

AFRICAN UNION
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UNION AFRICAINE
UNIÃO AFRICANA

Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA P. O. Box 3243 Telephone: (251 11) 5517700 Fax :
(251 11) 5517844
website : www.africa-union.org

**STATEMENT OF THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AFRICAN UNION
COMMISSION AT THE EXPERTS GROUP MEETING
ON SOCIAL PROTECTION**

CAIRO - EGYPT 13-14 MAY, 2008

Theme: *"Investing in Social Protection in Africa"*

Chairperson,
Your Excellency the Minister of Social Solidarity
The Director of HelpAge International
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and honour for the African Union Commission to be present at this important Experts Group Meeting for the Northern Africa Region. I would like to convey to you the warm greetings of Advocate Bience Gawanas, the Commissioner for Social Affairs who could not be here to-day because of other pressing engagement. The African Union Commission is happy to associate itself with the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt and HelpAge International in organizing this meeting on social protection, an issue which is close to the heart of everyone of us gathered here. I would like to thank the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt for accepting to host this meeting and for the warm hospitality extended to us since our arrival. This is a testimony of the Government's commitment to fight against poverty and enhance the livelihood of African people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized group of the society.

This meeting is important in that it will provide us with an opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences and promote regional partnership in our endeavour to fight poverty and inequality and achieve human and social development. Ensuring human and social development is critical for Africa as it remains the less developed continent in the world. This is why the African Union Commission has put social

development high on its Agenda and emphasized the necessity to give priority to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized groups and enhance their livelihood. Although Africa has made significant strides in some areas of social and economic development and efforts are continuing to attain the Millennium Development Goals, it still faces numerous social development challenges which have had negative impact on the communities, particularly the poor and vulnerable. These challenges need to be addressed by looking at the human dimension and the rights of people to have a decent and affordable life.

These challenges have also led to the fragmentation of the family and its structure. It is a well known fact that the traditional African family has been the prime mechanism for coping with social, economic and political adversity and Africa's development has also been based on the strength of the family. However, this family structure and pattern has changed over the years due to social, economic and political circumstances.

Social protection, which is part of social development, includes responses by States and society to protect citizens from risks, vulnerabilities and deprivations and promotes strategies and programmes aimed at ensuring a minimum standard of livelihood for all people. Among others, these programmes include education and health care, social welfare, livelihood, access to a stable income and employment. The theme of this meeting which is "Investing in Social Protection in Africa" sets the tone, on the outset, for Governments to enhance their efforts in reducing poverty and ensuring the well-being of the people, in particular, the marginalized and vulnerable group by investing in social protection.

Most of the social protection mechanisms aim at ensuring social sustainability and contribute to economic growth and reduce income inequality and overwhelming poverty. The social protection mechanism has also assisted in responding to the needs of the people in general and the most vulnerable group, in particular, through adequate pensions, high quality and accessible social and health services and better targeted social assistance schemes. In this regard, social transfers in the form of cash and social capital have transformed the lives of the vulnerable and marginalised group, including children, the older people, people with disability, women as well as the family, by providing them with food, improving the education and health of children and poor families, empowering the poor to become self-sufficient, and developing the local markets.

However, the other aspect of social protection which seems to be neglected is equity and rights, especially for vulnerable people. These people not only need to enhance their livelihood through benefits but also need to be protected from exploitation, discrimination and abuse. Indeed there are overlaps between the economic and social aspects of social protection as they are interconnected. The challenge is how to synchronize policies to address both risk management and equity and rights. Indeed there is no one model or framework for this. What is required is an integrated and inter-sectoral approach that can promote and protect the rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized group; improve basic social welfare services for the needy; empower the family and the community ; address economic inequalities and gaps among different groups in society; provide social protection to strengthen the capacity of the community; develop social policies that would enhance the living standard of people; and develop poverty reduction strategies that take into consideration the vulnerable and marginalized groups.

We have in our midst to-day Experts from the social development and finance sectors from the Governments, the UN Agencies, the NGOs, the Civil Society, as well as International, Regional, and other Organisations, who have come to share with us their valuable experiences and information on social protection and why we should invest in social protection. This kind of synergy is important if we want to achieve concrete results in developing and implementing social protection programmes. I am sure that during the discussions we will have a lot to learn from each other and up-date our knowledge. We will also have the opportunity to know what kind of social protection models exist, which ones work better and how to improve others. We will also come up with important recommendations on appropriate social protection interventions.

Your Excellency,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me now to share with you the social development agenda of the African Union Commission which is to promote sustainable development at economic, social and cultural levels as well as cooperation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples. The Commission's development programmes, therefore, are geared towards rights based approach and human security in which people are the beneficiaries. One of its key roles is to provide the political leadership to harmonize and coordinate Africa's

efforts in ensuring that noticeable improvements are made in the lives of Africans. In this regard, the African Union Commission has taken a number of measures to address the social challenges at the continental level since the 1990s. Thus a number of policy documents related to social development have been developed and adopted to guide Member States in the formulation of their national social development programmes. These policy documents include, Charters, Plans of Action, Frameworks, Declarations and Decisions on issues related to: children, the family, youth, people with disability, older people, women, health, and HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other related Infectious Diseases. Many of these documents have constituted Africa's common position at international fora. The challenge is to ensure that these instruments are translated into concrete actions at national level and have positive impact on the socio-economic development of the country and the lives of the people. Moreover, it is necessary to put in place proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure progress made and plan the way forward.

The AU Commission has, equally, undertaken activities to address poverty reduction on the continent. This culminated in the convening of an Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government on Employment and Poverty Alleviation in Ouagadougou in September 2004. The outcome was a Declaration and Plan of Action to guide Member States to develop policies on poverty reduction and job creation; to ensure sustainable livelihood of the African population in general, and the vulnerable group in particular, and provide equal opportunities for all. In these documents commitments were also made to empower the most vulnerable group, include them in the poverty alleviation programmes and policies and ensure their participation in the implementation of these programmes. A Follow-up Mechanism, which spells out the role of Member States and other stakeholders in the implementation of the Declaration and Plan of Action, was also adopted by the meeting. The AU Commission was mandated to monitor and evaluate progress made in implementing the Plan of Action and report back to the AU organs.

The Commission is further developing a continental Social Policy Framework aimed at reducing poverty and closing the inequality gap among the different groups of the society. The social policy framework is based on the principle of enabling governments to protect and promote the welfare of their societies and providing opportunities for individuals and groups to achieve a maximum standard of living. Social protection, which cuts across all social issues, has been included

in the document. When adopted, the Social Policy Framework will guide Member States in specifically promoting the rights and ensuring the welfare of the marginalized and excluded groups including the orphans, vulnerable children and youth, people with disabilities, refugees and displaced people, families, the elderly, and people living with HIV/AIDS. The final draft of the Social Policy Framework will be presented to the First AU Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development scheduled to be held in October this year.

Your Excellency,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you are already aware, this meeting has been convened within the framework of existing AU policy documents related to social development and indeed the social protection element cuts across all of them. But, more specifically, this meeting is a follow-up to the 2006 Livingstone and Yaounde Call for Action which called on Governments, among others, to:

- develop costed plans on social protection within 3 years and engage in capacity building and experience sharing to support this work.
- explore linkages with national programmes on social protection as well as clearer links between Africa-wide social development programmes and policies adopted by the African Union Commission to that effect.
- adopt comprehensive social protection schemes for older people with particular emphasis on universal social pensions;
- coordinate social protection measures being implemented with various Ministries through a comprehensive national coordination framework.

This is the second of the three regional meetings which have been planned to cover the five regions of Africa. The last one to cover the Central and Western Regions will take place in Senegal from 9 to 11 June, 2008. Prior to these meetings national consultations were conducted by HelpAge International in six selected countries. The consolidated report of the national consultations, which constitutes the main document of this meeting, will be presented to you during the meeting.

In addition to the regional meetings, the AU Commission is also conducting a study on Social Protection in Africa. The outcome of these Regional Meetings as well as the Study will be considered by the First AU Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development

scheduled to be held later this year in Namibia. It is the hope of the AU Commission that the recommendations from these meetings will be endorsed by the Conference of Ministers and assist in providing clear guidance on future social development programmes in general and social protection, in particular. The AU Commission is ready to advance the social protection agenda forward and collaborate with all stakeholders in this regard.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank HelpAge International, especially, Dr. Nhongo, the Regional Director, for his assistance and collaboration with the African Union Commission in organizing these meetings. I would also like to thank DFID for its financial support and reiterate the AU Commission's gratitude to the Government of Egypt for hosting this meeting.

We look forward for very fruitful deliberations.

I thank you for your attention.