EXPERT MECHANISM ON THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Thematic Study Policy Brief
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Inequality, Social Protection, and the Right to Development

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Overview

This policy brief presents the main findings and recommendations of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development (EMRTD) in its thematic study on inequality and social protection (A/HRC/54/83). The study situates inequality within the framework of the 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (DRTD) and the Secretary-General's report Our Common Agenda, which calls for a new social contract.

It highlights the structural and systemic drivers of global economic and social inequality, showing how these disparities undermine the right to development, threaten human rights, and obstruct progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goal 10 on reducing inequalities. The study also underscores the role of international cooperation and universal social protection systems as critical solutions to advancing equality and shared development.

Introduction

Inequality deepened by about 1.2 percent globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reversing decades of progress in poverty reduction. The pandemic pushed over 120 million people into extreme poverty, widened wealth gaps, and disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, including women, informal workers, migrants, and rural communities. Beyond limiting access to basic resources, inequality undermines democracy, erodes social cohesion, and obstructs the realization of the right to development. It also threatens the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 10 and its promise to "leave no one behind."

The Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development underscores that universal social protection systems are not only an essential tool for reducing disparities but also a fundamental human right grounded in equality of opportunity. Strengthening these systems through inclusive policies, global partnerships, and international solidarity is therefore critical to addressing deepening inequalities within and among States.

Key Insights

- **Deepening Global Inequalities:** Inequality within and among States has intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and global economic volatility. More than 120 million people were pushed into extreme poverty during the pandemic, while wealth concentration among the richest accelerated. Exacerbating market-based models of social protection has often resulted in inequitable access, higher costs, and deepened gender inequalities.

- **Interlinked Discrimination and Inequality**: Discrimination along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, age, and disability drives both horizontal and vertical inequalities in income and wealth, creating persistent cycles of exclusion and vulnerability. Vulnerable groups face compounded disadvantages in education, employment, and political participation, with limited access to social protection.

- **Weak and Unequal Social Protection Systems**: Despite proven benefits, 55% of the global population, around 4 billion people, remained without social protection as of 2019. Existing schemes are often poorly designed, underfunded, or exclude informal workers, migrants, and women, and are inaccessible to many.

- **Health Inequities:** Access to quality health care and other amenities remains unequal across gender, class, and geography. Comprehensive, rights-based health policies, including sexual and reproductive health education, are essential for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 & 5.

- **Territorial and Intergenerational Divides:** Rural-urban division and intergenerational inequalities exacerbate poverty. Young people face unstable employment and poverty traps, while older populations often lack adequate care and income security. Migrants and informal workers are particularly marginalized in existing frameworks.

- **Insufficient International Solidarity:** While inequality is a global issue, responses remain largely national, leaving low- and middle- income countries unable to sustain universal systems. Limited international cooperation and restrictive financing frameworks hinder collective progress towards reducing inequality.

Policy Suggestions

Universal Social Protection Systems

- Establish nationally defined social protection floors that guarantee income security, access to health care, and pensions for all.
- Shift from fragmented, targeted programs to universal rights-based systems, reducing exclusion and stigma (UN, 2023).

International Cooperation and Financing

- Support the creation of a Global Social Protection Fund to provide sustainable financing for low- and middle-income countries.
- Strengthen global tax cooperation and debt renegotiation frameworks to enhance domestic fiscal space for social investment.

Structural Reforms for Equality

- Enact policies that dismantle systemic discrimination across gender, race, age, disability, and migration status.
- Implement wealth redistribution mechanisms, progressive taxation, fair wage policies, and equitable access to resources to tackle entrenched disparities.

Decent Work and Inclusive Growth

- Align social protection with the Decent Work Agenda by creating productive employment opportunities, ensuring fair wages, and guaranteeing rights at work.
- Invest in education, job training, and digital inclusion to address intergenerational inequalities.

Strengthened Coordination and Accountability

- Develop multi-stakeholder governance frameworks involving governments, civil society, and marginalized groups in the design and monitoring of inequality-reduction policies.
- Establish universal benchmarks and indicators for evaluating progress on poverty and inequality reduction.

Policy Recommendation

1. For States

- Integrate rights-based universal social protection in national legislation.
- Ensure inclusion of migrants, women, informal workers, and marginalized groups in all schemes.
- Adopt multidimensional approaches combining social protection, job creation, and fiscal reforms.
- Improve monitoring, evaluation, and citizen participation in programme design and delivery.

2. For International Organizations

- Establish a Global Fund for Social Protection to close financing gaps.
- Reform the lending practices of international financial institutions to avoid austerity that weakens social protection.
- Encourage global tax cooperation to strengthen domestic financing capacities.

3. For Civil Society and Private Sector

- Engage in co-design and monitoring of social protection schemes.
- Businesses should adopt rights-based approaches, reducing inequality through inclusive hiring, fair wages, and sustainability practices.

Conclusion

Inequality is a preventable consequence of globalization or economic growth, considered a political choice that reflects the priorities of States and international systems. If inequality is left unaddressed, it leads to rising disparities in wealth and opportunity, and access to essential services will continue to erode human rights, undermine democratic governance, and slow progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The EMRTD study focuses on the establishment of universal social protection systems as a fundamental human right and a basis for reducing inequality within and among States.

To ensure participation at all levels, actions are required from the State, international organizations, and the civil society or private sector. The inequality and social protection presents a framework that ensures national commitments, international solidarity, and transformative governance, confirming that no one is left behind.

Further Reading

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