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SOCIAL OBSERVATORIES

Information Kit



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SOCIAL OBSERVATORIES



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SOCIAL POLICY

At the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995), Governments arrived at a new consensus on the need to put people at the centre of development. This was followed by a series of global commitments to people-centered development that were reinforced at the 2000 Millennium Summit, with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These instruments pledged to make the eradication of poverty, full employment and social integration overriding objectives of development. They committed countries to pursue inclusive development patterns aimed at ensuring that all social groups would benefit from the creation of wealth and be integrated into mainstream society.

Across the Arab region, economic development alone has not guaranteed the social outcomes envisaged at the world summits. Large disparities in social indicators persist. Basic social services such as education and health are unevenly distributed and inadequate, and many countries in the region are set to have difficulty in achieving MDGs. The sole reliance on economic growth as the main engine of change – from which social benefits were expected to ‘trickle down’ – has so far failed to redress problems of inequality, poverty and exclusion in the Arab region. This ‘growth first’ approach places the emphasis on dealing with symptoms of social inequity rather than on the fundamental causes of marginalization. It treats social changes as a secondary outcome of economic development, which has actually led to more social problems in a number of countries.

In line with the world summits, the approach of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to integrated social policy seeks to bring people into the centre stage of policymaking and include their needs and voices into the development process. An integrated social policy is one in which social issues are not viewed as residual or secondary to economic processes; rather, it encapsulates one where public policy is informed at every stage by social equity and human-rights concerns.

Social policy analysis, consensus building, monitoring and oversight are important elements of an integrated social policy. Specifically, they promote trust in Government and cement the social contract between Government and the people. Moreover, Governments are empowered in terms of withstanding competing interests and pressures from within or outside the country when they institute mechanisms and programmes that undertake social policy research and analysis, monitor trends, track impact and provide institutional space for the participation of citizens in decision-making that affects their lives.

Social observatories and economic and social councils can be models of effective institutional structures that promote integrated social policy. By providing socially-informed, evidence-based research and analysis, and by securing an institutional space for dialogue between different constituents and policymakers, these institutional mechanisms can inform policies and programmes aimed at promoting inclusive, equitable and sustainable development.

introduction

Social and economic indicators reflect variations in living standards between citizens, and provide policymakers and practitioners with the tools for assessing those areas of development that require more attention and intervention, thereby resulting in better targeting of resources and, consequently, in crafting successful policy initiatives.¹ Effective and equitable social policy depends on the availability of reliable data and information, and the constant monitoring of such indicators. The ability to measure social disparities, to understand the needs of various social groups and to assess the impact of Government policies is often hindered by the lack or unreliability of data. In addition, inconsistent indicators and measurements thwart the achievement of developmental goals and targets, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Arab Human Development Reports have argued that improving social disparities in the region necessitates “the consolidation of knowledge acquisition and its effective utilization”.² Specifically, there is a need to analyse the interdependence of economic and social policies and the impact of economic changes on the lives of the vulnerable in order to gauge the benefits and drawbacks of national planning and developmental strategies in the region. Moreover, the production of knowledge on different groups in society can aid Governments in terms of formulating more inclusive and equitable policies. To that end, Governments need to create a separate entity, such as a social observatory.

Social observatories can function side by side with the Government, and can gather necessary information and data aimed at improving social policy analysis and formulation.

A number of countries in the ESCWA region are exploring the establishment of social observatories to provide monitoring and analysis on social policy and to influence decision-making and provide oversight to social programmes and public policy. Designing the appropriate structure and mandate for a social observatory can vary by context, country and region. However, among other important considerations, the impartiality of social observatories, their financing, organization, location, membership and access to data and information should be carefully studied.

¹ ESCWA, “Social Development Bulletin: Bringing equity to the development agenda” (E/ESCWA/SDID/2006/Technical Paper 4).

² The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society (2003)*; and UNDP and AFESD, *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World (2005)*.

Social Observatories

While there is no agreement on a standard model for a social observatory, most countries have set up different types of institutions to provide detailed data and analyses on specific topics and issues. For example, networks of labour unions, community organizations, multilateral and Government agencies, and universities have been established over the past few decades aimed at describing and analysing the impact of national and international policies on economic, social and environmental development.³ Among the most common themes of socially-oriented observatories are those that relate to health, labour and employment, housing, demography, poverty, inclusion and income distribution.

Social observatories help Governments to monitor the impact of public policies and economic development, thereby ensuring they are not discriminating against specific groups. Additionally, they can monitor and check possible adverse outcomes and disparities of public policies, and help Governments to develop new policies and programmes that promote social equity.

Social observatories represent vital institutional instruments to inform policies, monitor trends, track the impact of programmes and anticipate potential areas of tension or change. Guided by a clear thematic framework, they are often launched by the Government, but can equally be established as independent, semi-governmental bodies. Their focus is as follows:

- Collect, analyse and disseminate data on poverty and other social issues;
- Conduct or commission surveys, research and other types of assessments;
- Build knowledge, capacity and evidence-based approaches to social policy;
- Disseminate information to the public, thereby encouraging citizen buy-in;
- Monitor the impact of relevant laws and regulations and provide feedback;
- Provide links to other related organizational efforts in the country and encourage networking and partnership. These linkages are an important hallmark of social observatories.

This information booklet draws on the experiences of a range of institutions in the design and set-up of social observatories. By reviewing different models of observatories, it aims to highlight the benefits of a social observatory and to promote its consideration in the ESCWA region as one practical tool of social policy.

"We want to push evidence onto public domain."

Priyanthi Fernando, Sri Lankan Observatory



SELECTED COMPARATIVE DATA ON SOCIAL OBSERVATORIES



France

NAME

National Observatory on Poverty and Social Exclusion
Observatoire National de la Pauvreté et de l'Exclusion Sociale, (ONPES)

HISTORY

Established by law in 1998 in response to demands by French NGOs and upon the recommendation of the Economic and Social Council and the Council for Statistical Information.

GOALS/ OBJECTIVES

- To collect, analyse and disseminate information and data on issues of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion
- To commission surveys, research and assessments
- To contribute to knowledge building and information systems in under-studied fields
- To prepare an annual report on activities to be made available to the public.

MEMBERSHIP

Twenty-two members composed of:

- Seven de jure members from all the relevant ministries and public research institutes
- Fourteen individual experts, including academics and researchers
- The President of the Observatory



FUNDING

Government

OPERATION

- ONPES does not conduct any studies itself but provides a forum to discuss and direct studies on poverty and social exclusion
- It undertakes knowledge collection and research
- It works with the National Council on Policies to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion to enable the Government to coordinate research and advise Government policy on social exclusion
- It has inter-session working groups to probe issues raised and steering committees to keep track of progress on studies and surveys

OUTPUTS AND IMPACT

- Annual public reports that assess poverty and social exclusion, and provide suggestions for areas for action and research. For example, the 2005-2006 report outlined steps to enhance indicators and the measurement of poverty and social exclusion



Sri Lanka

NAME

Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA)

HISTORY

Established in May 2001 by the Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit (PIMU) as an independent organization that would fill an institutional void in focused poverty research and analysis with special emphasis on poverty impact assessment.

GOALS/ OBJECTIVES

- To provide independent analysis on the causes, characteristics and impact of poverty
- To share knowledge and experience with development actors at the local and international level
- To contribute to policy dialogue and influence poverty-oriented policy at all levels of decision-making
- To influence mainstream development discourse and highlight cross-cutting issues
- To be a local and regional hub for learning and knowledge-sharing on poverty and development

MEMBERSHIP

Fifteen members:

- The 15 subscribing members hold the ownership of the organization and function as a permanent body composed of researchers, academics, practitioners and development experts
- An eight-member Board of Directors is elected every two years by the subscribing members. The Board is the organization's governing body representing the public sector, international development agencies and independent experts



FUNDING

Fee-based services, sponsorship and self-generating income

OPERATION

- CEPA offers four different types of professional services, namely: applied research, advisory services, training, and dialogue and exchange
- It works on commercial terms by offering fee-based research and advisory services on poverty issues
- It provides technical training on poverty assessment and monitoring for local specialists at the micro level
- Its Board of Directors meet quarterly to supervise, steer and review the performance of the Centre

OUTPUTS AND IMPACT

- Annual reports
- A poverty database as a central hub of information on poverty in Sri Lanka
- Publications and reports on poverty-related issues. Analysis used in the reports stems either from secondary data or from researched data

CEPA recently published a key report on tea plantation workers, who represent a very disadvantaged group in Sri Lanka. Findings and recommendations from this report were incorporated into the Government's National Action Plan for tea plantations.



Mozambique

NAME

Poverty Observatory (PO)⁸

HISTORY

Established by the Government in April 2003 with UNDP support, as a tool for both the Government and its international partners to follow up on the implementation of the PARPA (A Plan of Action for Reducing Absolute Poverty) as well as the monitoring, evaluation and consultation processes.

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate and monitor the implementation of the PARPA
- To enhance citizen participation and social accountability in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper process, as well as the poverty reduction and governance debates

MEMBERSHIP

Sixty members composed of:

- Twenty-four members from selected governmental bodies and ministries, including Health, Education, Agriculture, State Administration, Justice, the Central Bank, the National Institute of Statistics, and the DNPO (Ministry of Planning and Finance) with its special position in the Technical Secretariat of the Poverty Observatory
- Thirty-six members from civil society, academia, trade unions, private sector and international development partners

⁸ Southern African Regional Poverty Network. Mozambique's Poverty Observatory. www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000372/index.php



FUNDING

International donors

OPERATION

- The PO collects and conducts analysis of data, studies, meetings, seminars, and documentation and dissemination of best practices
- It provides guidance and technical advice to Government and Parliament
- It collaborates with governmental and non-governmental members in their support for PARPA
- It proposes new areas of research to relevant government bodies
- The PO is set up centrally at national level as well as at the provincial levels, which are designed to monitor and analyse data at a local level and organize regional level forums and plenary sessions

OUTPUTS AND IMPACT

- Annual poverty report.

Data gathering for the first poverty report took place at district, provincial and national level and more than 10,000 people were interviewed.



Europe regional example

NAME

European Observatory on Demography and the Social Situation

HISTORY

Established in 2005 as one of the observatories sponsored and supported by the European Union dedicated to monitoring social issues in Europe. Located in the Directorate on Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission.

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

- To compile information from four networks of experts working on demography, social inclusion, social capital and health
- To use information compiled to inform social policy debate and to provide analytical input to the reporting of the Commission

MEMBERSHIP

Comprising four multi-disciplinary networks of independent experts as follows:

- The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute
- The Social Inclusion and Income Distribution Network
- The Social Capital Research Network
- The European Observatory Network Health Status and Living Conditions Network



FUNDING

European Union

OPERATION

- The Observatory conducts monitoring and analysis through four networks of experts, coordinated by an already existing academic institution or think tank, rather than creating a separate Observatory institution
- Through the work of its networks, it assists the European Commission in its duty to report on the social situation in member countries by informing the social policy debate and providing analytical input to the reporting of the Commission
- Observatory experts and other invited experts meet once a year to discuss their findings

OUTPUTS AND IMPACT

- Annual monitoring reports in the four themes of demography, social inclusion, social capital and health
- Research notes and shorter policy briefs on specific issues of high policy relevance.

Issues to consider in the ESCWA region

A review of the experiences of socially-oriented observatories across the world reveals a number of relevant questions that need to be considered before the establishment of similar structures. The answers to some of these questions can clarify the aims, structure, functions and, ultimately, impact of a social observatory.

Governmental or independent?

Observatories can be established either as governmental bodies, independent organizations or a combination of both. While there is no clear model regarding the autonomy of the different observatories, it appears that some observatories are more flexible than others in setting their agenda, and in putting forward autonomous policy recommendations to Governments.

- In France and Germany, the observatories were established by law and are chaired and/or have members from the relevant ministry responsible for the observatory.
- In Sri Lanka, the observatory was established as an independent organization providing professional services on poverty issues. It is registered as a non-profit company.
- In Germany, the observatory has a small hierarchical structure that is accountable to a national ministry.
- In the European observatory, there is a much looser network of researchers who monitor social issues in Europe through four separate research bodies.



- What are the benefits or limitations of observatories established by Governments compared to those established independently?
- Should an observatory be linked to a specific ministry within the Government?
- Who should the observatory be accountable to or report to?
- What research centres or knowledge capacities are already available to cooperate in launching an observatory?
- To what extent will an observatory's independence enable or constrain its access to data and information?
- What institutional mechanisms could be put in place to establish and guard an observatory's mandate?

Funding

Most observatories reviewed received central Government financing or donor support.

- The observatories in France and Germany are funded exclusively by their respective Governments.
- In Mozambique, such international donors as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) appear to play a catalytic role in the establishment of the Poverty Observatory and in providing institutional support and funding.
- The observatory in Sri Lanka has a unique model whereby it has established a development fund and works on commercial terms by offering fee-based research and advisory services, as well as obtaining sponsorship for research programmes and events.



- How dependent should the observatory be on Government or donor financing?
- How does the source of financing impact sustainability and impartiality?
- Is it feasible for an observatory to be financially sustainable? What could ensure an observatory's financial sustainability?

Membership

Creating a forum for knowledge exchange is an objective identified by most observatories and it is partially achieved through the representation of different entities.

- In Mozambique, a principle aim of the Poverty Observatory is enhancing citizen participation and social accountability. Its advisory group comprises 40 per cent representatives of Government and 60 per cent representatives of civil society, trade unions and the private sector. The 20 members of civil society in the Opinion Council, known as the G20, act as an effective lobby aimed at promoting the interests of citizens and local groups.
- The observatory in Germany is a public institution. Its central advisory body is chaired by a representative of the Ministry and includes representatives of key organizations in the public sector and local municipalities.
- The French observatory is mostly composed of representatives of official institutions and individual experts.



- Should membership of the observatory be limited to Government representatives as in the case of Germany, or be a combination of Government, civil society, academics, donors and other actors?
- Who should direct an observatory and chair its governing body?
- What mechanisms and institutional processes are required to regulate the running, membership and direction of an observatory?
- What are the expertise and skills desirable for membership in an observatory?



Operation

All the observatories gather data and information relevant to a specific and/or defined area of interest. While research is a central area of work for most observatories, some observatories act more as a clearing house by commissioning studies that are then reviewed by the Board.

- Many observatories work closely with governmental agencies, statistics bureaux and research institutions to obtain data. In France, the observatory does not conduct any studies itself but provides a forum to discuss, prioritize and direct studies to be commissioned.
- Some observatories gather data and information through surveys and research commissioned for specific projects. In the case of the African Social Observatory, research is aimed at advocating change in the labour practices of multinational corporations. In Sri Lanka, the observatory has developed its capacity to undertake research and advisory services for specific projects on poverty.
- Some observatories work to advocate policy positions to a wider public and to raise awareness. In Sri Lanka, two of the observatory's five goals include sharing knowledge with development actors and becoming a local and regional hub for learning and knowledge-sharing.
- Some observatories work on capacity-building, networking and partnership building, as in the case of the regional observatory in Africa.
- All observatories issue reports and recommendations aimed at influencing and orienting Government policy.



- How restricted or broad should the mandate of the observatory be?
- To what extent should an observatory's capacity to conduct its own studies be developed? What are the benefits or drawbacks of commissioning or only directing studies?
- Should the observatory be a network of different experts and practitioners working on specific projects?
- Should data-gathering and analysis be the main role of an observatory?
- What role could an observatory play in networking, partnership, awareness-raising and capacity-building?
- Should the observatory work at a national, sub-national or regional level?
- What are the possibilities and challenges of monitoring policies and their impact?

Thematic focus

The thematic and substantive focus of each of the observatories differs depending on the identified national and regional priorities and the specific mandate.

- In Mozambique, the observatory is concerned with overall trends in poverty reduction, achievement of MDGs and human development.
- In France, the National Observatory works on issues of poverty, precarious living and social exclusion
- In the African observatory, the focus is on labour issues and corporate accountability.
- The European regional observatory examines such issues as social housing, health systems, democracy, demography and social inclusion within the context of European integration.



- Should the observatory look at issues of social policy as a whole by examining the social content of all economic and public policies?
- Should an observatory define and limit itself to priority issues in a country or a region?
- To what extent could an observatory chart new areas of research interest and flag new areas of concern for policymakers?



Outputs and impact

Most observatories issue an annual report that provides a general analysis of the areas on which the observatory worked during the year.

The Poverty Observatory is "a promising instrument for providing an independent assessment of the efforts by governments and donors to reduce poverty, inequalities and regional disparities".

It is an "instrument of accountability which ensures that the views of civil society [...] and the private sector are incorporated into government decision-making on poverty reduction."

UNDP programme evaluation report

- In Mozambique, the annual Poverty Report has become a flagship publication pivotal for civil society action.
- In France, the observatory prepares an annual public report that is submitted to Government and Parliament. The report assesses poverty and social exclusion in the country and provides recommendations for action and research.

In addition to annual reports, observatories issue different types of publications.

- The observatory in Sri Lanka issues studies, volumes, papers and articles, and is currently working to create a database on poverty indicators in Sri Lanka available through its website. The success of the Sri Lankan observatory may be assessed through its ability to build an institutionally and financially viable organization, with a growing national and regional reputation for quality analysis and advisory services.
- The observatory in Germany issues reports, working papers, monographs and a semi-annual newsletter.



- What products and outputs are envisioned to be most useful and effective?
- Should the reports be annual or more frequent?
- Who should be responsible for the production of the reports? Should it be undertaken in-house by observatory staff or outsourced to independent consultants?
- What role in influencing and informing policymaking could such products have? Are such outputs to be used as advocacy tools, data sources or reference materials?
- What mechanisms will organize the presentations of such products to concerned policymakers?
- Will all the outputs and reports be made public?
- Who is the main target audience for such outputs?
- What kind of forum or space for debate can and should the observatory provide?

Suggested Starting Points for Setting up an Observatory:

- **Form a national steering group** that will set the process and modalities for designing an observatory
- **Conduct consultations** (meetings, seminars, workshops) among policy makers, local authorities, professional associations, representatives of non-governmental and civil society organizations in order to:
 - Bring policymakers, practising professionals and civil society together;
 - Establish national priority needs and identify issues of national policy to agree on a focus area for the observatory;
 - Consider among other issues the questions presented in this kit.
- **Assess capacity** of existing national entities or other existing institutions, including university departments, NGOs or units in the Ministry of Planning that can be transformed into an observatory or can take on the responsibility of creating and running one.



More information on social observatories is available at:

Regional

• Europe

European Social Housing Observatory

<http://www.cecodhas.org/content/view/73/114/>

European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies

<http://www.euro.who.int/observatory>

European Employment Observatory (EEO)

<http://www.eu-employment-observatory.net/>

AER Observatory on Migrant Women (AEROMW)

<http://www.aer.eu/main-issues/equal-opportunities/observatory-on-migrant-women-omw.html>

• Africa

Social Observatory Project

<http://www.alrn.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=253>

• Latin America

The Observatório Social da América Latina (OSAL)

<http://osal.clacso.org/espanol/html/primer.html>

<http://www.clacso.org.ar/difusion/secciones/osal/>

National

• Germany

Germany's Observatory for the Development of Social Services in Europe

http://www.soziale-dienste-in-europa.de/Frameset/lxMainFrameset1b96_engl.html

• Argentina

Observatório Social

<http://www.observatoriosocial.com.ar/>

• Benin

Social Change Observatory

<http://www.undp.org/povertyreport/countryprofiles/benin1.html>

• Scotland

Scottish Public Health Observatory (ScotPHO)

<http://www.scotpho.org.uk/>