

## HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 55th SESSION

### Panel discussion on challenges and good practices to realize the right to social security and to provide quality public services

08 March 2024

**Ms Peggy Hicks, Director of the Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, OHCHR**, opened the panel discussion considering the social security systems, firmly rooted in human rights norms, and quality public services play a crucial role in realizing economic, social, and cultural rights and achieving the SDGs. Despite progress made by the States in enhancing social security systems and public services, **the right to social security** remains far beyond reach for many people. More than half of the world population remains uncovered by any social security schemes.

She mentioned the **large disparities between men and women, and countries**. She affirmed that **digital social security systems** hold a promise to overcome some of these challenges. Despite the proven benefits, many countries are struggling to secure the necessary resources to fund robust social security and public services.

**Ms Preeti Saran, Vice-Chair of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** affirmed that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognize the **right of “everyone” to social security**. This right empowers everyone in society to exercise other human rights and to live with dignity. Social security plays a crucial role in reducing poverty, preventing social exclusion, and promoting social inclusion. Regrettably, the Committee on ECOSOC Rights underscores that this right is not universally accessible, especially for those who need it most.

She focused on informal workers — those engaged in the informal economy sector or working in non-standard forms of employment. They are often excluded from or unable to access social security schemes. In this regard, she shared **recommendations and best practices** for States and relevant stakeholders. States must take all necessary measures to transition from an informal to a formal economy. Simultaneously, they should take steps, to the maximum of their available resources, to ensure that the social protection system provides informal economy workers with access to mechanisms designed not only for benefits and services, but also to facilitate their transition to formal employment. Robust and efficient public policies and availability of non-discriminatory, adequately resourced, and fully functioning quality public services are also indispensable.

She concluded highlighted the importance of the informalization of work. The increasing complexity of non-standard forms of employment such as short-term and zero-hour contracts, temporary agency work, multiple employer relationships, home-based work (and the emerging challenges encountered by digital platform workers) introduce additional complexities. These complexities intersect with the need for just and favourable conditions of work and robust social security systems.

Courts have contested the self-employment status of platform workers, reclassifying them as fully-fledged employees. This reclassification entitles them to the corresponding right to social security. However, a substantial legislative and regulatory gap persists. States must closely monitor these contracts and working arrangements to fulfil their obligations related to the rights to just and favourable conditions of work and social security.

**Ms Shahra Razavi, Director of the Universal Social Protection Department, International Labour Organization** reported the ILO’s international labour standards, including standards in the crucial field of social security or social protection. They are developed through a unique global tripartite consensus between governments, workers, and employers. She further addressed the Council about the three main challenges that countries face, while developing universal social protection system: **the lack of**

**strategic vision** at the policy making level that recognizes the interdependence of economic, employment and social policies; **the employment landscape; and the financial aspect**. Considering these issues, she shared good practices from Lebanon, Togo Viet Nam, Nepal, Paraguay, Ecuador and Cambodia, as well as solutions.

She concluded that while recognizing the important obstacles in extending social protection systems, expanding coverage is essential given the wide disparities in coverage. This will address immediate needs and inequities. Building rights based social protection systems is the bedrock of social justice, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of circumstance.

**Ms Lim Lin Lean, Economist and Senior Visiting Fellow of the Khazanah Research Institute**, focused her analysis on **domestic resource mobilization and public spending options** for addressing the financing and coverage gaps, emphasizing that increased international support is critical, especially for low-income countries. At national level, non-contributory social assistance programmes financed from general taxation are key to closing coverage gaps. She affirmed that as important as improving tax collection, is improving public spending. **Social insurance** reforms are also critical to cover different categories of workers, formal, informal, and non-standard workers, so that they are able to both contribute and benefit. A major policy decision is whether to make the social insurance contributions mandatory or voluntary. Voluntary schemes tend to be less successful at providing adequate coverage. However, to work well, mandatory schemes may need to include a solidarity financing component. Governments can implement solidarity with low-income persons by partially or entirely subsidizing the social insurances premiums or contributions.

She concluded by stating that the impact of social security systems is greater when **public services** are embedded in the systems so that the most disadvantaged and marginalized persons have access to the facilities and support, they need to live a decent, dignified life. Public services include public housing and transportation, quality education, safe water and care and support services, and decent employment for both women and men.

According to **Ms Magdalena Sepúlveda, Executive Director of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, nowadays, the right to social security is enshrined in constitutions and laws worldwide, and numerous domestic and regional judicial decisions uphold this right in national contexts. However, despite progress, most of the population is not protected or only partially covered. She affirmed that to ensure that social protection responses do not fail women, social protection systems must be **gender-responsive**, meaning the need to consider gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities. Social protection policies, working with employment and fiscal policies, hold significant promise to enhance gender equality. Moreover, she added that social protection systems must also be aligned with public services. In many countries, social protection focuses on enhancing people's income security by providing financial transfers, including pensions and child/family benefits, with little regard to the availability, accessibility, and quality of public services such as care services. States should invest in care services and reorganise care responsibilities so that it is shared by the State, the market, and the families.

Ms Sepúlveda concluded that investing in **gender-responsive social protection systems and public services** requires resources. For most States, this is an unattainable challenge. The UN is the appropriate forum to make international tax cooperation fully inclusive and fair.

### Interactive dialogue

26 country delegations took the floor during the interactive dialogue. **The majority of the countries** agreed that those who are from marginalized and vulnerable groups of people such as persons with disabilities, older people, children, migrant workers among others, are entitled to have equitable



access to social protection that is a basic human right. However, they are excluded from the social protection. **All countries** shared national good practices and social service programmes. Social protection has the potential to reduce poverty and inequality by promoting basic income security, decent work, equal pay for work of equal value, universal access to healthcare as well as access to education. For this, social protection shall comply with the principles of non-discrimination, equality, transparency, participation, and accountability; added the **EU**. **Qatar** affirmed that countries should avoid any conditions that lead to deprivation which erode enjoyment of human rights. The need to integrate a right to social security in the policies of international organizations, particularly structural adaptation policies to provide the necessary response to counter the increasing gap between the north and the south as well as hiking inflation and debts and to counter new crises.

**The Gulf Cooperation Council** affirmed that social security systems are a precondition for citizens to enjoy all their rights. It adopted a broad social security system for our countries so that all citizens can benefit from ongoing quality cover.

**UNDP's** strategic plan recognized the role of social protection in achieving structural transformation, inclusive growth, and resilience against economic, social, and environmental shocks. **FAO** said that despite important progress has been made in realizing people's right to social protection over the last two decades, there are still massive gaps in coverage. Increasing rates of hunger and poverty in the world call for rapidly expanding the coverage of social protection including among rural populations. 80% of the poorest rural households in low-income countries have no access to social protection.

**UN Women** shared that in 2023, one in ten women lived in households in extreme poverty, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and central and southern Asia. By 2050, women globally will still be spending almost 2.5 more hours per day on unpaid care work than men. Inclusive gender responsive social protection systems can play an important role in putting the SDGs back on track.

**NGOs** reported data and figures to disclose a universe of injustice and disparities and to show that social security measures are vital for people and communities threatened by the adverse effects of the looming global crisis. They also reveal that current development models and global governance are failing. Such challenges require a transformative approach driven by human rights and social justice principles to reforming global governance and addressing systemic issues such as fiscal policies, illicit financial flows, trade, debt, economic and financial architecture, and business accountability.

Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (26 country delegations):

*Timor-Leste, Chile, Dominican Republic, Luxembourg, Qatar, Switzerland, Morocco, Bangladesh, India, Belgium, Eritrea, Costa Rica, Brazil, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, OIC, Portugal, Armenia, Cuba, Albania, Lao People's Democratic Republic (on behalf of ASEAN), EU, Qatar (on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council), Democratic Republic of Congo (on behalf of a group of countries), Bahamas (on behalf of Member States of the Caribbean community), France.*

NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (10):

Sikh Human Rights Group, Akahatá - Equipo de Trabajo en Sexualidad y Géneros Asociación Civil, Associazione Comunita' Papa Giovanni XXIII, Centre Europe - tiers monde, Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Make Mothers Matter, Centre du Commerce International pour le Développement, Beijing Guangming Charity Foundation.

International organization (5): UN Women, National Human Rights Committee, Conseil national des droits de l'homme (Morocco), UNDP, FAO.

To watch the full meeting refer to [UN Web TV](#).