



## Box 2. Measuring Social Justice: Poverty, Inequality and Vulnerability

Designing well-informed and data-based economic and social policies that can facilitate the achievement of social justice requires the use of appropriate measurement techniques to assess poverty, inequality and vulnerability. The complexity of these phenomena has motivated the elaboration of different concepts and approaches to measure and analyse them. Quantitative techniques of measuring income or expenditure are clearly limited in reflecting the entirety of the social situation of poor people. However, they allow for measuring change and progress. They are often complemented by qualitative studies that look deeper into the individual factors contributing to poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

### Poverty

The majority of countries measure poverty in monetary terms using the income or poverty-line approach. In this case, a poverty line is drawn according to a certain minimum below which livelihood is unacceptable. The measurement is commonly based on estimating the cost of a nutritional basket considered essential to maintain the health of a typical individual or household. This approach was adopted to assess the progress made in achieving Target 1 of Millennium Development Goal 1- that is to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the number of people living on less than 1.25 dollars per day.

This approach masks different manifestations of deprivation such as the subjective perception of poverty, intra-household disparities and social exclusion. Developed countries often take a different approach in defining the poverty line. Instead of using a fixed monetary value, a relative approach is taken and poverty is assessed as a proportion, such as 50 per cent or 60 per cent of the median per capita annual income or consumption. The advantage of this measure is that it better reflects income distribution and inequalities within and between countries. Nevertheless, in order to fully capture the facets and gaps of poverty, other such non-monetary concepts as inequality and vulnerability are increasingly utilized.

### Inequality

Inequality and poverty are mutually reinforcing aspects of well-being. However, inequality takes into account the subjective perception of deprivation and the relative position of the individual vis-à-vis the rest of the community. Inequality analyses how income is distributed on the entire population, not only those below a certain poverty line. Examples of inequality measures include: the Gini coefficient, the Theil index, the decile dispersion ratio and the share of income of the poorest population quintile.

In order to redress the balance between the rich and the poor, inequality reduction measures should be integrated into poverty reduction strategies and should ensure, among others, that all people are equal before the law and that policies are implemented to correct market deficiencies, increase decent employment opportunities, and promote equal distribution of the benefits of growth. In addition, those measures should also ensure equal and universal access to basic social resources and information, and encourage public participation.

### Vulnerability

By definition, vulnerability is the likelihood of falling into or deeper into poverty. In recent years, the food and energy crisis, the global financial downturn and climate change served as constant reminders that no individual or country is immune against economic shocks, poverty or natural disasters and that vulnerability is also an important indicator of well-being.

Measuring vulnerability is difficult. It focuses on assessing the extent of a threat before it actually happens, and requires the use of complex regression techniques depending on variations in income levels and consumption patterns. Participation of households in informal networks, seasonal variations in income and consumption, self-perception of vulnerability and coping strategies are all considered good indicators of vulnerability.

*Source:* Compiled by ESCWA on the basis of Coudouel et al. (2002), *Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, in the PRSP Sourcebook, World Bank, Washington D.C. and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2009), *Rethinking Poverty*, Report on the World Social Situation 2010, New York.

## What are the factors leading to a happy, healthy and fulfilling life? Which are the ways towards education and rewarding employment? How are risks and opportunities distributed in a given society and across social groups?

Far too often the answers to such questions lie in a certain family background, sectarian ties, and influential connections. Members of the elite automatically settle in the front row while poor and less well-connected people are pushed behind. The evidence of strong correlations between such issues as the nutritional status of children and the level of education of their mothers or between maternal mortality and the place of residence in a given country illuminates the cumulative effect of multiple disadvantages or deprivations and their transmission from one generation to the next. The common nuance that “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer” is acquiring a new dynamic in the current context where both globalization and global crises are contributing to increased inequalities and social hardships.

### Social Justice...

Intergenerational poverty, hunger and discrimination in all its forms undermine the common notion of equity and equal value of human life and impede the promulgation of peace, security and social justice. Most societies mandate the State to take action in order to remedy such situations and work towards a fairer distribution of resources and life chances that reflects people’s efforts and achievements. However, the equalization of opportunities and the creation of a “society for all” are often challenged by such political, social and economic factors as a weak social agenda, a frail civic engagement and geographical marginalization.

Experiences around the world show that no magic bullet exists that could solve the complex problems of poverty, inequality and marginalization. Economic growth, though essential, by itself does not necessarily trigger the distributional effects that would lift people out of destitution and reduce income gaps. In fact, countries which succeeded in achieving higher social development dividends and improving the lives of their people have done that by ensuring synergy between economic and social objectives and integrating social concerns in economic development strategies.

*“Social justice is based on the values of fairness, equality, respect for diversity, access to social protection, and the application of human rights in all spheres of life, including in the workplace. As we face the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis, which has led to significant increases in unemployment and poverty and is straining social integration, these principles are more important than ever.”*

*United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, on the World Day of Social Justice, 20 February 2010.*

## Box 1. The World Summit on Social Development and its Follow-up

The World Summit for Social Development was held in March 1995 in Copenhagen and brought together 117 heads of State and Government, the largest gathering yet of world leaders, to launch a global drive that places people at the centre of development. At the end of their deliberations, the Governments adopted the Copenhagen Declaration, the Ten Commitments and the Programme of Action, which laid out a wide framework for achieving social justice and a society for all.

Five years later, Governments reconvened in Geneva in June 2000 for the 24th Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly and endorsed further actions to reduce poverty, address unemployment, promote social integration, and to achieve the internationally set goals on health and education.

Since the Summit in 1995, the General Assembly has annually considered the issue of implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development, taking stock of follow-up activities undertaken at the national level and within the United Nations, including in its subsidiary bodies, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission for Social Development, as well as sharing experiences, lessons learned and obstacles encountered.

The Copenhagen Summit continues to guide the work of the United Nations on social progress along three core tiers, namely, poverty eradication, full employment and social integration.

*Source:* United Nations, Division for Social Policy and Development website: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/index.html>.

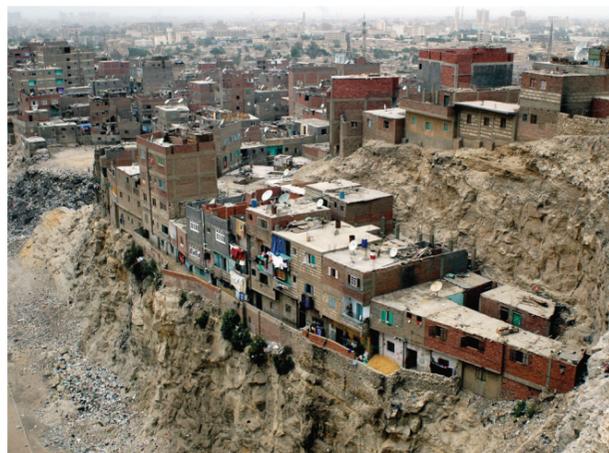
For the United Nations, the pursuit of social justice has spearheaded the global agenda since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It culminated in 2007, when the General Assembly, under the pressure of an accelerating food crisis, looming turmoil on financial markets and rising inequality, unanimously proclaimed 20 February of each year as the World Day of Social Justice.<sup>1</sup> This follows the recognition that social development, sustained economic growth and social justice are mutually reinforcing goals and indispensable for the achievement of peace and security.

The launching of the World Day of Social Justice was designed to encourage efforts to achieve the objectives and goals of the World Summit for Social Development and the Further Initiatives on Social Development adopted at the 24th Special Session of the General Assembly. In that context, the World Day of Social Justice serves to remind the international community to strengthen and consolidate efforts in such areas as poverty eradication, promotion of full employment and decent work, gender equity, social integration, respect for human rights, universal and equitable access to social services and opportunities to all.

In the Arab region, social justice, social exclusion and the lack of equal opportunity are often related to issues of citizenship, poverty, gender, social class or group. Women, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities face a multitude of barriers blocking their full participation in social life and in the decision-making process. Similarly, low and semi-skilled migrant workers attracted by the employment opportunities available in some of the Arab countries often do not enjoy adequate social protection. Although poverty rates in the region are low in comparison to other regions, a large number of people live on incomes that are barely above poverty lines, have no capacity to build any reserves and are highly dependent on traditional solidarity systems. Their sensitivity to political, economic and environmental shocks is very high, given that the existing social protection schemes cover a small portion of the population and are generally limited to workers in the formal sector. Moreover, national statistical averages and the way poverty is defined and measured, often conceal pockets of poverty and in some individual countries poverty rates may reach almost 50 per cent. The latest Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) statistics indicate a deepening poverty gap for the Western Asia region.<sup>2</sup>

### ...requires integrated policies...

Globally, the United Nations have established a set of



goals and programmes of actions that can advance equality and social justice. Most prominently, these relate to poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, and social integration. Specifically, they promote policies that ensure the rule of law and equality of all people, encouraging the free formation of civil society organizations and strengthening participation and social dialogue. Access to land, credit, information, infrastructure and markets is of vital importance for supporting people to get out of poverty and to better their lives.

The objectives of social cohesion and a social fabric built on solidarity and shared values rank high in the priorities of ESCWA member countries and generally follow the principles advanced by the United Nations forums. In their national development plans and strategies, member countries acknowledge a number of challenges to social integration and social cohesion, including notable discrepancies between geographic regions, large disparities between social classes, inequitable distribution of social services, mismatches between educational outcomes and labour market demands, and insufficient attention to the needs of vulnerable groups.

Among the most notable achievements in promoting social justice in the ESCWA region is the fact that almost all member countries highlight the need for social inclusion of persons with special needs and have enacted new laws or updated existing ones pursuant to the Declaration of the Arab Decade for Persons with Disabilities (2004-2013). In that line, Jordan is demonstrating high political commitment to the cause of persons with disabilities by enhancing the availability of and equal access to social services. Saudi Arabia is developing in-family assistance programmes, while Lebanon developed the "The Right &

Access Project" for the provision of proximity services and plans to expand free health-care coverage. The United Arab Emirates has enacted legislation and special regulations to include people with special needs and provide them with rehabilitation and training programmes to facilitate their entry into the job market. In Egypt, the law states that 5 per cent of jobs in all sectors must be assigned to persons with disabilities who have been given free job training. Qatar has made sterling efforts at legislative and institutional levels to raise awareness of, promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities. The national act imposes penalties in cases where provisions prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities are violated.

Encouraging examples on promoting social justice can also be found in national policies supporting the inclusion of the elderly (the majority of member countries), of disadvantaged youth (Palestine) and war-torn communities (the Sudan). Egypt and Jordan are gearing towards universal social protection, by extending coverage to larger social groups, including to informal workers and self-employed. Bahrain recently introduced a new unemployment insurance scheme and Iraq pays particular attention to integrating vulnerable populations within the framework of the MDGs.

### ...and an investment in social protection

Despite these positive efforts, ESCWA member countries still struggle to include the entirety of their populations in the development process. Only a small proportion of the population enjoys adequate social security. Compared to other developing regions, social expenditure levels are not impressive. Only an estimated average of 10 per cent of the elderly are receiving pension payments, and the fact that merely 30 per cent of the region's labour force is currently enrolled in some pension scheme points to rather slow improvements.

A new initiative to advance social justice, launched in 2009 against the background of the global financial and economic crisis, is the Social Protection Floor initiative of the United Nations. It comprises a set of basic social rights, services and facilities that the global citizen should enjoy. Depending on the design, preliminary costing studies show that the basic floor for social services is affordable in all countries. The initial costs for low income countries, including health care, were estimated to range from 2.3 to 5.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010.

Social justice is not a new concept. It is inherent in the economic, social, political, civil and cultural rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and forms the basis for inclusive societies where every individual and group is entitled to fair treatment and have equal access to



opportunities and rights. Creating a society for all requires that tolerance, mutual respect and value for diversity be taught at an early stage of life. It also necessitates the development of strategies that integrate social and economic policies and instate comprehensive social protection systems to ward off labour market insecurity.

*"Social and economic welfare are not separate concepts. Without economic prosperity, no country can provide for all the social needs of its citizens. But nor can any country be called truly prosperous so long as many of its citizens are left to fend for themselves against ignorance, hardship and disease."*

*Ex-Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 24th Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Social Development, 20 June 2000.*

While enacting institutional and legislative measures is the first step to take up social justice, clearly one of the key challenges remains in ensuring their effective implementation in a democratic and participatory manner. An additional challenge lies in realigning national priorities to target the implications of globalization, the global crises and other such emergent issues as health epidemics and changing demographics, from a social justice and human right perspective, while paying special attention to the poor and marginalized groups.

For a long time, social policy has been regarded as a burden to the economy, spoiling incentives and the investment climate. However, promoting equal access across social groups and geographic locations to quality education and health care, water and land, transportation and communication, and to information and knowledge is not only about securing human rights. It is also an investment in one of the most productive resources of any country: an investment in people.

<sup>1</sup> General Assembly resolution A/RES/62/10.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009.