

Right to Social Security in Development

**International Symposium
19-20 October 2009, Berlin**

Background

The development of social security systems in the South has been largely ignored in the South and in international development practice. For example, the Millennium Development Goals do not include any reference to social security or protection. It is thus not surprising that the ILO reports that most of the world lack any form of access to social security. This lacuna was heightened by a series of global economic crises in 2008. Beginning with the massive rise in food prices, the year ended with a meltdown in financial markets and contraction of the real economic activity in most but not all countries. All three crises have impacted the right to social security. The cost of basic goods has risen, social security funds obtain lower returns on investments while rising unemployment places greater demands on social security programmes at a time when government revenues can be declining.

For people living in poverty, the recognition of the right to social security is arguably profound and existential and has received increased attention in the last decade. In 2001 the International Labour Conference affirmed social security as a basic human right, highlighting the connection between social protection, economic growth and poverty eradication.¹

At the beginning of 2008, the UN Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights released General Comment No. 19 on the Right to Social Security.² The right was interpreted in some detail by the Committee to mean that Governments have binding obligations to establish social security systems that provide a minimum level of the right and progressively achieve an adequate level within maximum available resources. In 2008, the UN Human Rights Council also appointed a new Independent Expert on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty who has placed a focus on cash transfers.

Simultaneously there has been a strong upsurge of interest in social security, or 'social protection', in the development community. The ILO has commenced a global campaign for social security and, along with others, has undertaken economic studies showing that basic social security packages are affordable in low-income countries. Many developing countries, particularly in Latin America, but also elsewhere, have begun to develop various social security or cash transfer programmes which have had a demonstrated impact on poverty. In 2009, the G8 agreed to allocate 50 billion of a 1 trillion economic crisis package to low-

¹ Social security: A new consensus, Resolution and Conclusions concerning social security, International Labour Conference, 89th Session, 2001.

² Thirty-ninth session, 5-23 November 2007, UN doc. E/C.12/GC/19, 4 February 2008. The right to social security is found in article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

income countries, with some of the funds to be allocated to social protection. And the IMF recently accepted that social security is one key way of stimulating economies in economic downturns.

Challenges

While it is clear that social protection is climbing up the priorities of the development ladder, there are many outstanding questions. Are the emerging national and international campaigns and budgetary allocations really sufficient to make a significant impact? Do we need different types of international financing mechanisms to support long-term development of schemes? Can a human rights approach contribute to fostering conditions for development of schemes, including new forms of national and international accountability? And is an emerging preference for conditionalities and tightly targeted schemes consistent with human rights?

Symposium

This symposium aims to bring together leading actors working on social security to discuss ways in which the right to social security can be effectively promoted at the national and international level as a human right. The stakeholders would include national government officials, development and UN agencies, trade unions, NGOs, employers and academics. Participants would be approximately 50 persons.

The workshop will generally aim to examine how the right to social security can both support and challenge existing initiatives in low and middle income countries. It will ask three specific questions:

1. What will facilitate the national conditions for implementing social security packages that conform with the right to social security?
2. How can we improve international accountability for social protection? What would be the value-added of a new MDG target or new international legal standard on social security?
3. What is the human rights response to the design of programmes, especially conditionalities and narrow targeting?

The symposium is held in Berlin from the afternoon of Monday 19 October 2009 to the afternoon of Tuesday 20 October. It will be hosted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights in association with the UN Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The first afternoon involves introductory presentations while the second day involves parallel sessions to concentrate on the three principal questions. On the evening of the first day of the workshop, a public debate with media present would be held.

Conference language is English. Simultaneous translation German/English will be offered for the public debate on Monday, 19 October 2009, 18.30-20.30 hrs.