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In this issue:

- Featured article: **The quest for gender equality and the Social Protection Floors initiative: creating stronger synergy** by Patience W. Stephens
- **The door stands wide open. A report on the social protection floor mission to Myanmar** by Michael Cichon and Konstantin Bärwaldt
- **25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child**
- **Useful resources and links**

➤ **Featured article. The quest for gender equality and the Social Protection Floors initiative: creating stronger synergy** by Patience W. Stephens

Dr. Patience W. Stephens is currently the Special Adviser on Education at the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in New York. She was previously the Director of the Intergovernmental Support Division of UN Women, helping to shape the Entity's intergovernmental support work following its establishment by the General Assembly in 2010.



Most intergovernmental agreements reached in United Nations deliberations on global development issues relate closely to one another. Although negotiations of outcome documents for different sectors are usually undertaken by different intergovernmental bodies, the outcomes often include extensive references to related intergovernmental agreements, and they draw extensively on previously agreed language in the outcome documents from other sectoral processes. The issues addressed in the agreements of one intergovernmental body often appear in the outcomes of others as well, providing a different perspective and laying down a comprehensive, rich and interrelated web of norms that complement each other in many ways.

Although they were adopted 17 years apart, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (adopted in 1995) and the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (R. 202), adopted in 2012, are strongly related to each other in their quest for inclusion and social protection. While the Platform for Action focuses on women and girls and R. 202 addresses social protection as its primary objective, both intergovernmental agreements echo strong concerns about the inadequacy of social security and social protection, and they lay down guidance about how States should address this. For this reason, the joint pursuit of the objectives of R. 202 and the Beijing Platform for Action offers unique opportunities for generating synergistic benefits for States, communities and individuals.

In particular, with ongoing intergovernmental negotiations to finalize a post-2015 development agenda, and the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action occurring in 2015, it is timely to capitalize on opportunities that R. 202 provides

for accelerating progress on gender equality. How can the implementation of R. 202 contribute to addressing gender equality and the empowerment of women? How can synergy between the implementation of R. 202 and the Beijing Platform for Action be promoted and harnessed?

Common concerns and vision

Although it focused on a broad range of issues impinging on the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, the Beijing Platform for Action outlined many concerns about social security for women. The Platform highlighted women's higher risk of falling into poverty, particularly in old age, where social security systems are based on the principle of continuous remunerated employment, noting that in some cases, women do not fulfil this requirement because of interruptions in their work, due to the unbalanced distribution of remunerated and unremunerated work.

To that end the Platform for Action made over a dozen references to the need for social security provisions for women and girls. In paragraph 58, it called for the creation of social security systems wherever they do not exist, or to review them with a view to placing individual women and men on an equal footing, at every stage of their lives. In paragraph 106, in the context of addressing access to health care, the Platform called for women to be allowed to access social security systems in equality with men throughout the whole life cycle. It called, in paragraph 175, for the adoption of policies to extend or maintain the protection of labour laws and social security provisions for those who undertake paid work in the home. In paragraph 179, the Platform called for the adoption of policies to ensure the appropriate protection of labour laws and social security benefits for part-time, temporary, seasonal and home-based workers.

The preamble of R. 202 affirms that "social security is an important tool to prevent and reduce poverty, inequality, social exclusion and social insecurity, to promote equal opportunity and gender and racial equality, and to support the transition from informal to formal employment." R. 202 defines social protection floors as "nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees which secure protection aimed at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion" (para. 2). It aims, among its objectives, to provide guidance to its Members to (a) establish and maintain social protection floors as a fundamental element of their national social security systems; and (b) to implement social protection floors within strategies for the extension of social security that progressively ensure higher levels of social security to as many people as possible, guided by ILO social security standards (para. 1).

Therefore, R. 202, apart from focusing on social protection, also aims to address some important issues outlined in the Platform for Action under its Critical Areas of Concern. These include the prevention and reduction of poverty, inequality, social exclusion and social insecurity and the transition from informal to formal employment. The promotion of equal opportunity and gender equality are, of course, the *raison d'être* of the Platform for Action.

Although not focused on gender equality, the guidelines that R. 202 provides to States are essential for the drive towards social security systems that provide for all, including women and girls, as envisioned in the Beijing Platform for Action. In that regard, R. 202 was ground breaking in recommending to governments to establish as quickly as possible national minimum protection floors with basic social security guarantees.

R. 202: Friend or foe to gender equality?

There have been concerns that R. 202 has not adequately addressed gender equality issues in its guidance to States. For example, Lamache (2014) has questioned the adequacy of R. 202 from the women's rights perspective. She notes that the Recommendation "is neither gender inclusive nor gender specific" and she argues that apart from addressing free prenatal and post-natal medical care, the recommendation assumes that poor women should simply be treated like poor women, with a bit of financial help." (p. 3)

While R. 202 may not have delved into the specifics of how to adequately provide for women in their varied roles in society and in the context of gender-based discrimination, the coexistence of the Beijing Platform for Action and the ongoing national review processes being undertaken as part of the Beijing +20 commemorations provide a unique opportunity to twin-up with efforts that are underway to develop national strategies for the extension of social security in accordance with R. 202. This is an opportunity to infuse the needed gender-equality perspective into the implementation of R. 202. It is also an opportunity to find a new avenue for invigorating the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The backlog of pent-up discrimination and disempowerment of women and girls makes it essential to demand a strong gender equality perspective when the R. 202 is implemented at the national level.

Looking ahead

There are several ways to foster the needed feedback between the two landmark intergovernmental agreements. These include:

1. Engage women's groups and the National Women's Machineries

Article 13 of the R.202 urges members to formulate national social security extension strategies based on national consultations. To ensure that the complex and diverse needs of women and girls are reflected, women's organizations must be a part of these consultations. Their participation should seek to bring in the needs and perspectives of all subgroups of women, especially those in rural areas and other disadvantaged groups. Engagement with national women's machineries also provides a direct opportunity to link the actions that are taken to enhance social protection with those recommended in the Beijing Platform for Action and its review processes.

2. Provide Education and Information, Education and Communication (IEC)

Given the high level of illiteracy among women in some regions and the persistent gender gaps in education, the successful elaboration and implementation of R. 202 requires extensive information, education and communication programmes. That is required to ensure that women are aware of the provisions and that they are able to successfully exercise their right to undertake complaint and appeal processes without fear or discrimination.

In a similar manner, the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action must be used to communicate relevant information to women and women's groups about on-going processes for the elaboration of national strategies for the extension of social security. Specific opportunities for women's participation in the process should be shared.

3. Create opportunities for feedback between the Commission on the Status of Women and the General Conference of the ILO

To maximize opportunities for the establishment of social protection floors that are gender responsive, and that help to advance the objectives of both R. 202 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, better interaction and feedback between the relevant intergovernmental bodies should be fostered. National gender equality ministers and gender equality advocates should be encouraged to participate in meetings of the International Labour Conference (ILC) of the ILO, in accordance with the "Right of admission to sittings of the Conference." Representatives of the UN system offices that focus on gender equality issues should also participate. This would provide critical opportunities to foster information exchange, promote gender mainstreaming, and create stronger links between the Conference's work on labour issues and the global and national gender equality work, thus strengthening the synergy between the two areas. The ILC's unique composition -- including for each Member State, two government delegates, an employer delegate, a worker

delegate, and their respective advisers – provides a rich milieu in which to foster far-reaching consensus across multiple key actors whose actions are key determinants of gender equality.

With respect to intergovernmental discussions on gender equality, the Commission on the Status of Women should explore a full range of avenues consistent with its working methods, to bring discussions and preparations for the establishment of social protection floors to the fore. These could include panel discussions, side events, and keynote presentations to the Commission. The Commission may also wish to consider for a soon upcoming session, the selection of a priority theme that critically assesses progress in ensuring gender equality in the context of the establishment of social protection floors.

Conclusions

Despite the absence of strong gender-equality dimensions, R. 202 is an important normative advance over existing intergovernmental agreements on social security and social protection. R. 202 strongly complements the vision expressed in the Beijing Platform for Action, and it provides an opportunity to harness the energy and commitment of States to establish social protection floors. In that regard, Cichon (2014) could not have been more accurate when he noted that the potential consequences of R. 202's policy guidance "are much wider and much more concrete than one would expect at first sight from a five or six page document." R. 202 holds a lot of possibilities for enhancing gender equality 20 years after Beijing. However, we must be willing and creative in fostering the coexistence of these two seemingly incompatible intergovernmental agreements.

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The opinions expressed in the article are those of the author and may not necessarily coincide with the opinions of the ICSW Management Committee or the United Nations Secretariat.

- ***The door stands wide open. A report on the social protection floor mission to Myanmar*** by Michael Cichon (ICSW) and Konstantin Bärwaldt, (FES Yangon, Myanmar)

At the end of November 2014 Michael Cichon, the President of the ICSW, took part in the mission to Myanmar organized in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) of Germany. In a wider sense, it was the first mission of the Global Coalition on the Social Protection Floors -- to which both ICSW and FES belong -- to explore the options regarding possibilities to provide support to the Social Protection Floors initiative at the national level. It is hoped that the mission report below will be of interest to the readers of the Newsletter—Editor.

History shows that major structural reforms to national social protection systems tend to occur in times of fundamental political or economic change. Myanmar is no exception. As part of the process of political change the country is reviewing its national social protection system and wider social policy. This is long overdue.

After months of consultation, the Ministry of Welfare will soon table its vision of the future welfare state in Myanmar in a major strategy paper. The strategy will be submitted to the Cabinet and – if approved – will be passed on from there to the Parliament for amendment and endorsement early

next year. A series of implementing laws will have to follow to set out details of the new vision. Some of them will be discussed in the Parliament before the next elections in the fall of 2015. As it stands now, the strategic and legislative formulation of the new vision of welfare could be the first major challenge of the still new and inexperienced Parliament, which was created in 2011, a challenge that the Parliament Committee of Population and Social Development seems to be well aware of. The pace of reform could be rapid and its depth fundamental and structural. From what seems to be emerging, it would appear that the structure of the reform strategy will follow the logic of the Social Protection Floor as it will address all four guarantees of the Floor through a selected set of social security measures, i.e. health security and income security for children, adults and elderly persons. The ICSW and the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung have selected Myanmar as a pilot country to test whether and how the Global Coalition for Social Protections (SPFs) and its local subsidiaries can provide useful support to national SPF-related decision-making processes; accordingly, a mission was organized from 22 to 27 November to the capital Nay Phi Taw and Yangon. The mission was organized by Konstantin Bärwaldt, FES resident representative in Yangon. Michael Cichon participated on behalf of the ICSW.

Background

The present social protection system in Myanmar is at best rudimentary. Schemes for the civil service and the military, as well as a social insurance scheme for the formal private sector that dates back to 1954, serve a total of about 1.7 million people in a nation of 51 million. Small-scale fragmented social assistance-type schemes for children, the disabled or sick persons in active or old age are in place and provide some benefits that help to cope with specific needs, but coverage and benefit levels remain low. The public health system - providing in theory free medicines and emergency medical care to the whole population - is underfunded. Public expenditure on health is only on the order of 1% of GDP, total health expenditure is thought to be less than 2% of GDP – one of the lowest levels of all low-income countries. Overall expenditure on social protection, including public health expenditure, could be as low as 3% of GDP (including health care), which is a lot lower than expenditure levels in, for example, Thailand (7.2% of GDP) and other neighbouring Asian countries. Life expectancy remains low and stands at 65 years. Myanmar ranks 150th in the Human Development index league table (with a value of 0.524) and has a GDP per capita of about US\$ 1000. The poverty rate is still a matter of debate between the government and the World Bank but seems to lie between 27 and 31%.

However, following the political thaw and the removal of most international sanctions, the economy is growing at a pace of about 7% per year and is expected to continue to do so for a while. The IMF sees a positive medium-term economic outlook. Between 2011 and 2012, total government revenue – largely due to new income from extractive industries – has almost doubled and now stands at about 23 to 24% of GDP. But with only 6 to 7% of GDP, tax collection remains at a record low among all low-income countries. There seems to be wide agreement that the tax to GDP ratio has to increase and that major tax reforms are due. Only then will there be fiscal space for social protection reform. Even the IMF in its latest country report welcomed further investments in the social sector and education. The door to reforms stands wide open.

To support the process of social policy designs, the ILO, in collaboration with other UN agencies, donors and NGOs, has undertaken a full analysis of the existing social protection system through its participatory Assessment Based National Dialogue (ABND) process. The draft report contains a full stocktaking of the existing social protection system, identifies protection gaps and estimates the cost of closing those gaps. The ILO's ABND report estimates that closing the SPF gaps would cost between 2 and perhaps 7% of GDP, depending on the design of the specific measures to be introduced. The ABND undertook elaborate consultations with government ministries and social protection institutions. The data and information "digging" phase of the national dialogue process has thus already been completed. Furthermore, the policy consultations between the ABND team and the ministries, as well as the direct support to the Ministry of Welfare that was led by UNICEF, have also

been completed, and the results have found their way into the draft strategy of the Ministry of Welfare. The present draft is still being discussed within the Ministry and with selected external experts, but it seems to contain important elements of the SP floor, such as child allowances, disability allowances, employment guarantee schemes as well as social pensions. What now has to begin is the process of hammering out an affordable and implementable set of concrete benefits.

Mission activities

The missing link so far in the policy consultation process has been Parliament. The Parliament was only established in 2011. The overwhelming majority of its members are affiliated to and supportive of the new civilian government. Nevertheless, Parliament has to vet the new government's social protection strategy and is keen to build social policy competence in social protection before having to do so. Follow-up legislation to the social protection strategy will also have to go through the parliamentary process. FES and ICSW decided to start their engagement in the SPF process with a briefing to the Parliament's Committee for Population and Social Development. The mission thus started out with a full-day briefing for parliamentarians on Saturday, 22 November (non-parliamentary meetings can take place only on weekends when the Parliament is in session). The meeting was chaired by the Chairperson of the Committee on Population and Social Development, Mr. U Maung Maung Swe, and attended by 15 deputies from various Committees. The discussions showed that there was a need for knowledge transfer on the Social Protection Floor, but also, and perhaps even more urgently, on social protection and its potential role in social and economic development in general, as well as on the drafting of national social policy laws in particular. The interest and engagement of the participants in the discussions showed that Parliament is ready to play an active role in shaping the future social protection scheme in Myanmar.

At the same time, the mission raised awareness of the SPF concepts among academics and professional policy analysts through a number of further events. Two lectures were given to academic institutions. A major consultation session was held with the development partners, a group of I-NGOs and NGOs in Myanmar, including the leading economic think-tank in Myanmar, the Myanmar Development Resource Institute (MDRI). Future collaboration was discussed with the President and social security experts from the Federation of Trade Unions Myanmar (FTUM).

Two local branches of our coalition, Helpage International and Save the Children, were briefed on the mission, and potential further collaboration was discussed. We expect that the major NGOs who were part of the ABND process will align their strategies so that together we will continue to promote a comprehensive SPF concept as the fundamental building block for the future social protection system in Myanmar.

Follow-up

A mission is only as useful as its follow-up. As the coalition has no major budget, such follow-up needs to be strategic and pivotal. The next critical player in the national policy formulation process is Parliament. We have therefore decided for the time being to support and help to empower the new Parliament in playing a role in the formulation of the country's new social policy.

We will start with the provision of a core library on social protection (together with ILO) and further training for Parliamentarians on social protection and the SPF. Currently, we are thinking of supporting the Population and Social Development Committee through exposure to parliamentary practice in Europe and through supporting their policy analysis of the new strategy paper, once it becomes available. It is expected that support can take the form of study visits, expert consultations, and reviews of draft national laws and regulations. We will also support the ILO in obtaining donor support for a major SPF capacity-building project, which should start on an urgent basis, but definitely before the first new laws on social protection have to be implemented.

FES and ICSW will also support the trade unions to build their social protection capacity and will, hopefully, help them to formulate their national social protection strategy. It is expected that ILO will finance most of that activity. A similar operation could be staged for employer organizations. Those two activities could help stabilize the national consensus through and beyond the sensitive next election process.

Conclusion

The present policy formulation and national consensus-finding process is as complex as Myanmar's overall political and economic transition. Our overall impression is that the Government has an interest in building a more inclusive new social protection system, which can no longer afford to ignore large parts of the population. These are decisive and historically important times in Myanmar that open up an unprecedented range of new social policy opportunities. It is important that we keep up all the support we can to all players that seek our advice, even if our means are limited.

The authors express profound thanks to Lou Tessier of the ILO, who is the primary author of the country ABND study. She supported the mission and opened doors that could have easily remained closed to us without her.

➤ **25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Countries the world over marked the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). That ground-breaking convention, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989, signified a global commitment to recognizing children as human beings with a specific set of rights. To date, the Convention has been ratified by 194 countries, making it the most widely ratified international human rights treaty.

As part of celebrations marking the anniversary, the General Assembly convened a high-level meeting combining an opening session with an interactive panel discussion. The speakers discussed the progress that has been achieved for children since 1989, identified main challenges in realizing the rights of the child, including discrimination and inequalities in the progress made, and looked to the future from various perspectives, including children, governments and civil society, and considered the best ways to address those challenges as the international community moves into the next 25 years of the CRC.

Speaking during the session, Ivan Šimonović, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, said that, while children have access to a better standard of life today, great inequalities still persist around the world.

"This is a time to recommit to the vision of the Convention and to its full implementation," he said. "It is also a time to bring children and their rights more centrally into our peace, security and development goals. Our future in these areas depends on our children and on our respect for their rights," he added.

There remain numerous unresolved issues, such as poverty and exploitation of children. While the Convention calls for securing the rights of each child "without discrimination of any kind" (article 2), in many countries discrimination, including gender-based discrimination against girl-children, is still wide spread. The sex-selective feticide, when abortions are performed on the basis of the advanced medical screening, provides an example of such early bias. In areas where culture and tradition favor boys over girls, including parts of Asia, Southeast Europe and the Caucasus, much needs to be done at all levels to address that sore challenge.

For additional details please go to the UN Webcast:

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/index.php/watch/general-assembly-56th-plenary-69th-session-high-level-meeting-on-the-occasion-of-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-adoption-of-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child/3903624576001>

➤ **Useful resources and links.**

- **UNCTAD Least Developed Countries Report 2014—Growth with structural transformation: A post -2015 development agenda.**

According to the most recent report of UNCTAD, the least-developed countries (LDCs) have enjoyed unprecedented economic growth since 2000, helped by rising commodity prices and aid flows. But despite economic growth and substantial progress in human development, most LDCs will not meet the majority of the MDGs, and nearly half of their population continues to live in extreme poverty. Understanding this "LDC paradox" is crucial to the development of a coherent post-2015 agenda. The above report contributes towards that objective, providing a differentiated picture and identifying policy lessons along with critical areas for future action.

For further details please refer to:

<http://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=1067>

- **Job Creation and Local Economic Development**

This recent OECD publication identifies and assesses effective innovations in policies to support job creation, bringing together the latest research on the labor market, entrepreneurship and local economic development policy to help governments support job creation in the recovery. New data on skills supply and demand at the level of smaller OECD regions have been included.

For more details: <http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/job-creation-and-local-economic-development-9789264215009-en.htm>

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