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REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING TO DISCUSS THE REGIONAL REPORT ON INTEGRATED SOCIAL POLICIES IN ARAB COUNTRIES BEIRUT, 31 JANUARY – 2 FEBRUARY 2005

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) bases its interest in social policies on the many pertinent international instruments. That interest is expressed in the form of a set of activities that included an expert group meeting that was held at United Nations House, Beirut, from 31 January to 2 February 2005, in order to discuss the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies.

The aim of that Report was to provide an analysis of social policies and give information about ways of improving their integration and effectiveness in Arab countries. That comparative analysis covered such developed countries as Canada and Norway, in addition to other countries at different stages of development, including Malaysia and North Korea.

The purpose of the Meeting was to discuss the draft report on social policies under the main chapters into which it is divided, namely: (a) identification of the concept of social policies; (b) the significance of social policies with respect to values, ideologies and structures; (c) the functions of social policies in respect of social problems and social development; (d) social policy operations, including models, facts and conditions; (e) the characteristics of social policies in the Arab countries.

This report contains a brief summary of the most significant points that were raised by Meeting participants, together with the most important outcomes and recommendations.

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Introduction

1. ESCWA organized an expert group meeting with a view to discussing the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies. The meeting was held in Beirut from 31 January to 2 February 2005, in order to consider all parts of the Report and the publication in the future of regular reports on integrated social policies. This report contains a review of the most important meeting outcomes and recommendations made by participants, together with the most significant points that were raised in the course of the discussion on the main topic and its various sections.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE MEETING

A. RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Most of the participants' proposals concerned the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies that was the focus of the meeting, as follows:

(a) The data that is missing from certain tables of the Report should be completed and other data should be updated, while that which refers to the Freedom House indicator should be removed;

(b) The section on the characteristics of social policies in Arab countries should take the form of an annex;

(c) There is a need to identify the negative outcomes of the modernization and globalization process and its impact on overall levels of social development and, consequently, its impact on the formulation of policies related to such development;

(d) With respect to the fields covered by the social policies that appear in chapter III of the Report, it was suggested that the outcome and impact of the globalization process on each sector, including, inter alia, health, education, employment, unemployment, poverty and social security, should be individually addressed.

B. OUTCOMES

3. The following points were raised during the discussions:

(a) It is worth differentiating between, on the one hand, globalization as a fact which there is no alternative but to deal with and, on the other hand, forms of the phenomenon that give rise to many questions. The majority of developing countries can only follow and respond to the demands of globalization, because their resources are subject to the capabilities and decisions of the developed countries, as represented by their multinational corporations. Very few countries as yet have therefore been able to protect their economic interests or enable their societies to avoid the negative impact of globalization;

(b) At the conceptual level, the difference between growth and development did not come to the fore until after World War II, when independence was gained by many countries that had been colonized for centuries. The focus of the development of the industrialized countries was clearly and primarily on economic growth, with attention being given to social issues once the theoretical and practical bases of the economic structure had been firmly established. In contrast, in an unfavourable international environment in which the colonial heritage has bled developing countries of their resources and saddled them with poverty, unemployment and suffering, public policies in those countries that attempt to achieve both economic and social development are subject to severe pressures;

(c) It is not feasible to restrict research into the subject of the environment to material resources, because the concept of the environment is much wider. It includes human development dimensions, sustainability and other vital issues and there is a huge difference between the developed and the developing countries with respect to the factors responsible for environmental degradation and pollution. With respect to the use of non-renewable energy, for example, the practices of developing countries are governed by poverty, whereas the behaviour of developed countries is extravagant and profligate;

(d) Notwithstanding the importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their growing role in development, the facts confirm that the donor organizations have taken over many NGOs through the support that they provide in the form of projects that were prepared by those organizations, which, in the guise of strengthening their capacities, threatens to divest them of their function;

(e) It is clear from the experiences of the past 20 years that economic reform and restructuring programmes that declared the need to reduce the role of the State in favour of that of the market have in fact confirmed the importance and vitality of the role of the State. The truth is that markets, while able to ensure the efficient allocation of resources, are not able to achieve equitable growth and development, which is the essence of the humanitarian aspect of development;

(f) The contemporary experience of development, in the framework of its managed international strategies, confirms that the momentum of globalization, which is equal in importance to economic reform practices, has had a negative impact on social cohesion in the overwhelming majority of developing countries, including the Arab countries, that cannot be ignored in any discussion of social policy problems.

II. ISSUES DISCUSSED

4. Discussions concentrated on two main areas, namely, the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies that was the focus of the meeting, and activities relating to the publication in the future of regular reports on integrated social policies.

A. THE REGIONAL REPORT ON INTEGRATED SOCIAL POLICIES

5. The discussion addressed the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies chapter by chapter, as follows:

(a) Chapter I: covers the identification of the concept of social policies, including the structure of such policies and their various processes, with the aim of providing an integrated framework for those policies. Such a framework could focus on a general and comprehensive definition of the meaning of social policies, without going into certain of their constituent elements, including social well-being, social welfare, social services, social security and social protection networks;

(b) Chapter II: includes a definition of the meaning of social policies with respect to values, ideologies and structures. It also includes complete coverage of the contribution made by the various types and levels of social institution (international, trade, professional, or civil society) to social services and the concepts that support social protection;

(c) Chapter III: discusses the functions of social policies in respect of social problems and social development. This chapter may in itself be considered a conceptual framework that can educate social policy makers as to the logical content of social policies and the procedures that must be taken in drawing up such policies;

(d) Chapter IV: deals with social policy operations, including models, facts and conditions and the outstanding characteristics of the basic models, and concerns the construction of a comprehensive model that combines all the stages involved in drawing up and implementing policies. The chapter also includes an attempt to identify and discuss the circumstances that may promote or prevent each of those stages, and covers the practices that are current in Arab and other countries that are included in the analysis in that context;

(e) Chapter V: includes the characteristics of social policies in the Arab countries and recommendations to the countries of the region, some of which relate to general policy issues, while others deal with more specific issues relating to particular sectors or problems. It also includes proposals regarding the regular reports on social policies and their positive role in providing assistance.

**B. THE PUBLICATION IN THE FUTURE OF REGULAR REPORTS
ON INTEGRATED SOCIAL POLICIES**

6. The discussions on this issue raised the following points:

(a) The aim of social policies is to achieve the well-being of individuals in society, accentuate the positive aspects of progress and develop ways of dealing with its negative aspects. The achievement of that aim entails great difficulties that arise from the nature of the social policies issues and the fact that such policies do not constitute independent entities, but are interrelated, because they are closely linked to, inter alia, economic, political, legal, historical and cultural branches of knowledge;

(b) Comparison of the economic and social bases of development at the level of thought, outlook and analysis, and the mechanisms, policies and indicators, shows that there is a wide divide between economic development and social development. This issue should in itself constitute an impetus for the exertion of further efforts to close the divide that exists in the development structure;

(c) The review of Arab countries experiences was comprehensive, having initially been restricted to ESCWA member countries and then expanded to selected, successful non-Arab cases, for the purpose of comparison;

(d) The analysis depended on the choice of priority social issues and their classification by effectiveness and the nature of their impact, using both parts of the human development criterion, namely, building human capacities and finding appropriate opportunities to employ those capacities. The issues that have a positive impact on the creation of capacities include education, skills acquisition, health care and social inclusion, which are balanced by vital problems that have a negative impact at the human society level, including, inter alia, the market, labour, unemployment, poverty and the status of women;

(e) The experience of each Arab country at the level of the abovementioned vital issues, with the focus on the status of social policies and their interaction with those issues. The models that could result from those experiences was summarized;

(f) Those models were classified by suitability as the practical foundation for building integrated Arab social policies within the framework of an attempt to build an analytical model that would permit coordination and harmonization.

III. PARTICIPANTS AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE OF MEETING

7. The expert group meeting to discuss the Regional Report on Integrated Social Policies was held at United Nations House, Beirut, from 31 January to 2 February 2005.

B. PARTICIPANTS

8. Taking part in the meeting were a number of researchers and experts who represented academic establishments, NGOs and research centres in various countries of the region, in addition to social policy specialists from ESCWA. The list of participants is contained in the annex to this report.

Annex*

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