

Speech by the Minister of Social Development Z Skweyiya at the International Bi-regional Conference on Social Protection, Somerset West

7 June 2007

Honourable Ministers of Social Development, Labour, Social Security and Social Services from Latin America and the African countries
Your Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps
The United Nations Resident Representative and Co-ordinator
Members of the Academic and Research fraternity
Senior Managers and advisors
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

It is a privilege for me to welcome you, on behalf of the Government and the people of South Africa, to our country and also to the City of Cape Town.

I would like to thank the researchers from Latin America and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the compliment in agreeing to have this Bi-Regional Conference on Social Protection in South Africa.

We are indeed humbled by your positive responses. You're coming to South Africa does give us the responsibility of ensuring that we engage in fruitful dialogue on the issues of social protection.

Ladies and gentlemen:

This gathering is of great significance for our countries as we continue to forge meaningful relationships of co-operation in our endeavours to respond to the challenges of poverty, vulnerability, inequality and social exclusion. The southern African sub-region incorporates some of the poorest countries in the world, with about 40% of people living in poverty if the crude one dollar a day measure is taken.

It is argued that inequality in the African sub-region is manifested through increasing levels of impoverishment, rising unemployment and the inability of the majority of people to access sources of livelihood or basic services.

Equally, the people of Latin America also continue to face the challenges of poverty and inequality, notwithstanding some significant progress in the last 15 years.

HIV and AIDS remains one of the key challenges of our time and has its most severe impact on the African continent. The disease is robbing our children of their parents and a sustained livelihood and burdening them with the costs of care, medicine and funerals.

Ladies and gentlemen

It has now become very apparent that neither the developmental approaches adopted in the 1960s and 70s, nor the "structural adjustment" reforms of subsequent decades have been effective strategies in reducing extreme disadvantages faced by the poorest and most vulnerable groups in our societies. Social security measures for example, though very significant, have proved to have limited successes in our countries.

There is a great degree of consensus that poverty means the complex, multi-dimensional state of material lack and ill-being of such a nature that it undermines the basis of effective social and economic being and participation; preventing our people from being able to live a meaningful life.

Poverty means a woman dying while giving birth, despite the great advances in medical science. Poverty means people dying in transit between work and home simply because of a reliance on sometimes private or public modes of transport. Poverty means dying from cholera because access to potable water is limited. It is in the context of this multi-faceted nature of poverty that many of our past efforts bore limited fruit.

Ladies and gentlemen

There is now also emerging consensus that social protection, which had its genesis in the developing country contexts, and implemented with great success in many Latin American, is the response of the South to our challenges of poverty, destitution, vulnerability and social exclusion. Social protection goes beyond the narrower concept of social security to encompass a package of benefits including income support and the social wage from the state, the market, civil society and households to individuals and households. This broad framework makes this concept more acceptable in developing countries than the concept of social security.

Social security has indeed proved beneficial in developed countries where large numbers of citizens depend on the formal economy for their livelihood. In our common country contexts of high levels of unemployment, a growing and significant informal economy, formal social security arrangements are almost absent for the vast majority of the working population and for the unemployed.

Our state's capacity to reach the vast majority of the poor people is often limited because of resource constraints. We therefore require multiple agencies to provide social protection as well as a developmental state that has the requisite capacity to intervene effectively. A properly construed framework of social protection is thus capable of holding the state responsible to provide for the poorest sections by regulating non-state agencies.

Many countries in Latin America and Africa have adopted a broad view of social protection. As this conference unfolds and the country case studies presented, we will draw inspiration from the success of a number of programmes.

* The success of the cash transfer programmes of countries such as the Brazilian Bosa Familia, the Mexican Oportunidades and the Chilean Solidario linked with conditions have generated fresh and new excitement in both developed and developing countries. I am sure that the delegates here will engage in the merits and demerits of these programmes.

* The comprehensiveness of the social assistance programme from Mauritius and the expansion of the safety net in Namibia, Botswana, discussions in Uganda and Tanzania are exciting developments as we seek to address poverty in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. These examples of income support and the positive impacts indicate that poverty alleviation has to be

accompanied by providing people with the ability to make purchasing decisions.

* There is widespread realisation that education, especially primary education must be provided free since any form of fees creates serious distortions and bias against the poor. Again the commitments of some Latin American countries to provide free secondary and tertiary education, linked with savings incentives serve as excellent proof of the success of this social protection measure.

* In both our regions the provision of adequate health continues to be a major challenge in respect of prevalence of preventable diseases that the poor are exposed to, inequitable access, exclusion from participation in minimum benefits packages. We should continue to strive for health systems that are inclusive, affordable and equitable.

* We are encouraged by the Chilean example of housing provision coupled with basic services of water, electricity and refuse removal. South Africa too has made significant progress in this area which has set us on course to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in these areas.

* Our regions have build systems of welfare services and community development, and we continue to address challenges of violence against women and children, substance abuse and social instability, in a comprehensive, albeit that the skills drain of professional social workers poses a new threat in our endeavours.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are pleased that since 1998, interaction between the countries of the South has intensified in a number of areas covering strategic engagements, exchange of expertise, consultations in social protection and regional technical assistance.

We need to further expand these engagements. There are five main areas in social protection on which our strategic cooperation ought to rest:

1. In respect of labour market work, we need policies and programmes designed to promote employment, the efficient operation of labour markets and the protection of workers
2. We need to think together on how to expand social insurance programs to cushion the risks associated with unemployment, ill health, disability, work-related injury and old age.
3. We need to collectively grapple with expanding the impact of income transfers and welfare services for the most vulnerable groups with little or other means, including single mothers, the homeless, or physically or mentally challenged people.
4. Exchanges of ideas are needed on micro-and area-based schemes to address vulnerability at the community level, including micro-insurance, agricultural insurance, social funds and programs to manage natural disasters.
5. The most critical of all is the need to find solutions to improve child protection and to ensure the healthy and productive development of our children.

When implemented properly, these policies and programmes can make a major contribution to our common overarching goal of poverty reduction. In closing, I wish to emphasise that the South-South Co-operation has a critical role to play in helping us build a brighter tomorrow. This we must pursue as part of our destiny and for our children. I wish this forum success in the deliberations on social

Thank you,

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