

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND AUSTERITY: THE ROLE FOR THE IMF AND HUMAN RIGHTS



Friday, 22 June 2018, 13:00-14:30
Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

Organized by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, the International Movement ATD Fourth World, the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Center for Economic and Social Rights

Background

Social protection, based on a set of social security guarantees designed to prevent poverty and social exclusion throughout the life cycle, is widely recognized as a fundamental human right. As embodied in the [Social Protection Floors Initiative](#) led by the International Labour Organisation, a social protection system should ensure, at a minimum, access to essential health care and to basic income security that would

together enable all to enjoy life in dignity. Yet, despite its central importance, over half of the global population – 55 percent, or as many as 4 billion people – are not protected by any form of social protection.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is the single most influential international actor, not only in relation to fiscal policy but also to social protection, even if the IMF and its critics would prefer this were not the case. Given its unique position, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has devoted his thematic report to the 38th session of the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/38/33) to the IMF's role in relation to social protection. The report is timely, because the IMF is currently in the process of developing a strategic framework on its involvement in social protection and has created a consultative group consisting of experts from diverse backgrounds for this purpose.

For many years, the IMF took the position that it could take account only of narrowly defined macroeconomic issues. While the IMF has gradually moved over the years to accept the relevance of social protection to its mandate to a certain degree, its approach to social protection appears to be predominantly shaped by narrow fiscal concerns and stands in contrast with a human rights-based notion of social protection. For the IMF, social protection programmes mostly serve the purpose of mitigating adverse effects of fiscal adjustments on “vulnerable” groups.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, many governments have prescribed fiscal consolidation as a remedial measure to address growing public deficits, without safeguarding necessary fiscal space to guarantee basic social protection floors. Today, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of countries in the world are contracting the level of public expenditure and reducing their fiscal space. In this era of austerity, inadequate investments in social protection directly translate into inadequate social protection coverage, and the role of the IMF in this debate is, again, key.

Objectives

The objectives of the event are to address questions including, but not limited to, the following:

- What do human rights have to add to the global debate on austerity and social protection? What role is there to be played for international human rights mechanisms?
- What is the current role of the IMF in the debates on austerity and social protection? What needs to change in its approach to these issues? What is the role for human rights? How can human rights mechanisms and NGOs influence the development of a strategic framework on social protection by the IMF?

- What is the role for UN organizations in shaping the global debate on austerity and social protection?