

News and views ... from ICSW

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The Agenda Social Protection Floor Initiative

In the last edition of *International Social Work* the Presidents of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) reported on *The Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: A New Beginning*. A component of The Agenda and the main agenda for ICSW is the Social Protection Floor (SPF) Initiative.

The financial and economic crisis continues and will continue for many years. Millions of workers in developed and developing economies are unemployed or underemployed. Before the economic crisis many developing countries considered universal social security systems unaffordable. More than three quarters of the global population do not enjoy a set of social guarantees that allow them to deal with life's risks. Ensuring a social protection floor for these people, struggling just to survive, is a priority. It would also be probably the fastest way to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The ongoing financial and economic crisis is having dramatic social, health, hunger and education effects. Many people who had scrambled out of poverty before the economic crisis have plunged back into it. In times of crisis, transfer incomes, notably social assistance and social security benefits paid to unemployed workers and other vulnerable recipients, act as social and economic stabilisers.

There is strong evidence that social protection contributes to economic growth by raising labour productivity and enhancing social stability. Those governments with existing social transfer systems were able to deliver stimulus packages to help alleviate the impact of the economic crisis.

Investing in a Social Protection Floor is investing in social justice and economic development. Ensuring a Social Protection Floor for the entire world population represents a considerable challenge, but calculations by various UN agencies show that a basic floor of social transfers is globally affordable at virtually any stage of economic development, even if the funding is not yet available everywhere.

ICSW in its work on developing national policies and influencing national budgets emphasizes that budgets are about choices. National military expenditure is rising. *The Guardian* reports (Norton-Taylor, 2010) that the volume of arms sales increased 22% over the last five years. In that figure is the troubling statistic that arms sales to South America rose by 150%. In South East Asia, arms sales to Indonesia and Malaysia increased significantly. If governments have the funds to spend on vast quantities of arms they could make the choice to spend less on weapons and enhance social protection.

In considering who would benefit from a Social Protection Floor societies need to remember those who are not citizens – both formal and informal migrants. There are also those many millions in the informal sector who are vulnerable to economic changes. The ageing population needs to be considered but realizing that while this segment of society is expanding, there is a contraction in births which could enable resources to be redirected.

Rural populations have less access to essential services than urban dwellers, thus requiring programmes suited to their greater isolation.

Benefits and guaranteed access to services not only prevent people from falling further into poverty but also limit the contraction of aggregate demand thereby curtailing the potential depth of the recession. There is a need for a Social Protection Floor below which nobody should fall. The international community has to support the development of a Social Protection Floor to protect people during this crisis and future crises.

A Social Protection Floor is a human right, an economic necessity, a social necessity and a political necessity. A social floor provides a solid floor upon which to build a system.

It is not a single vision but needs to be formulated at national level with government and civil society working together to develop a unified approach to social protection.

The concept of a Social Protection Floor requires:

1. A basic set of essential social rights and transfers, in cash and in kind, to provide a minimum income and livelihood security for all and to facilitate effective demand for and access to essential goods and services.
2. The supply of an essential level of goods and social services such as health, water and sanitation, education, food, housing, life and asset-saving information that are accessible to all.

The Social Protection Floor Initiative was adopted by the Chief Executives Board of the United Nations in April 2009 as a response to the

global financial and economic crisis. The ILO and the World Health Organization (WHO) are leading the Initiative. It is supported by 19 UN agencies and other partners such as development banks, bilateral organizations and NGOs including ICSW.

After the Joint World Conference in Hong Kong in June 2010, the General Assembly of ICSW members resolved to make the Social Protection Floor Initiative part of the ICSW global programme. Each of the nine ICSW regions were asked to make the Social Protection Floor a part of their social policy agenda and engage national and regional governments in the design, adoption, implementation and sustaining of a Social Protection Floor. We are seeking ways for civil society to become members of joint Social Protection Floor taskforces.

To assist in this process, ICSW is running training programmes at regional level to assist national welfare umbrella organizations to prepare for their participation in their government's national initiatives. The training programmes will have a strong emphasis on South-South cooperation, meaning that the knowledge of innovative social protection measures is shared between the NGO participants. In addition, ICSW will involve the members of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers. As the Presidents of IASSW, ICSW and IFSW said at the end of the Joint World Conference 'together we build The Agenda, together we face the challenge, together we thrive'.

Resources

Global Extension of Social Security (GESS) website including: The Manual for Social Protection Floor joint UN country operations. <http://www.socialsecurityextension.org/gimi/gess/ShowMainPage.do>

The UN Social Protection Floor Initiative – Brochure in English, French and Spanish <http://www.socialsecurityextension.org/gimi/gess/ResShowResource.do?resourceId=14583>

References

Norton-Taylor, R. (2010) 'Arms sales are booming despite global recession', *The Guardian Weekly*, 19 March.

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