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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in
achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full
employment and decent work for all**

Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in response to Economic and Social Council resolution 2012/7, in which the Council decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle of the Commission for Social Development would be “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”.

The report explores the linkages between empowerment and poverty eradication, full employment and decent work for all, and social integration, in addition to sustainable development. It presents a policy framework that promotes empowerment and development, with a particular focus on social protection. The report concludes with policy recommendations.



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 2012/7 on the future organization and methods of work of the Commission for Social Development, the Economic and Social Council decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle would be “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”. In the resolution, the Council stressed the importance of identifying relevant sub-themes within the priority theme, in order to focus interventions and discussions, and of taking into account cross-cutting issues during subsequent sessions of the Commission.

2. Empowerment of people is at the root of social development. Aspects of empowerment, such as participation, human dignity and freedom and the full utilization of human resources, are elaborated in numerous key United Nations policy instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (see General Assembly resolution 34/180), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see General Assembly resolution 217 (III) A) and the Declaration on Social Progress and Development (see General Assembly resolution 2542 (XXIV)).

3. In particular, a basic principle put forward in paragraph 25 of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development¹ was to “give the highest priority in national, regional and international policies and actions to the promotion of social progress, justice and the betterment of the human condition, based on full participation by all”. In paragraph 26 (o) of the Declaration, world leaders specified as a framework for action to:

“Recognize that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development and its principal resource. Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of our societies”.

4. Empowerment is interconnected with the three core goals that world leaders at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen committed to achieving: poverty eradication, social integration and full and productive employment and decent work for all.

5. In preparation for the fifty-first session of the Commission for Social Development, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat convened an expert group meeting in September 2012 on the priority theme. The meeting focused on defining empowerment vis-à-vis the three core objectives of social development, reviewing achievements in the promotion of economic, social and political empowerment of people and social groups and developing an evidence-based set of policy recommendations to promote the empowerment of people. The present report is drawn in part from the deliberations and outputs of the expert group meeting.

¹ *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

II. The context and dimensions of empowerment

A. Background

6. The concept of empowerment has been used in United Nations forums for a number of years, mainly in promoting the advancement of women. However, the term has been defined in different ways. Empowerment has been defined as “the process of transforming existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. Empowerment builds people’s capacity to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic and political forces to act individually as well as collectively to make choices about the way they want to be and do things in their best interest to improve their life situation”.² Another definition of empowerment is “the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”.³ Similarly, empowerment is described as “the decisions and actions of poor people themselves that will bring about sustainable improvements in their lives and livelihoods”.⁴

7. It is commonly recognized that empowerment is a long-term dynamic process affected by and resulting in changes in norms, values, rules, institutions and social relations, and that empowerment does not by itself ensure desired outcomes. For empowerment to secure full and effective participation, it requires capable and responsive decision makers whom empowered citizens can hold accountable, as well as effective institutions.

8. In general, empowerment of people, especially from marginalized social groups, has been considered to be promoted through their effective engagement in economic, social and political life, the provision of adequate resources and assets and the flexibility to exercise choice and control over their rights and well-being. In the context of the work of the Commission for Social Development, empowerment can relate to the enhancement of the capabilities of all individuals and groups, in particular people living in poverty and social groups (youth, older persons, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples), to fully participate in all aspects of society. The empowerment of vulnerable population segments requires a comprehensive set of policies and institutions that aim to strengthen the availability of jobs and livelihoods and services. From education and health care to governance and economic and social policy, all activities need to be effectively coordinated to empower people by expanding the opportunities that allow them to live in dignity and security.

9. In December 2011, the General Assembly adopted resolution 66/224 on people’s empowerment and development, which focuses on the interlinkages between empowerment and development, which are mutually reinforcing, in conveying concern about poverty and inequality. As referred to in the resolution, an

² See United Nations Development Programme, *Nepal Human Development Report 2004: Empowerment and Poverty Reduction* (Kathmandu, 2004), p. 12, available from http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/asiathepacific/nepal/nepal_2004_en.pdf.

³ World Bank, *Empowerment Sourcebook* (2002), available from <http://go.worldbank.org/FD9HH8DH11>.

⁴ See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Poverty Reduction and Pro-Poor Growth: The Role of Empowerment* (Paris, 2012), available from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/povertyreduction/povertyreductionandpro-poorgrowththeroleofempowerment.htm>.

international conference was held in Dhaka on 5 August 2012 to elicit the views of Member States on the people's empowerment and development model. The conference called for effective responses to poverty and hunger and adopted a draft resolution and recommendations for further consideration by Member States.

B. Key dimensions of empowerment

10. The present report proposes that empowerment be considered as the effective participation of members of society, individuals and groups in decisions about their lives. It also encompasses the notion of creating legal entitlements or social protection guarantees that ensure that beneficiaries are empowered and become rights-holders (see A/HRC/17/34, para. 67). Empowerment is primarily a means of achieving other objectives. For empowerment to occur, there must be an enabling environment that will permit people to participate in effective decision-making. Participation is necessary — but not sufficient — for empowerment. There is therefore a need for mutually reinforcing or complementary efforts in other areas — from investments in education and health to protecting the land and water rights of indigenous groups or other marginalized groups.

11. An enabling environment for empowerment must include a formal institutional structure, such as mechanisms and organized procedures, and traditional institutional structures, that permit and encourage meaningful participation. The promotion of human development through education and health is an important means, among others, to give individuals and groups a voice and greater agency to articulate their interests. An enabling environment should also ensure that human rights can be enjoyed.

12. For empowerment to acquire significant meaning for human and social development and to ensure more effective empowerment policies, greater efforts should be undertaken to measure and monitor empowerment through the development of appropriate indicators. Some elements of empowerment, such as participation, can be measured by, for example, calculating votes or the percentage of women in decision-making positions, and may require qualitative indicators. However, there are no universally agreed indicators on empowerment and such indicators need to be developed.

Social empowerment

13. Social empowerment refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to autonomously foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for their well-being and productivity. As the rest of the report will show, this aspect of people's empowerment is closely linked to social integration and poverty eradication. It builds people's capabilities to participate. The involvement of people living in poverty and marginalized social groups in setting development priorities is crucial to ensuring that limited public resources are utilized wisely. There is further need to deploy resources to leverage local knowledge and engage and involve local communities in defining their priorities.

14. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, the World Programme of Action for Youth, the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples all advocate social empowerment through the removal of social, political, legal and economic barriers and the active participation of marginalized social groups in society.

Economic empowerment

15. Economic empowerment is critical for poverty eradication and can be achieved if marginalized people have access to jobs and livelihoods and to basic entitlements, such as education, health and housing. Economic participation facilitates the social integration of vulnerable groups, in particular women, youth, older persons, people with disabilities and indigenous people.

Political empowerment

16. Political empowerment arises from the ability of marginalized groups to influence processes and decisions that affect their well-being. State and social institutions ought to serve people's needs, and building responsive governance would help to nurture citizen participation. The promotion of participation is vital to mobilizing people and improving the accountability and transparency of governments. This often involves expanded citizen engagement in decision-making and greater public input into the planning and delivery of social services. Better access to information, including through information and communications technologies, can help to advance these processes.

Legal empowerment

17. Legal empowerment of the poor refers to empowering people to demand and exercise their rights, while at the same time strengthening legal frameworks and judicial institutions so that they can better respond to people's needs. Property and land rights backed by effective legal frameworks and the resolution of issues related to livelihoods and entrepreneurship can help communities and societies to garner development dividends. Legal empowerment would facilitate the accessibility and affordability of the delivery of justice to people living in poverty.

C. Empowerment and sustainable development

18. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, world leaders agreed to renew their commitment to sustainable development, and to ensure the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future. They recognized that green economy policies should improve the livelihoods and empowerment of people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups, in particular in developing countries (see General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex).

19. The empowerment and participation of all members of society in social, economic and political life is critical to achieving sustainable development. Confronting challenges such as climate change will require significant shifts in human behaviour in terms of both production and consumption patterns, and such changes can be achieved more effectively if people participate in the formulation and implementation of plans, policies and programmes. Participation is also important to ensure that Governments respond to social needs, including those of people living in poverty, and to ensure that development is socially sustainable.

20. Social movements, including community organizations, are important to bringing people together. These movements have traditionally given people living in poverty and excluded social groups a voice and greater agency to articulate their

interests and take control of their own lives. More recently, social movements have been an effective force in the creation of innovative, sustainability-enhancing institutions and, in a few countries, they have succeeded in integrating environmental and social programmes. Creating an enabling environment for participation and social movements is important to address inequities and thus advance social cohesion and promote social sustainability for economic growth and environmental protection.

III. Empowerment of people, poverty eradication, full employment and decent work and social integration

A. Empowerment and poverty eradication

21. Over the past four years, the economic crisis and high food and fuel prices have slowed the rate of poverty reduction and hurt vulnerable populations. In spite of this, the global rate of extreme poverty was reduced by half in the 20 years between 1990 and 2010, according to preliminary estimates. If those estimates are confirmed, the first target of Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals will have been achieved at the global level five years ahead of the target date of 2015. More than 600 million people escaped extreme poverty between 1990 and 2008. Estimates indicate that the global rate of extreme poverty will fall to just below 16 per cent by 2015.

22. Though this represents considerable progress, by 2015 there will still be 1 billion people living in extreme poverty. In addition, poverty reduction has been highly uneven across regions. While poverty has been substantially reduced in China, it remains widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and in Southern Asia. The topic of poverty reduction remains prominent in ongoing discussions of the post-2015 development agenda. In order to continue progress towards eradicating poverty, countries will need to maintain robust growth rates while ensuring that growth is both environmentally sustainable and pro-poor. Empowerment is a key driver of pro-poor growth, which contributes to improvements in health, education and productive employment and decent work for all.⁵

23. Looking forward, sustainable poverty reduction can only be achieved with the active participation of people affected by poverty. However, inequitable power relations inhibit the participation of men and women living in poverty. The lack of social, political and economic opportunities available to people living in poverty constrain their potential to improve their lives. As a result, people living in poverty often feel powerless to improve their position. It is people's own actions that empower them, rather than those of others. However, Governments, civil society organizations and other development partners can support the empowerment of people by reducing — or removing — the barriers that constrain their opportunities and by ensuring that initiatives and programmes aimed at reducing poverty are participatory.

⁵ For examples of good practices and stories of poverty reduction through empowerment, see www.oecd.org/dac/poverty/empowerment; and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, footnote 4 above.

24. There is increasing evidence that inequality in the distribution of income is growing in both developing and developed countries.⁶ This will have negative consequences for many countries and will likely frustrate efforts to empower people and reduce poverty. The analysis contained in *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*⁷ suggests that a lack of growth and development, including poverty eradication, social integration and full employment is related to inequality in participation and decision-making. Empowerment is clearly related to inequality in society, politics and the economy. While power disparities — specifically, the lack of effective people's representation in political processes — and social and economic inequality are mutually reinforcing, the specific pathways between empowerment and inequality are not fully understood and should be further examined.

25. At the local level, there has also been considerable experience in expanding participation in the management of resources, development projects and provision of services,⁸ what is termed community development. The institutional structure for engaging people at the community level, through incentives and programmes, is significant. One element that is growing in importance is the decentralization of government programmes and administration to the local level. However, decentralization faces important challenges that must be addressed. Given that the poorest communities have the least capacity to participate, decentralization can in fact exacerbate inequality. While the empirical evidence is not conclusive, greater involvement of local populations in decision-making through democratic decentralization may significantly contribute to poverty reduction.⁹

26. Though most participation is expected to occur at the local level, where people live and work, it is also possible at the national and international levels. For example, at the national level, an increasing number of countries are engaging civil society organizations in policy discussion and in accountability processes.

B. Empowerment and full employment and decent work

27. Employment and decent work are crucial means to improve living standards. They can be essential to social integration and empowerment, provided that they bring adequate remuneration and income security as well as access to social protection. Workers holding a decent job are not only empowered personally, but also socially, since their job gives them social recognition. Jobs can transform the role of marginalized groups, in particular women, both in their communities and in society more broadly. Where they promote social dialogue, employment and decent work give workers a voice and therefore allow them to play an active role in decisions that affect their well-being. All in all, decent jobs empower people by making them agents of their own actions.

⁶ See, for example, Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

⁷ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York, Crown Business, 2012).

⁸ Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2013), available from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/11859/9780821382561.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of local governance, empowerment and poverty reduction, see United Nations Capital Development Fund, *Empowering the Poor: Local Governance for Poverty Reduction* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.III.B.10).

28. Empowerment is also a means of achieving decent work, to the extent that it makes it possible for individuals or groups to negotiate — often through collective action — more equitable access to jobs, better working conditions and ultimately more inclusive and job-rich patterns of economic growth.

29. Decent work for all is still a distant goal. Globally, 200 million people were unemployed at the end of 2011, an increase of 27 million jobless persons since 2007.¹⁰ However, changes in unemployment do not reflect the full impact of the economic crisis on workers and households. In poor countries, workers laid off from the formal sector have turned to the informal economy, where salaries are lower, working conditions are poorer and where most workers are deprived of representation. Even though informal employment covers a diverse range of jobs, working conditions in the sector are often not conducive to fostering empowerment. The recession and increased competition have even lowered earnings for workers employed in the informal sector. Consequently, progress in reducing working poverty has slowed. In 2011, there were an estimated 456 million workers living on less than \$1.25 a day. If poverty had continued declining at pre-crisis rates, the number of working poor would be lower by 50 million.¹⁰

30. Youth are disproportionately affected by unemployment and overrepresented in the informal sector and among the working poor. In 2011, 12.6 per cent of youth aged 15 to 24 were unemployed, as compared with 4.6 per cent of adults. The number of discouraged young workers, who are not counted among the unemployed because they are not actively seeking employment, has increased sharply in many countries as well. Early labour market experience is a key driver of personal and social empowerment; a difficult transition from school to work has a negative impact on long-term earnings prospects and increases the risk of unemployment later in life. Thus exclusion from productive activity will have negative consequences on the well-being of the current and future generations of young people. Besides affecting the skills, motivation as well as physical and mental well-being of youth, the loss of human and productive potential also undermines participation, social cohesion and stability.

31. The most effective way to influence employment opportunities and empower workers is through labour market policies and institutions, such as laws on minimum wage and wage-setting mechanisms, unemployment insurance and other mandatory benefits, employment protection legislation, active labour market programmes and collective bargaining. The participation of workers in the design and implementation of these policies can help in ensuring their success. Unionization and measures aimed at building workers' skills and social capital, in particular, give voice and market power to workers, thereby improving their prospects for decent work. As the role of unions and other social movements has weakened, the balance of power in work-related negotiations has shifted towards employers, and workers have lost an important means of affecting policy. It is important to note, however, that unions organized around the traditional employer-employee relationship are not well suited to give voice to those who do not work for a wage, or who do so outside the formal sector.¹¹ The growing incidence of informal and non-standard forms of employment has created momentum for innovative

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2012: preventing a deeper jobs crisis* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2012).

¹¹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2013: Jobs* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2012).

institutions, such as associations of self-employed workers that are organized around specific jobs or specific needs, for example, land rights, credit, savings and cooperatives.

32. Empowerment through economic institutions based on full member participation, such as cooperatives, serves as an important tool for the creation of decent employment as well as poverty reduction and social integration. One of the objectives of the International Year of Cooperatives (2012) was to promote the formation and growth of cooperatives among individuals and institutions to address common economic needs and for socioeconomic empowerment. The celebration of the international year supported the exchange of best practices on how to achieve this empowerment.

33. With the intention of boosting competitiveness and reviving growth, several developed countries have initiated labour market reforms in order to reduce labour protections, lower labour costs and facilitate exits. At the same time, developed countries have launched fiscal austerity that is being achieved through reduced social spending as well as layoffs and wage cuts. The dilemma is that labour market flexibility and the rationalization of the public sector are happening at a time when unemployment is at its peak among youth and other vulnerable groups. These policies are disempowering poor and marginalized groups and are adversely impacting their welfare, creating the potential for social disruption.

C. Empowerment and social integration

34. In the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development,¹ heads of State and Government committed themselves to “promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons” (commitment 4).

35. Social integration fosters the empowerment of all people through opportunities for decent work, the enjoyment of basic services and full participation in political life. Since the World Summit for Social Development, several mandates have been established to address the situation of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons, young people and indigenous peoples. Many Governments have put in place policies to combat exclusion, in particular of the most marginalized groups. Yet globalization and changing social structures and processes are expanding forms of risks and vulnerabilities, and much remains to be done to realize the goal of creating a society for all. Social integration should be promoted through social and macroeconomic policies that are implemented holistically and coherently, include redistributive measures and focus on anti-discrimination, participation and decent work. Effective approaches to social integration promote economic growth along with equity and empowerment.

36. Many individuals and social groups continue to experience discrimination and poverty and lack decent work and a voice in decision-making processes. They may regularly confront inadequate housing, unemployment or job insecurity, violence, childhood deprivation, family disintegration and a lack of access to health care, education and information. Such experiences, and their underlying causes, often illustrate the effects of social exclusion.

37. In both developed and developing countries, persons with disabilities have worse educational and employment outcomes than those without disabilities. In a 2009 study conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development of 21 upper-middle and high-income countries, working-age persons with disabilities had higher poverty rates in 18 countries, and were also twice as likely to be unemployed.¹² A key factor in the enabling environment is the removal of cultural and physical barriers, most of which relate to a lack of access to material and immaterial opportunities and to stereotypes entrenched in social and cultural traditions and the denial of basic rights. When such barriers are removed, persons with disabilities, particularly through their organizations, can impact policies and further empower others.

38. The indigenous paradigm of empowerment and development is holistic, encompassing environmental sustainability, development with culture and identity, and the affirmation of the socioeconomic, cultural and political rights of indigenous peoples. Around the world, disparities persist between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in respect of poverty, educational levels, income, health, environmental risks and other levels. In the area of health, indigenous persons are disproportionately affected across the spectrum of diseases and conditions, from infectious diseases such as HIV and AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and respiratory illnesses. Moreover, many of the most widespread causes of mortality among indigenous children are preventable, such as malnutrition, diarrhoea, parasitic infections and tuberculosis.¹³ Indigenous perspectives on health continue to be excluded from mainstream approaches to care and national health systems.

39. In member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the average percentage of people aged 65 and over living in poverty is 13.5 per cent, against a rate of 10.6 per cent for the population as a whole. In most countries, the incidence of poverty increases further with age, rising to an average of 16.1 per cent among persons aged 75 and over. The global population of older persons has a significantly higher proportion of women, who are at far greater risk of poverty owing to disadvantages in access to resources and income opportunities, particularly during later life and for widows or divorcees. Income insecurity and poverty among older persons also disproportionately affect ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities. Greater efforts are needed to empower older persons through strengthening capabilities, expanding choices, tackling discrimination and ensuring rights.

40. Young people additionally face risk factors for exclusion and marginalization. In particular, as described above, they are disproportionately affected by unemployment, job insecurity and working poverty. Moreover, worldwide, there are 621 million young people who are neither in employment, school or training nor looking for work.¹¹ Young people are increasingly frustrated about their future and feel that their voices are not being heard. However, the growing use of information and communications technologies among youth is providing new means of participation in civil society and in decision-making.

¹² World Health Organization and World Bank, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva, 2011), p. 39.

¹³ *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 09.VI.13), p. 162.

41. Efforts to achieve social integration continue to confront barriers such as discrimination, stigmatization, racism, xenophobia and gender-based violence. Despite major gains in the enactment of national legislation aimed at combating violence against women, such violence continues to disempower women across cultural and income lines. Up to 7 out of every 10 women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, with young women most exposed to violence. Discrimination and marginalization also continue to affect the Roma population. A study of the Roma in 11 European Union member States found that, among respondents, 90 per cent were living in poverty, 33 per cent were unemployed and 20 per cent lacked health insurance coverage.¹⁴ In response to such persistent social exclusion, the European Commission developed the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. The Framework represents the first time that the social integration and empowerment of the Roma has been addressed at the European Union level, and is linked with the Europe 2020 strategy for a new growth path. All member States agreed to develop an integrated approach to Roma inclusion across four policy areas — access to education, jobs, housing and health care — and prepared national strategies to address them.

42. The United Nations system is strengthening its focus on empowerment. The Secretary-General identified “Working with and for women and young people” as one of the top priorities for his Five-year Action Agenda, which laid out measures to deepen the United Nations campaign to end violence against women, promote women’s political participation worldwide, develop an action agenda for ensuring the full participation of women in social and economic recovery and address the needs of the largest generation of young people the world has ever known. Among other initiatives to advance the Agenda, a Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Youth will be appointed who will promote youth empowerment at all levels, including through exploring mechanisms for the participation of young people, with a special focus on the most marginalized and vulnerable youth.

IV. Policy frameworks and practical measures that promote empowerment of people

43. Empowerment is an important means to achieve the main social and sustainable development objectives. There is a need to create an enabling environment that can generate participation and make it effective.

A. Social protection

44. Social protection has proven to be an effective instrument for empowering individuals, families and communities, reducing poverty, vulnerability and inequality and strengthening social inclusion. The recent global economic crisis has demonstrated the important role of social protection in times of such crises and downturns. Social protection helps to prevent poverty and improves the resilience of

¹⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and United Nations Development Programme, *The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States — Survey results at a glance* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2012), available from <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/situation-roma-11-eu-member-states-survey-results-glance> (accessed on 16 November 2012).

individuals and families to economic shocks. In the long term, social protection helps individuals and families to build human capital and other assets and improve their livelihood prospects, thereby empowering them socially and economically. All in all, social protection is a crucial policy tool to further empowerment, participation, equity and social justice, and thus contributes to a fairer distribution of resources and benefits. As noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (formerly Independent Expert) “a national social protection floor is a basic set of rights and transfers that enables and empowers all members of a society to have access to essential services (such as adequate nutrition, health, education, housing, water and sanitation) and income security (through social transfers)” (see A/HRC/17/34, para. 65).

45. Social protection is also an essential investment that contributes to economic growth and makes growth more pro-poor while directly reducing poverty. It has positive macroeconomic effects and contributes to sustaining economic growth and raising productivity in national economies. Income support derived from social protection helps to stabilize income, which in turn can offset cyclical swings in consumption, thus helping to maintain levels of aggregate demand and economic growth.

46. Lessons from social protection schemes demonstrate that cash transfer programmes, universal child benefits, non-contributory old-age and disability pensions, conditional support to the unemployed and universal access to health care and social services have a dramatic impact on empowerment, poverty reduction, equity and human development outcomes.

47. Nearly 80 per cent of the world’s population is without adequate access to social protection; it is therefore crucial to develop comprehensive access to social services in countries where only rudimentary systems exist thus far, starting with basic income security and affordable access to essential services. The Social Protection Floor Initiative¹⁵ promotes nationally defined strategies that protect access to a basic and modest set of social security benefits for all citizens. National social protection floors should include guaranteed access to goods and services inclusive of essential health care, education and other social services. If implemented progressively, this basic set of transfers is affordable, even in the poorest countries.

48. Broadening access to existing social assistance or cash transfers and employment guarantee schemes will empower people living in poverty and marginalized groups to take greater control over their own lives and be less exposed to economic risks.

49. Social protection has an important role in the creation of a more inclusive and sustainable development path through breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The debate on the post-2015 global development agenda needs a comprehensive focus on poverty, empowerment and social inclusion, towards which social protection can be the ultimate route.

¹⁵ International Labour Organization, *Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization: report of the Social Protection Floor Advisory Group* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2011).

B. Investing in education, skills training and health for empowerment and improved livelihoods

50. Education, skills training and access to health care are essential components of any empowerment strategies designed to contribute to poverty reduction and employment creation and to fostering social integration. Social and economic mobility depends more on enabling factors, such as quality education, skills and knowledge enhancements and access to health care. By expanding human freedom and capabilities, education has an empowering effect on people's lives. It is vital in obtaining decent jobs, understanding and invoking legal rights, overcoming deprivation and raising the political voice of marginalized social groups. Considerable research with a focus on women's empowerment shows that improved education for women, including adult women, leads to improved child health and significant reductions in fertility. More importantly, investments targeting girls can have some of the highest returns of all development investments. Hence, concerted efforts have been made to empower women by broadening access to schooling and literacy opportunities. In addition to giving women opportunities for employment outside the home and broadening their understanding of the world outside their home, education also increases their input into family decision-making. Studies have further consistently shown that greater access to health care, contraceptives and nutrition enhances women's empowerment in low-income countries.

51. To eliminate or reduce the higher barriers in education and training that limit women's participation in more productive and remunerative work, countries have focused on implementing policies that empower women by reducing gender inequalities in education. As a result, considerable progress has been made towards gender equality through achievements in access to primary education. For all developing regions, school enrolment rates for girls are now at par with those for boys, with the ratio between the enrolment of girls and that of boys increasing from 0.91 in 1999 to 0.97 in 2010. For least developed countries and sub-Saharan Africa, the ratios increased from 0.84 to 0.94 and 0.58 to 0.76, respectively, during the same period (see A/67/257, para. 5). By enhancing their ability to participate in the labour market and other aspects of life, such impressive gains will, in the long run, contribute to the empowerment of not only women, but also the world's poor and other marginalized groups.

52. Skills training programmes are particularly important for the empowerment of young people. Besides enhancing their employability, such training opportunities also empower young people to run their own small and medium-sized enterprises or access other income-earning opportunities. Hence, greater efforts are required to expand access to vocational and business training, including for those in the informal economy. The empowerment of rural youth through agricultural skills training also contributes to increased agricultural productivity, higher incomes and poverty reduction.

53. In addition to empowerment programmes targeting individuals, it has been shown that community empowerment and participation improves health and education outcomes as well as the quality of public service provisioning. For example, in Indonesia and Togo, it was shown that increased community

participation in water supply projects resulted in improved child health strategies.¹⁶ Furthermore, a series of randomized control studies conducted by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab have underscored the importance of community empowerment and participation. In Kenya, empowering local communities to oversee the recruitment process of supplementary contract teachers and to effectively monitor teacher performance had a positive effect on children's learning, resulting in higher student test scores in targeted communities. In Uganda, a programme designed to enhance community monitoring of health providers improved the provision of public services that resulted in gains in infant weight and a 33 per cent reduction in under-5 mortality. Moreover, in India, a programme empowering individuals to improve teaching in their own communities contributed to gains in child learning outcomes.

C. Information and communications technologies

54. Enhanced availability of information through information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, mobile telephony and social media platforms has served to facilitate participation. Presently, 2.3 billion people are Internet users. Increasingly, ICTs serve as a crucial means of expanding access to information and opportunities, including for participation in decision-making. In this way, ICTs have a key role in empowering people. However, there remains a significant digital divide that requires greater attention and investment.¹⁷

55. Information and communications technologies can contribute to multiple dimensions of empowerment. They disseminate valuable information on public services, health care, education and training, livelihoods and rights, and also connect individuals and groups with one another, thereby strengthening both human and social capital. For example, the use of ICTs enables farmers to learn about innovating agricultural methods, older persons and people in remote areas to readily consult medical professionals and job seekers to access employment guidance and opportunities.

56. Information and communications technologies are also serving as tools to both foster and strengthen social mobilization, particularly within social groups. A study of youth and ICTs in the Arab awakening found that social media tools would not have been as influential as they were in the absence of existing social movements that were ready to be deployed.¹⁸ ICTs have also expanded opportunities for civil society organizations to influence debate on international policy and its formulation. For example, the Rio+twenty youth organization developed an online platform that

¹⁶ E. Eng and others, "Participation effect from water projects on EPI", *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 30, No. 12, 1990, pp. 1349-1358.

¹⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Over two billion people now connected to Internet but digital divide remains wide", *UN News*, 6 November 2012, available from <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/administration/over-two-billion-people-now-connected-to-internet-but-digital-divide-remains-wide.html>.

¹⁸ Ahmad Alhindawi, "Empowerment, youth and ICT", presentation delivered at the expert group meeting on promoting people's empowerment in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and productive and decent work for all, United Nations Headquarters, (10-12 September 2012), available from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs/2012/ppt/Ahmad-Alhindawi.pdf>.

effectively promoted the active participation of youth in the events and activities surrounding the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

57. Public policies on information and communications technologies should foster the wider use of ICTs, including through the development of technology infrastructure and public access, engagement in public-private partnerships, and the promotion of content in indigenous and local languages. In order to support inclusive access, policies should further focus on education and training on the use and development of ICTs. In addition, Government policies and programmes should address risks associated with the use of ICTs, including through awareness-raising.

58. Human empowerment was one of five main themes addressed in the seventh meeting of the Internet Governance Forum on the theme “Internet governance for sustainable human, economic and social development”, held in Baku in November 2012. The Forum discussed challenges to empowerment through ICTs, such as barriers to accessibility among people with disabilities and older persons and illiteracy, particularly among girls and women, and encouraged the expansion of community access to ICTs. It was noted that an increase in broadband penetration of 10 per cent can raise a country’s gross domestic product by 3.2 per cent and boost productivity by 2 per cent. Broadband Internet can therefore contribute to economic growth as well as human empowerment.¹⁹

59. In 2013, the Economic and Social Council will have as the theme of its annual ministerial review “Science, technology and innovation (STI) and culture for sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals”. Among other issues, the meeting will address ways in which technology and innovation foster access to knowledge, job creation and food security, and will highlight green technologies.

D. Participation, governance and accountability

60. Good governance is of critical importance to poverty reduction and social integration, and empowerment reinforces good governance. Good governance is participatory, geared towards consensus-building, accountable, transparent, responsive, efficient, equitable and inclusive. Rule of law reforms are critical and should be responsive to the present and future needs of society. To empower individuals and local communities, it has become increasingly imperative to improve governance at all levels. Greater attention should focus on developing or improving mechanisms that increase citizen access to information, enable inclusion and participation, strengthen the accountability of Governments to citizens and invest in local organizational capacity.

61. Countries have adopted various strategies to empower people. In India, devolving more constitutional power to people is contributing to popular governance. In particular, greater efforts are being made to actively involve marginalized segments of society in decision-making. The Government also passed the Right to Information Act, 2005, which has brought significant transparency to governing functions. By enhancing accountability, the Act strengthens public trust in

¹⁹ Internet Governance Forum secretariat, draft Chair’s summary of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum, Baku, 6-9 November 2012, available from <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/>.

Government administration and public institutions. In Brazil, a participatory budgeting process that enables citizens to participate in decision-making on the setting of budgetary priorities at the municipal level has been found to be effective.²⁰ In addition, the Government of Rwanda has adopted ambitious policies to help women economically and politically. Of particular note is the constitutional requirement that at least 30 per cent of all parliamentary and cabinet seats must go to women. One dramatic result of these efforts is that a more gender-sensitive parliament has abolished laws that prevented women from inheriting land and has made numerous amendments to discriminatory legislation.

62. Governments can make empowering policy choices by expanding the range of options available to people living in poverty. Some key ways that Governments can support poverty reduction through empowerment include investing in social and economic infrastructure, expanding regulatory measures that support and broaden basic rights and developing interventions and programmes that are inclusive, participatory and mindful of the importance of empowerment. The provision of a basic social protection floor is also a powerful means to empower people living in poverty.

63. The lack of legal rights and of access to justice for people living in poverty are significant barriers to poverty reduction and empowerment. Pro-poor property rights, labour protection, a fair, inclusive and socially responsible private sector and quality training and education have been demonstrated to reduce poverty.²¹

V. Recommendations

64. The Commission may wish to consider the following recommendations:

(a) **The participation of people in social, economic and political life is essential in order to achieve the eradication of poverty, social inclusion and empowerment, and in this regard, Governments should establish or strengthen institutions that facilitate civic engagement and the broad-based participation of citizens, in particular people living in poverty, and communities in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of socioeconomic policies;**

(b) **The creation of full employment and decent work for all should be at the centre of a policy framework for poverty eradication and social integration, given its importance for sustainable empowerment and participation, and appropriate public sector policies should be adopted to encourage both public and private investment in social and economic infrastructure;**

(c) **Universal access to basic social protection and social services is an important instrument for empowering people, and in this regard, Governments should consider establishing a national social protection floor as an effective safeguard against poverty and inequality, consistent with national priorities and circumstances;**

²⁰ Vera Schattan and others, "Participation and public policies in Brazil", in John Gastil and Peter Levine, eds. *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century* (John Wiley & Sons: San Francisco, 2005), pp. 174-184.

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of legal empowerment of the poor, see the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 64/215 on legal empowerment of the poor and eradication of poverty (A/66/341).

(d) Strategies to empower women, youth, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, the elderly and other marginalized groups should be treated as a matter of urgency by, inter alia, addressing their basic needs and concerns in the mainstream development agenda, in particular in the areas of full employment and decent work, equality, agriculture and infrastructure development, and financial inclusion, including access to microcredit;

(e) Governments and their development partners should forge public-private partnerships that help to create the conditions in which people living in poverty can be empowered to use their own skills and talents to work their way out of poverty, and that help to ensure a fair, inclusive and socially responsible private sector that promotes decent work for all;

(f) Educational systems and policies should provide adequate and practical opportunities to all, in particular young people, for on-the-job training, information about the labour market and assistance in finding decent work;

(g) Access to justice and legal instruments are essential to reducing poverty and promoting empowerment. Governments should promote the legal empowerment of the poor by ensuring pro-poor property rights and labour protections;

(h) Successful empowerment strategies, including those targeting various social groups, must be created within — or adapted to — specific national or local contexts;

(i) Appropriate measures should be taken to broaden basic rights and to develop effective policy frameworks for empowerment through interventions and programmes that promote inclusive and participatory growth.