UNESCO Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development from South Asia

Social Protection Policies in South Asia
Third Ministerial Meeting
Ministry of Social Services, Government of Sri Lanka
COLOMBO, SRI LANKA
20-22 February 2011

Concept Note
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INTRODUCTION

The Third Meeting of the UNESCO Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development from South Asia is jointly organized by UNESCO and the Ministry of Social Services, Government of Sri Lanka, on Social Protection Policies in South Asia. Such fora were launched by UNESCO in 2001, in Latin America, in the framework of UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformation Programme (MOST), with the aim of enhancing dialogue between Ministries, academic researchers and members of the civil society, to enable the development of high quality policy responses to issues of social transformations. The following note elaborates on the background, context and objectives of the Third Meeting of UNESCO Forum of Ministers to be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 20 to 22 February 2011.

BACKGROUND

M.O.S.T.: UNESCO Management of Social Transformations programme

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized UN agency with a multiple mandate and a constituency of 193 Member States. It was founded in 1945 to build peace and mutual understanding between member countries by promoting international cooperation through education, sciences, culture and communication.

In 1994, UNESCO launched the Management of Social Transformations’ (MOST) programme, with the objective to play a significant role in disseminating knowledge to member States on managing social challenges and transformations. A key objective is to assist member States with improving the quality of policy-making by encouraging evidence-based policy making and research and analysis through dialogue with key stakeholders. Therefore, MOST plays a unique role in bringing researchers and policy-makers together to apply research to policy and thereby improving policy formulation, anchored by international norms and standards. Further, as part of the broader UN system, MOST is called upon to contribute to the realization of human rights and to the enhancement of social development. In 2003, in recognition of the increasing need to further improve policy formulation and relevance, MOST has been reoriented\(^1\), both thematically and in terms of its modalities of operation, with a stronger focus attached to building efficient bridges between research, policy and practice, and on promoting a culture of policy-making based on analysis of evidence and on dialogue.

\(^1\) MOST has been reoriented in response to the recommendations that were made in February 2003 during the 6th session of the Intergovernmental Council of the MOST Programme, which comprises 35 Member States, and later approved by the 166th session of UNESCO’s Executive Board (166 EX/41).
UNESCO Fora of Ministers of Social Development

One of the ways MOST assists Member States in responding to global challenges is through the institutionalization of regional and sub-regional Fora of Ministers in charge of Social Development. These fora serve as platforms to enable the concerned Ministeries to meet and exchange their experiences, engage in dialogue with researchers and other important stakeholders, particularly the civil society and the UN System. The result of this process is to enable the development of high quality policy responses to challenges and opportunities posed by social transformations worldwide.²

The Fora of Ministers aim to provide a space for regional dialogue at a Ministerial level for regional strategies on social policy; a platform for the exchange of experiences and best practices on national policies; an environment that encourages the scope and development of joint projects and opportunities to influence international reflection and policy-making.

Mitigating the social consequences of the economic and financial crisis

Member States have identified an immediate need to mitigate the serious social impact of the financial and economic crisis. The UN Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-Moon, and the Chief Executives of the United Nations system, stressed at a meeting in UNESCO (4th and 5th April 2009) that “If action is not taken urgently, it can be devastating for the most vulnerable, with growing social insecurity and displacement of people. The achievement of the MDGs is at stake. The middle class in many countries is being weakened. The vulnerable groups, children, women, youth, elderly, migrants and people with disabilities are hit the strongest”. The Chief Executives Board (CEB) underlined that the capacity of governments to design, afford and implement the right policies, while coordinating them with international partners, must be strengthened: “The multilateral system plays a central role in articulating and delivering a global and coherent response to the crisis, and in translating it into action at the country level”.

The CEB agreed on the need for policy coherence and coordination on nine joint crisis initiatives (Box 1), each of which has one or more multilateral lead agencies. As a result, and in response to the crisis, The MOST programme at present is focusing on the social implications of the financial and economic crisis and appropriate policy responses, through all regional and sub-regional Fora of Ministers in charge of Social Development, encompassing regions from Latin America to Africa and South Asia³.

² Such Fora of Ministers have been organized in Latin America (seven times); South Asia (twice); for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (twice); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (twice); the East African Community (twice), the Arab region (twice) and the Caribbean (once). The years 2010 - 2011 will be marked by the launch of a Forum of Ministers for South East Asia and Central Asia respectively, and for the Caribbean.

³ The thematic session of the ninth session of the Intergovernmental Council (IGC) of the MOST Programme (28-30 September 2009) was “National and International Responses to the Crisis”.

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Box 1 - THE NINE JOINT CRISIS INITIATIVES OF THE U.N. CHIEF EXECUTIVES BOARD (CEB)

1. **Additional financing for the most vulnerable**: advocating and devising joint World Bank-UN system mechanisms for the common articulation and implementation of additional financing, including through the World Bank proposed Vulnerability Fund.

2. **Food Security**: strengthening programmes to feed the hungry and expanding support to farmers in developing countries.

3. **Trade**: fighting protectionism, including through the conclusion of the Doha round and strengthening aid for trade initiatives and finance for trade.

4. **A Green Economy Initiative**: promoting investment in long-term environmental sustainability and putting the world on a climate-friendly path.

5. **A Global Jobs Pact**: boosting employment, production, investment and aggregate demand, and promoting a decent world for all.

6. **A Social Protection Floor**: ensuring access to basic social services, shelter, empowerment and protection of the poor and vulnerable.

7. **Humanitarian, Security and Social Stability**: emergency action to protect lives and livelihoods, meeting hunger and humanitarian needs, protecting displaced people and shoring up security and social stability.

8. **Technology and Innovation**: developing technological infrastructure to facilitate the promotion and access to innovation.

9. **Monitoring and Analysis**: (i) Strengthening macroeconomic and financial surveillance and implementing an effective economic early warning system; (ii) urgently establish a UN system-wide vulnerability monitoring and alert mechanism to track developments, and report on the political, economic, social and environmental dimensions of the crisis.

**The UN Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPFI)**

Out of the nine CEB initiatives, it is the Social Protection Floor and the Global Jobs Pact which have received the highest political attention and support by United Nations’ Member States and the UN-system.

The objective of the Social Protection Floor is to promote and support the implementation of a basic set of social transfers, in cash and in kind, paid to the poor and vulnerable to provide minimum income security and access to essential health care, and the availability and access to essential services, such as education and health, adequate nutrition, water and sanitation. It is intended to provide, amongst others, a framework through which countries can expand social protection by scaling up existing programs or replicating successful practices from other countries with room for regional idiosyncrasies.

UNESCO fully supports the Social Protection Floor Initiative led by ILO and WHO, and participates with them in its development. At the inter-agency meeting on the Social Protection Floor (Turin, Italy, October 2009), it was suggested that UNESCO Fora of Ministers in charge of Social Development could publicly advocate for this initiative and exchange best
practices regarding social protection. In response to this, Ministers planning to host upcoming Fora have already agreed to this thematic focus. Following the convening of each sub-regional Forum of Ministers of Social Development, MOST will analyze and summarize the results in a policy brief format. At the end of 2011, MOST will publish a Policy Brief on social protection practices and experiences drawn from several regions, including South Asia.

Box 2 - THE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The 48th Session of the Commission for Social Development, 2-13 February 2010, United Nations Headquarters, adopted a resolution on “Promoting social integration” which makes several references to the Social Protection Floor and social protection policies to achieve this: “Further recognizing that social protection is also an investment in people and in long-term social and economic development, in this regard appropriate social protection systems make a critical contribution to meeting the development goals directed towards poverty eradication and exerting a positive impact on economic growth, social cohesion and social development”. In the Report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.5/2010/2) prepared for the Commission under this agenda it is recommended that: “Governments should establish basic social protection schemes for both the formal and informal sectors so as to promote equity, inclusion, cohesion and stability in society. Social protection programmes should be designed to protect people throughout their life course, as well as to support the poor and most vulnerable, especially during periods of macroeconomic instability. All countries are encouraged to put in place a social protection floor”.

Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development from South Asia

The South Asian Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development was launched in 2006 in Bhurban, Pakistan, with a Ministerial Meeting on Governance and Public Accountability, and concluded with the Ministers’ agreement to institutionalize the Forum. Two years later, in 2008, a Second Ministerial Meeting was organized in New Delhi, India, on Transparency, Right to Information and Social Development. In the New Delhi Declaration, the Ministers stressed the importance of research for evidence-based policy-making: “...reiterate our common resolve to strengthen the Forum of Ministers of Social Development in South Asia, with the aim of facilitating consultations and dialogue that will help to develop social policies on the basis of scientific evidence”.

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In order to provide the opportunity for social policy dialogue among South Asian countries in the field of social protection policies, the Third Meeting of the Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development is jointly organized in Sri Lanka (Colombo) by the Ministry of Social Services (MSS) and UNESCO, from 20 to 22 February 2011. The inaugural session will coincide with the celebration of the World Day of Social Justice, established in 2009, and held on 20 February.

Social Protection in South Asia
Social Protection pertains to the set of public measures that a society provides for its members to protect them against economic and social distress caused by the absence or a substantial reduction of income from work as a result of various contingencies (sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age or death of the breadwinner), the provision of health care and the provision of benefits for families with children. The International Labor Organization (ILO) suggests that social protection should be approached in its various dimensions and through various phases. The dimensions include: access to essential goods and services, prevention of and protection against various risks, and promotion of potentials and opportunities in order to break vicious cycles and pervasive tendencies. The phases are: before, during, and after working years.

At the international level, the presence of working class struggles and the consequent evolution of state policy in a number of diverse systems led to the post war consensus on social security and social protection as human rights. This is clearly set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Articles 22 to 26 state the universal right of each individual to a basic standard of life, to proper working conditions and to social security and social protection. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, again recognizes “the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance” (Article 9) and Articles 10 to 13 of the Convention elaborate on the right of mothers and infants, the right to a decent standard of living, the right to food, health and education. While the developed countries have a legacy of social protection that emanated from welfare state regimes, the same is not the case with developing countries. The reason for such a situation is that most developing countries are still grappling to meet the needs of vast majority of population in terms of their basic human capabilities. Moreover, the economic structure of these countries, which are dominated by the informal sector, militates against the expansion and the universalization of social protection policies. For instance, over 90% of the labour force in the countries of South Asia are informal workers and over 75% of the population of the six largest countries of the South Asia live under $2 (PPP) a day.

In policy terms, the governments of developing countries have a vital role in creating mechanisms to provide basic social security (capability enhancing measures) as well as mechanisms in mitigating the vulnerabilities that poor and marginalized sections face due to various reasons including their inability to mediate the dynamics of the labour market. It would also mean acknowledging the critical role of poverty reduction strategies that need to work in
tandem with social protection policies. With increasing acknowledgement of the multi
dimensionality of poverty and the far reaching potential of social protection, it is advocated
that there is a need to view social protection policies as ‘developmental’ as against their current
treatment as ‘residual’ social policies. Such mainstreaming is also in conformity with the
thinking that social protection policies ought to be ‘transformative’ in content and practice as
they mediate through notions of rights and entitlements, inclusion, citizenship, collectivity of
the poor and good governance\(^5\). One does find a plethora of targeted programmes and
schemes in all the countries of the South Asian region but most of them suffer from limitations
in terms of design, outreach, quality and impact.

While conceptual developments of social protection are available in the existing policy
literature, there is a need to translate them into programmes and identify barriers for extension
of social protection to the poor and marginalized. What appears to be dramatically missing in
the region is a cohesive and inclusive national social protection policy that would articulate
aspirations and programmes for social development. There is also a need to identify and adapt
innovative forms of social protection that are available across the countries of South Asia,
which share several similarities in terms of nature and quantum of poverty, social exclusion,
conditions of vulnerability and deprivation amongst their populations.

**World Day of Social Justice**

On November 26, 2007, the UN General Assembly named February 20 as the *World Day of
Social Justice*. The *World Day of Social Justice* is the result of a resolution taken by more than
100 political leaders at the World Summit of Social Development held in Copenhagen, Denmark
in 1995, to conquer poverty and ensure full employment, as well as stable, safe and just
societies. It was in an effort to put people at the centre of development plans and an attempt
to spread the fervor of social justice both within and between countries. The inaugural session
of the Forum organized on Sunday 20 February 2011 will be open to a larger number of
participants, notably to social scientists and researchers from Sri Lanka, officials from other
Ministries, and to the United Nations family in Sri Lanka. It is hoped that the celebration of
*World Day of Social Justice* in Colombo, for the first time, will raise the general profile of the
social science community in Sri Lanka and of the United Nations Social Protection Floor
Initiative.

**Ministry of Social Services, Government of Sri Lanka**

The Ministry of Social Services is long time partner of the MOST programme, and has been a regular
member of the MOST Intergovernmental Council. It serves as an appropriate platform for the
nature and theme of the dialogue proposed by the Forum. The Ministry works with an aim to make
the disadvantaged equal partners in national development by providing the right environment and
opportunities, through policy initiatives in the fields of social welfare and social development.
Programmes range from rehabilitation, social integration and protection of persons with disabilities,
to provision of pension and social security for the self-employed and promotion of living standards
of women and children under difficult circumstances. Current schemes provide housing grants,

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\(^5\) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are
invoked to situate the discourse on entitlements and rights over social protection.
medical assistance, opportunities for self-employment, days of employment, counseling programmes and community based rehabilitation programmes for the disabled and aged. As it is the case in most countries, several Ministries are involved in the field of social protection in Sri Lanka, such as, among others, the Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations, the Ministry of Economic Development, the Ministry of Child Development & Women’s Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Finance and Planning, and the Ministry of Education. The main poverty alleviation programme of Sri Lanka, *Samurdhi*, focuses on income transfers and improving the nutritional status of mothers.

**Social Protection Policies in South Asia: Preparatory Research Meeting**

A joint *UNESCO – ICSSR Research Meeting on Social Protection Policies in South Asia* was organized in New Delhi, on 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} March 2010, with the participation of over forty scholars and experts from across South Asia\textsuperscript{6}. Twelve research papers and presentations, having a focus on implementation, innovations and extensions of social protection in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Asia as a whole, were debated and discussed. The material collected for the Research Meeting, including a *Summary Report* of the debate and the *Recommendations from Researchers*, has been compiled in a working document, which is expected to provide inputs to the Ministerial Meeting, by highlighting: key areas for regional cooperation; national best practices or social protection gaps; and key policy recommendations to Ministers. It is available online, along with the full research papers, concept note, agenda, list of participants, at: [www.unesco.org/newdelhi](http://www.unesco.org/newdelhi) (click: social and human sciences/ social policy dialogues/ News) and on CD-Rom.

**Key objectives**

It is hoped that the current Forum will contribute towards:

- The advancement of the agenda for a social protection floor in South Asia, ensuring universal access to essential social transfers (cash and kind transfers providing minimum income and livelihood security) and services (water and sanitation, food and adequate nutrition, health, education, housing)
- The advancement of knowledge and social research on neglected themes and excluded groups in the field of social protection, such the migrants and the urban poor;
- The development of opportunities to sustain horizontal cooperation in South Asia at the levels of academic research, and public policy;

**Outcomes**

The expected outcomes of this event are to increase awareness, engagement and advocacy on the importance of social protection policies in the South Asian region, based on sound research. It is anticipated that the participants of the Forum will gain:

- A better knowledge of existing social protection policies in South Asia
- An overview of sound practices in social protection policies of the countries of the South Asian region and their possible replicability

\textsuperscript{6} The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) was established in 1969 by the Government of India to promote social sciences research in the country and serve as an advisor to the Government in matters of social science research, its promotion and eventual utilization.
✓ A higher level of awareness about the Social Protection Floor Initiative and its practical eligibility in South Asia
✓ A greater level of networking and exchange between social scientists and policy makers
✓ A better understanding of the fact that the development of social science research and capacity is a critical part of the policy making process

Expected Outputs
✓ The adoption of a Ministerial Declaration on social protection policies, in conjunction with the SAARC Social Charter and other relevant documents, that will reflect a common consensus on the need for governments to ensure universal access to basic services (health, education, housing, nutrition, ..) in South Asian countries
✓ The Summary Report of the UNESCO-ICSSR Research Meeting on Social Protection Policies in South Asia held on 18-19 March 2010 in New Delhi, India will serve as a background paper for the Forum. The report highlights the themes and topics discussed and provides pertinent information related to the state of social protection policies in South Asia and the experiences of countries in implementing them
✓ Key recommendations emanating from the Forum, as well as the Ministerial Declaration, will be highlighted and disseminated to the social science community, the civil society and the policy makers in South Asia (online, mailing lists, media, etc.)

Presentations and papers
It is proposed that at least one country presentation (15-20 minutes) be invited from each country. The country presentation should focus on the very social protection schemes that are truly representative of the country`s achievements, difficulties or aspirations, are currently debated within the country, or have the most innovative approach. A comprehensive description and list of social protection schemes in each country is not required and goes beyond the scope of the country sessions, which is to stimulate dialogue among different countries. The country sessions will entail discussing each country’s experience, while keeping a particular focus on means of implementation, provisions for transparency and accountability, and results achieved. In all, it is expected that eight country presentations would be presented by the Ministers or the Head of Delegation, before the sessions are opened up for general discussion. Country presentations should stimulate the discussions and the exchange of knowledge and experiences (best practices), so that policy alternatives can be discussed in more concrete terms, with specific proposals for regional cooperation. The research material made available stresses a number of sub-themes that could be used as guidelines in preparing papers and presentations such as the need for social protection policies to encompass the interests of the urban poor and migrants, the viability of employment-led social protection policies in the South Asian region and the eligibility of a Social Protection Floor for South Asia. The UNICEF ROSA publication on “Social Protection in South Asia: A Review” is also been made available as a resourceful documentation. On social science at large, UNESCO World Social Science Report (WSSR 2010) will be available in its summary version as an important testimony on the state of social science in the world.
There are three sessions devoted to country presentations and four thematic sessions, which, as per the recommendations of the researchers, will focus on: employment oriented social protection schemes, social protection floor initiative, social protection measures inclusive of children needs, and the nature and extent of the population excluded from social protection measures (urban poor, migrants). One session will be devoted to the joint preparation of a Ministerial Declaration.

**Participants**
In addition to the eight Ministers in charge of Social Development from the SAARC region and their delegation, and representatives from SAARC, about twenty scholars will be invited from universities, research organizations, and think-tanks across South Asia, including several researchers who attended the UNESCO – ICSSR Research Meeting held in March 2010. Experts from international agencies (multilateral and bilateral), UN organizations, especially key partners of the Forum such as UNICEF and ILO, and development practitioners from the grassroots are invited to participate to share their experiences as panelists, speakers or participants. In total, 60 participants are expected to attend.

**Accommodation and Travel**
Boarding and lodging of Ministers will be provided by the Government of Sri Lanka for the duration of the Ministerial Meeting. The researchers invited will be provided with a comprehensive travel grant from our partners, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC – South Asia), the International Council for Social Welfare (ICSW – South Asia), and the Institute for Human Development, India (IHD). If traveling by Sri Lankan Airlines, all participants will be granted air fares at discounted rates.

**Partners**
This initiative has drawn support from a variety of partners who have provided a meaningful contribution at different levels: Sri Lankan National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, National Science Foundation (NSF), Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (JNU), Institute for Human Development, New Delhi (IHD), Social Protection in Asia network (SPA), International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), International Development and Research Centre (IDRC–South Asia), International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) and Sri Lankan Airlines.

**Focal Points**
For Sri Lanka, the Focal Point is Ms. W. Yamuna Chitranganie, Secretary, Ministry of Social Services, Government of Sri Lanka (email: msssec@sltnet.lk; Phone: +94 11 2877124/ 2883525 Fax: +94 11 2877381). For UNESCO, the Sub-regional Coordinator of the Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development from South Asia is Ms Marina Faetanini, Programme Specialist, Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO New Delhi Office (email: m.faetanini@unesco.org; Phone: +91 11 267 13000 ext 316; Fax: +91 11 267 13 001-2), assisted by Mr. Shehan Ratnavale, UNESCO Focal Point in Sri Lanka (email: s.ratnavale@unesco.org; Phone: +94 11 2745178)

**Conference Secretariat**: Ms. Olinka Randeniya, Coordinating Secretary, at: msssec@sltnet.lk.