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and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: rethinking and strengthening social development
in the contemporary world

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The year 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development. During the 53rd session of the Commission for Social Development (February 2015), Member States acknowledged that the vision, principles and goals adopted at the Summit remain as relevant today as twenty years ago. Despite the enormous progress halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, more than 1 billion people still live below the poverty line. Rates of unemployment and underemployment, particularly among youth, are also unacceptably high, and many countries continue to grapple with the challenge of fostering social inclusion. More recently, many countries have experienced widening inequality, persistent poverty and exclusion, volatile food and energy prices, food and water insecurity, environmental degradation and intensified negative effects of climate change. People across regions often feel they are becoming more vulnerable to economic shocks as well as environmental and social risks. Building on the lessons learnt from the implementation of the Copenhagen Programme of Action, Member States during the 53rd Commission urged further integration of poverty eradication, productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration into the post-2015 development agenda.

Historically, social development has been pursued both as an end and as a means. Social development as a means, or a process, will be increasingly important to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals over the coming decades. To effectively integrate the social dimension of sustainable development in national and international policies and development agendas, there is a need to shift our approach to social development, going beyond pursuing it merely as a goal — something that can be “achieved”, to seeing it as an ongoing process of structural transformation that can be “facilitated”, “supported” or “enabled.” The United Nations and the international community should pay greater attention to assessing how social development processes contribute to achieving sustainable development.

Implementation of the post-2015 Global Goals will require a strategic and holistic approach that looks at the inter-relations between the various dimensions of development and focuses on the root causes of problems, as well identify enablers that drive transformative changes. It also brings new mechanisms of accountability, higher complexity and results-based policy-making, which have implications for development cooperation. The post-2015 development agenda, as a universal plan, indicates a conceptual shift in the global partnership for development to policy coherence for sustainable development with strengthened global partnerships in areas including trade, migration, climate change, technology and financial stability and transparency of financial transactions.

While the importance of the social dimension of sustainable development is clear, it has often been neglected or marginalized. There is an urgent need to think more and better about the role of social development in the sustainable development agenda. Poverty was measured only through economic terms (income) in the Millennium Development Goals; poverty is a more complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It is necessary to reposition the international community and the UN in efforts to eradicate poverty by advocating for a universal policy framework (i.e. the right to social security; no discrimination).

Considering the current economic and political environment, we agree it is time to rethink and strengthen social development.

In rethinking social development, we need to build on the outcome of the Summit documented in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, which provides a strong foundation for achieving social development, and considered the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and its targets.

In rethinking social development, the shifting contexts and priorities of social development should be captured, analysed and addressed. Some aspects of this shift include widening inequality, global economic and financial integration and growing economic uncertainty, climate change and its intensifying negative impacts, volatile energy and food prices, food security, the spread of communicable diseases, environmental degradation, technological innovation (Information Communication Technologies in particular), rapid urbanization, structural job insecurity (jobless growth), the changing nature of work and the shift in employability of people, growing migration and the increased role of remittances to development, and increasing internal conflicts. These shifting contexts impact social development.

There has been growing recognition, particularly in the aftermath of the recent global financial and economic crisis, that a dominant focus on economic growth is neither sufficient nor sustainable. Economic development must be accompanied by social progress and the well-being of all people, supported by effective social policies and environmental protection. We call for more inclusive, equitable and sustainable development.

The complexity of the relationship between social and economic development needs to be recognized. In particular, the interaction between economic growth, widening inequality, the well-being of people, employment, and social integration should be further examined. Addressing this important socio-economic linkage will help better understand and analyse poverty and sustainable development.

Another important linkage that needs strengthening are the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, including the interaction between climate change, food, energy and water insecurity, shifting production and consumption patterns, the transition to green jobs, and their social impacts. This is a complex task, as several sectoral policies have to be looked at simultaneously.

In promoting social integration, there is a need to harmonize the current group-specific approach with the broader universal approach towards an inclusive society. One way of doing so is to ensure that the enhancement of social cohesion is built into other policy objectives. Strong advocates from Member States and/or civil society are needed to advocate for social integration in the international agenda. This could be done by promoting an inclusive approach to development.

To facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of development goals, it is important to invest in data collection (disaggregated data where possible) and develop measureable indicators.

In the post-2015 context, the Commission for Social Development should take a lead in strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development, by focusing on clear social goals, as well as social dimensions of economic and environmental goals, with particular attention to their inter-relation and social drivers. In doing so, it is necessary to first clarify the meaning of “social sustainability”.