



Economic Commission
for Africa

Consultative Meeting on Accelerating Progress in Africa towards the targets of the MDGs: What scope for social protection

(ECA support to strengthen poverty Reduction strategies)

Task Brief

Introduction

The chorus of voices for the introduction of social protection policies to aid growth in advancing improvements in the human condition, including achieving the MDGs in Africa, has risen not only among academics and anti-poverty advocates but also in governments circles and at the regional level. There is growing broad based acceptance of the view that social protection measures such as conditional cash transfers, minimum wage legislation, and subsidies and grants can help Africa accelerate progress towards the MDGs. It was on this premise that the African Union at its first Session of Ministers in charge of Social Development, in October 2008 in Windhoek, Namibia, proposed a Social Policy framework for Africa.

Social protection policy constitutes an important and vital element of the broader social policy. Long a vital policy tool in developed and some middle-income countries, African countries are increasingly recognizing the use of social protection instruments, including social transfers in efforts to reduce poverty reduction and achieve the MDGs. Social protection is in essence a set of public actions – carried out by the state or privately – that: a) enable people to deal more effectively with risk and their vulnerability to crises and changes in circumstances (such as unemployment or old age); and b) help tackle extreme and chronic poverty (EPRI 2006). It could also be seen as a set of measures designed to assist individuals, households and communities to better manage the income risks that leave people vulnerable (World Bank 2004).

Social protection can contribute to achieving improved social outcomes, including the MDGs, through a number of transmission instruments. Foremost, social protection is an effective instrument for reducing poverty and hunger through food assistance, income support for disabled and/or the elderly. In addition, social protection is a powerful tool in investing in poor people, for example school feeding to provide educational assets to poor children and contributing to breaking the intergenerational transfer of poverty. Social protection is critical in ensuring equitable growth promoting safety nets and hence encouraging households to take on higher risk. Finally, social protection is an essential aspect of an effective state by tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion and thus strengthening social cohesion. This reduces the likelihood of political instability and ultimately contributes to higher economic growth.

Social protection rests on three pillars- social insurance (individuals pooling their resources to manage shocks to their livelihood). In Africa, social insurance schemes are often for formal sector workers to compensate for income loss of life cycle changes (contributory pensions, however some forms of national health insurance schemes for all are being introduced. Weather and crop insurances are also gaining interest.

In addition, social assistance comprises of a set of instruments through which the state or private providers in some instances transfer non-contributory benefits. Examples include social pensions, disability allowances and food subsidies. An important aspect of these transfers is

whether they are conditional or non-conditional cash transfers. Conditional cash transfers have become popular in Latin America but have had limited application in Africa (DFID 2006). Conditional cash transfers are restricted by the provision of some other social service, for example in the “Oportunidades Programme” in Mexico child income support is given if school attendance reaches a certain threshold.

Finally, the third pillar is the social protection of vulnerable individuals and households through the establishment of minimum standards and regulations reflecting national, regional and international norms. A good example in this regard is wage legislation which ensures a decent wage, above internationally set poverty levels.

However, not much is known or understood about the scope for social protection in many African countries. Although a number of African countries have effective social protection policies, not much is also known about their experiences and what lessons they present to other African countries. Yet this is critical for efforts to use social protection instruments to accelerate progress towards the MDGs and overall improvements in the human condition of poor people. With this as backdrop, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) with the financial support of its partners is conducting a seven-country study on social protection in Africa.

Objective

The objective of these studies is to, through new evidence and analysis; strengthen capacity in member states and regional economic communities to formulate policies and programmes for poverty reduction that integrate social dimensions in the development process. Emphasis will be on how these integrative efforts can help accelerate progress towards the targets of the MDGs.

As a preparatory step, ECA is convening a Consultative Meeting to help define a research agenda on social protection in Africa and propose means of integrating social protection into the broader African development agenda through capacity building in its key elements. Participants at the Consultative meeting will come from selected African countries and other stakeholders in African Development. ECA’s strategic partners will also participate. The outcome of the meeting will be a report demarcating pressing areas of policy and research interest and agreeing modalities for working on them. The central role of the African Learning Group on Poverty Reduction Strategies and the Millennium Development Goals (PRS/MDGs-LG) in promoting knowledge sharing and capacity building in this area will also be discussed.

Format of the Consultative Meeting

The Consultative Meeting will take the form of a plenary session and will bring together a select number of participants from member states, the African Union Commission, the Regional

Economic Communities (RECs), African Development Bank, the World Bank, academia, and NGOs such as Help Age, research institutions, development partners, to explore the scope for social protection both as an end and as a means to achieving the MDGs in Africa.

Discussions will be based on the task brief and an annotated agenda. The idea is to allow sufficient time for detailed, open and in-depth discussion of the issues.

Date and venue

The Consultative meeting is scheduled to take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on the 25-26th March, 2009. Participants will receive a tentative programme of work and background documents two weeks before the meeting.

Venue: United Nations Conference Centre, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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