

SOCIAL SERVICES, EMPOWERMENT AND PROTECTION OF PEOPLE

42. Social protection is in urgent need. The economic downturn is already having several implications in the provision of social services and social protection programmes, particularly in developing countries. Fiscal tightness arising from the need for economic stimulus packages to counterbalance the negative effects of financial constraints are already affecting the possibility of weak public structures to face the growing needs for safety nets, and ways of protecting the population from the effects of the major meltdown.

43. During the present crisis, it is more necessary than ever to ensure access to basic social services in the areas of food, education, health, water and sanitation, housing and minimum welfare for the most needy. Enhanced results can be achieved by combining essential components of social services focusing on targeted groups like the rural poor, migrants, workers in the informal economy, the working poor, children, women, migrants and youth. Innovative fiscal policies and financing mechanisms for such services will be required, including micro-finance which in times of crisis has proved more resilient than commercial banking. Efficient delivery is of the essence, calling for new integrated policy approaches.

44. Direct income support can help reduce poverty, and conditional cash benefits, if properly administered, can enhance human capital and education. Empowering people through education, vocational training and skills development, plus support to science and technology, can equip people to be more resilient and emerge from the crisis. Health concerns are also on the table even more urgently than before. Demand on public health services will increase with the crisis and governments must be supported to bear this additional demand, by upgrading deteriorating social protection systems.

45. The provision of social benefits to unemployed workers is being urgently demanded, both in the developed and the developing world. The crisis is not only deteriorating unemployment rates but also is bringing about worsening conditions of work, safety and health, jeopardising welfare, especially among the most vulnerable groups. The financial crisis is also resulting in deteriorating pension systems which will have long-term effects for present and future generations. The scarcity of well-designed basic social security packages for workers in the developing world is of particular worry as public structures are in some cases extremely weak, after a long period of deregulation and weakening of the State's role.



A SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOOR

Establish a social protection floor by ensuring access to basic social services and empowerment and protection of the poor and vulnerable.

Lead Agencies

ILO
WHO

Cooperating Agencies

FAO
IMF
OHCHR
UN Regional Commissions
UNAIDS
UN-DESA
UNDP
UNESCO
UNFPA
UN-HABITAT
UN-HCR
UNICEF
UNODC
UNRWA
WFP
WMO
World Bank

This global crisis is likely to have dramatic social and health effects. In crisis conditions, social security benefits and public health services act as social, health and economic stabilizers, thereby curtailing the potential social and economic depth of the recession, through avoiding poverty and stabilizing aggregate demand. The international community should advocate and support the development of a social protection floor to protect people during the crisis, and thereafter. The definition transcends the mandate of any individual UN agency, so a coherent system-wide approach is needed. A social protection floor could consist of two main elements: (a) Services: geographical and financial access to essential public services (such as water and sanitation, health, and education); and (b) Transfers: a basic set of essential social transfers, in cash and in kind, paid to the poor and vulnerable to provide a minimum income security and access to essential services, including health care. ■