Regional Conversation on Social Protection: “A Right for All, or a Privilege for a Few?” and Launch of the Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific (Hybrid Meeting), Thursday 15 October, 2020

Summary Report

Introduction

For more than half a century, social protection has been firmly anchored as a human right that States are obligated to guarantee. Yet the Asia-Pacific region lags in terms of investment in social protection, which is among the lowest in the world. As a result, gaps in coverage are alarmingly high. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role well-designed, coordinated and implemented social protection systems play in building resilience and mitigating risks faced by all individuals throughout life.

The Regional Conversation on Social Protection: “A Right for All, or a Privilege for a Few?”, fifth in a series of Regional Conversations on Building Back Better, took place on 15 October 2020, to discuss the need for broadening social protection. The Regional Conversation was held jointly by ESCAP and ILO.

The event started with the launch of the first-ever regional flagship report on social protection: *The Future We Want: Social Outlook 2020 for Asia and the Pacific*. The publication was produced jointly by ESCAP and the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under Secretary General of the UN and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, in her opening address provided an overview of the publication’s findings. Mr. Guy Ryder, the Director General from the International Labour Organization in his opening remarks reminded the audience that social protection is a human right and that, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, it has the power to prevent a health emergency from becoming a humanitarian crisis.

After the launch of the report, the event featured a high-level dialogue on the theme “Social Protection: A Right for All, or A Privilege for a Few?” which featured eminent policymakers and experts from across the region:

- H.E. Ms. Mereseini Vuniwaqa, Minister of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji;
- H.E. Ms. Sania Nishtar, Special Assistant on Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety to the Prime Minister, Pakistan;
- H.E. Mr. Kung Phoak, Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community;
- Ms. Haiyani Rumondang, Director General of Industrial Relations and Worker’s Social Security, Ministry of Manpower, Indonesia;
- Ms. Sarah Cook, Director, Institute for Global Development, University of New South Wales; and
- Mr. Michael Cichon, Professor Emeritus, Graduate School of Governance at UNU, Maastricht.
Key take-away

- **Social protection systems in the Asia-Pacific region are riddled with gaps.** More than half of the region’s population are left without any coverage. Only a handful of countries have comprehensive social protection systems with relatively broad coverage. Most poverty-targeted schemes fail to reach the poorest families.

- **Social protection is affordable.** At a cost of 2 to 6 per cent of GDP, most countries can afford a social protection system that covers all children, older people and persons with disabilities.

- **Low coverage of social protection is primarily the result of low political commitment.** Policymakers in many countries in the region are not aware of the role of social protection as a foundation for sustained socioeconomic development. A second reason is the high level of labour market informality, with 70 percent of workers in the region being in informal employment. A third reason is the low levels of tax revenues, which limits the capacity of governments to devote adequate resources to social protection.

- There is a need for **stronger regional and national cooperation on social protection.** The ASEAN region is leading by example, through a blueprint that is advancing closer collaboration on social protection. The United Nations, academia, social partners and civil society need to work more closely with policymakers to build the evidence base, identify good practices and advocate for the positive impact social protection have on families, economies and societies. The benefits would far exceed the investments.

- **Social protection will help countries be better prepared to respond to many of the ongoing and emerging challenges.** As this pandemic has revealed, well-resourced social protection systems built over time are far better equipped to respond to the unexpected and shield the most vulnerable.
Recommendations

(1) **Stop seeing social protection as a cost, but rather as an investment that can support economic growth.** While social protection is not free, adequate fiscal space can be found in almost all countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Increasing the tax to GDP ratio would be also be a great start for increasing public revenues. Given the high levels of tax avoidance, collecting what is due could finance a basic universal social protection system.

(2) **Build universal social protection systems.** Universality is key to effectively reaching those who need support, when they need it. Rather than thinking of universality as ‘universal basic income’, it may be more pragmatic and affordable to deconstruct that concept into its basic components: universal child benefits, universal old age pension, universal disability benefits, unemployment- and maternity benefits.

(3) **Expand social protection to informal workers.** The highest hurdle towards universality is the size of the informal sector. To overcome that, establish social protection schemes that are inclusive of the self-employed, the family contributing workers and others who are not covered by schemes. A mix of contributory and non-contributory schemes will still be required to ensure no one falls through the cracks.

(4) **Fast- Provide adequate social protection to women throughout their lives.** In most countries in the region, women are underrepresented in the labour force. The current pandemic and extensive lockdowns are aggravating these trends. Social protection can be designed in ways that does not penalize care work and that encourages women to return to the workforce after childbirth.

(5) **Improve efficiency and effectiveness by using emerging technologies.** Examples from across the region highlight that technological advances can be put to the service of social protection systems, by improving civil registration systems and social registries. Automations in the disbursement of benefits, e.g. through bank accounts, also allow easy scale up of programmes in times of need.

(6) **Leave no one behind.** Even in countries with well-developed schemes, the most vulnerable may not be covered. Governments can better design social protection systems, build stronger institutions and administrations through closer collaboration and coordination. The tools are available to cover everyone who is eligible for a scheme, by overcoming issues related to accessibility due to geography, poor infrastructure, and overly bureaucratic requirements.