

Information note:

How social protection can help achieve the MDGs

Basic social protection schemes can help people access health and education services, access housing, water and sanitation and find decent work – in other words: escape poverty.

Yet close to 80% of the world's population still does not enjoy adequate social protection. Particularly in developing countries, poor people have no health or unemployment coverage or no old age pension, they cannot afford to participate in social insurance schemes and they occupy jobs where labour standards and regulations offer weak protection. The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in particular MDG1 (reduce extreme poverty), would be greatly enhanced if governments strengthened their policies to reduce the vulnerability of people living in poverty through social protection interventions.

Ensuring a basic level of social protection is an obligation of States. This includes the universal provision of essential services – for example health care – and public resource transfer schemes – for example food stamps and rations, or unemployment benefits or universal old age pensions. Social protection is a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (articles 22-25). It also appears in numerous international and regional human rights instruments and in international labour standards. Using human rights as a framework to design, implement and monitor social protection policies and programmes helps focus on the poorest and most marginalized persons. This paves the way for the achievement of all the MDGs in a sustainable and equitable way.

Reduce vulnerability, move away from average improvements

Focusing policies on the poorest and most marginalized and reducing inequalities are two human rights requirements that have so far been omitted in the MDG approach which focuses on average improvement. As a result, many countries report economic improvements that hide wider inequalities and greater social protection gaps between rich and poor. The MDGs omit certain groups of people facing specific vulnerabilities, for example older persons, in particular older women, or persons living with disabilities. For these groups, general measures to reduce poverty through employment and economic activity cannot work without additional support.

Setting up social protection mechanisms for the poorest and most marginalized grants them the basic security they need in order to participate in economic growth. And there is strong evidence that social protection contributes to economic growth by raising labour productivity and enhancing social stability. In times of crisis, it is a crucial automatic stabilizer of the economy that can prevent the rise of poverty rates.

Legal frameworks ensure sustainability and coherence

Focusing on the time-bound targets of the MDGs has led some governments to implement their MDG-related policies without grounding them in the State's laws. For example, some

social protection programmes stem from political campaign promises and are set up through decrees; others are pilot programmes which overlap long-standing ones.

Human rights-based social protection requires States to adopt integral responses to poverty by grounding their programmes in national strategies and solid legal frameworks. This reinforces the stability of social protection interventions, reducing the possibility that retrogressive measures are taken once political power changes. Legal protection also reinforces accountability since people can more easily claim their rights before judicial or quasi judicial bodies.

Transparency and accountability allow everyone to claim the MDGs

The lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms can weaken the effective implementation of MDG-based strategies and programmes. Conversely, these are core features of a human rights-based approach to policy making processes. Human rights-based social protection also requires that mechanisms be in place to enable everyone to know what social benefits they are entitled to and how these are allocated. This also enables people to lodge complaints and seek redress.

Some countries have found innovative solutions to facilitate access to information and redress, for example by setting up toll-free information phone lines or confidential complaints mechanisms. These simple measures can contribute to reducing corruption and abuse of power by local elites that have a role in granting social benefits. They also promote a more active engagement of the people for whom these benefits are intended.

Universal social protection: a universal human right

In 2009, the United Nations launched the Global Initiative for a Universal Social Protection Floor which aims to help governments achieve an adequate standard of living for everyone. The Social Protection Floor includes a basic set of essential social transfers, in cash and in kind, that are required to provide a minimum income and livelihood security for all people. This includes the supply of essential goods and social services such as health, water and sanitation, education, food, housing, and other social services that are accessible for all. Some States, such as Chile, Mexico and Uruguay, have started to put in place a Social Protection Floor because they recognize the necessity of guaranteeing the human right to an adequate standard of living for all. Initiatives such as the Social Protection Floor can contribute greatly to the achievement of the MDGs by helping States set up coherent frameworks for basic social protection schemes that reach the most vulnerable, and which can in time be progressively strengthened with additional policies and programmes.

In 2009, the G-20 made an explicit commitment to fund social protection for the poorest countries as part of their global plan for recovery. It is time to set social protection firmly on the MDG agenda.

Further information:

On a rights-based approach to social protection: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/poverty/expert/index.htm>

On the Social Protection Floor <http://www.socialsecurityextension.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.do?tid=1321>

On MDGs and Human Rights: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/millennium-development/index.htm>

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