of nationally defined social protection floors (SPFs) may be regarded as an important tool in the fight against poverty and inequality of all people. The SPF is essential for preventing marginalization of people in society and securing their rights. A rights-based approach aimed at protecting women, men and children from risks and vulnerabilities helps to sustain their well-being throughout the lifecycle, guaranteeing access to health care and other basic services, as well as at least a basic level of income security. The ICSW has supported that initiative since its inception by the United Nations in 2009, and continues doing so at various levels such as international, regional or national, and in various forms. We consistently speak on that issue at the United Nations when addressing the Commission for Social Development and the Commission on the Status of Women. We address this issue at the global conferences convened by ICSW, in cooperation with our partners, – I speak here about the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development convened every two years.

In this light the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda could be seen as a new window of opportunity for the proponents of the Social Protection Floor Initiative, including ICSW, to advocate and push for the reinforcement of social protection policies on the ground in the context of sustainable development.

I would like to underscore that social protection is a political issue – as all social issues are by definition political issues. To be effective, social protection programmes should always be country-specific, there is no one-size-fits all solution. It depends on a history as well as prevalent values in society which society considers to be in a situation of vulnerability, and worth supporting and

protecting. In practical terms, it depends on the national political class how policies and programs are conceived and selected, and on national budget priorities are set up.

The immediate goals vary: in one country the key concern for social protection schemes could be older persons, in another it could be single mothers or poor children. It all depends on national circumstances and preferences. But I would like to stress that despite distinctly pronounced defensive functions, aimed at building or strengthening abilities of people to withstand various social risks or shocks, social protection schemes also play enabling and empowering functions, a key role in terms of strengthening human potential and its developmental dimension is quite obvious here.

The formulation of national plans with the 2030 Agenda commitments in mind is by definition a huge challenge, given the scale and ambition of the Agenda. In order to make implementation participatory and inclusive, all major groups and stakeholders should be involved in the discussion on the ways and means of implementation. Civil-society organizations, including ICSW, along with the private sector, academia and philanthropic organizations, can help to delineate the national policy space; articulate public concerns in the context of building capacities to address national priorities connected to implementation; submit proposals for the allocation of financial and technical resources; and establish mechanisms for the monitoring of progress. ICSW could definitely play a catalytic role here at the regional level, acting through various regional platforms, including European Social Platform.

Given the ICSW advocacy role in promoting social protection, we should continue our outreach policy that 2030 Agenda provides an obvious opportunity to move forward the case for justice, dignity and social protection. The climate change has substantially re-shaped the international development discourse, focusing attention on several new issues taken in their complexity.

The key issues associated with global warming capture universal media attention as well as public attention. Promoting policies aimed at social protection through agreements that are conceived in the context of climate change can increase funding for several important sectoral programmes that make sense in adaptation for climate change as well as for the protection people who are immediately affected by the climate change – as indigenous people, or those living in coastal areas, or remote communities. It is well known, that many poor people are often disproportionately affected by the climate change; in this sense assisting the poor and vulnerable groups through social protection schemes is important on moral ground as a way to reduce human suffering but it is also an important effort to mitigate the climate change. Social protection plays an important role here and could be even more important in the future.

The integrated national policy framework for such two-pronged action becomes viable only if it is closely linked to top *national development priorities* reflecting the immediate needs of the population; only then can integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions – a key prerequisite for eventual success – be wholeheartedly embraced at the ground level.

As I mentioned before, promoting social protection is a political issue. It involves not only a vision but also an effort to reconcile value judgements, addressing public concerns at the same time. We all know that converting even the best-laid plans into practice is often elusive and might involve numerous trade-offs. Linking sustainable development and social protection in national planning represents a substantial policy challenge, particularly when it stays at the abstract level. My view is that whenever possible we should ‘spell out’ some abstract notions like social security or social protection to make issues more clear to policy-makers at the city level and to the public at large, and also to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. When we have at hand a clear evidence linking social protection schemes – such as programs that prevent avoidable infant mortality, or convincingly demonstrate how such schemes are connected to improved access to health care, or to improved longevity – we have a better chance for our advocacy efforts, winning broader public support and making outreach more effective. Being concrete with arguments helps to win the supporters.

But there is another, broader dimension here. I am referring to the possibility of emergence of *new international social norms* associated with 2030 Agenda. Social protection may be considered as one of those new norms that is gradually winning wider acceptance – the situation in this regard is changing. For example, at the beginning of 2000s the UN member states had a chance to discuss social protection agenda during one of the sessions of the Commission for Social Development, but the delegates were unable to agree on the need to support such efforts either at the international or national levels. Yet only ten years later international community became witnesses to the undeniable *policy shift* when Recommendation 202 was adopted by the ILC. The commitment of many countries to improved social protection has become a reality now, and this may be considered a normative shift. It became also clear that this option is affordable even to medium-income countries. In my view in our advocacy efforts we should emphasize the importance of recognizing social protection as a *new international social norm*. It may facilitate our efforts of the other fronts of advocacy and technical cooperation.

And finally, a few words about the ICSW role as a civil society organization in monitoring commitments and decisions if and when they are made regarding social protection and climate change. I think that bottom-up approach might be a useful way to include the voices of our members in local and national decision-making process. It could be particularly effective given that the next Joint World conference on Social Work and Social Development in Dublin in July 2018 will address the priority theme of ‘Environmental and Community Sustainability’.

In my opinion, the bottom-up reviews of the respective programmes undertaken by major independent stakeholders have proven their effectiveness in many areas of socio-economic development; their positive role can be particularly significant in identifying the bottle-necks and removing the obstacles to the national implementation of the core goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. If the ideals, objectives and actions contained in the national plans linking SDGs and social protection are to be realized, all sectors of society must play a role in the implementation efforts and be involved in all phases of policy action. This process could not but promote public awareness and generate knowledge for policy-makers at the same time.

Moreover, decision-making that is based on public evidence-based and data-driven has a better chance to succeed even if it calls into question some existing conventional approaches.

And finally, the existing evidence proves that citizens’ engagement always make a difference. National debates on the core themes of the Agenda, conducted in civil society circles, in academic and policy-making communities, could clarify the relationship between adaptation and development priorities. Adaptation activities represent a new policy area for most countries, and significant work on the part of all stakeholders is required to highlight a scope of possible further action and the existing policy linkages. More effective outreach and media promotion activities might be essential for reaching the broader audience and obtaining a wider impact.