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**1st AU CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS  
IN CHARGE OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
27 - 31 OCTOBER 2008  
WINDHOEK - NAMIBIA**

## **CONCEPT NOTE**

**THEME: *TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
AGENDA FOR AFRICA***

# 1st AU CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS IN CHARGE OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Theme: *Towards a Sustainable Social development Agenda for Africa*

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**DATE** : 27 – 31 October, 2008

**VENUE** : Namibia

## I. INTRODUCTION

Africa has, in the last decade, made significant strides in certain areas of social and economic development as shown, for example, by increased literacy rates in many countries, increased enrollment rate of children, reduction in child mortality, recovery in the rates of economic growth, increasing democratisation and reduction of civil strife. Despite the above however, the general developmental crisis has not been fundamentally altered. African countries rank low on any list measuring social development and economic activity despite the wealth of natural resources in the continent. In most African countries development has not made a significant impact on the lives of the majority of the population, especially the marginalized and vulnerable group. Most vulnerable groups are children particularly orphans, the elderly, people with disabilities, widows, chronically ill (HIV/AIDS posing the most threat) people in situations of conflict.

Many governments have responded to the social challenges by adopting various strategies. However, and despite these strategies, policy prescriptions that came with structural adjustment packages were based on a narrow quantitative concern for economic growth and macro-economic stability. There was little or no concern for questions of equity, livelihoods and human security. Where these concerns were on the agenda, they were to be achieved through trickle-down effects of growth, and not by any deliberate intervention by the state. Such an approach viewed the social sector as a consumptive sector and therefore did not attract investment. In general, social development was seen as a drag on economic development, existing merely to serve the objectives of the latter. This was unlike what occurred in some successful countries, such as the Nordic and the Asian developmental states, where macro-economic policy was conditioned by social development goals.

The challenges today faced by many communities in post-colonial Africa are widespread poverty, unemployment, violence, diseases, conflicts, disasters, environmental degradation, poor access to basic infrastructure and social services such as potable water and sanitation; roads; safe and secure housing;

basic education and training, and healthcare. In turn, these factors cause high infant and child morbidity and mortality rates, high maternal mortality, low life expectancy, disability, poor health and unnecessary suffering. Africa also has the highest rates of illiteracy, mortality and HIV-AIDS prevalence in the world. The majority of Africans work in the informal economy and are vulnerable to job insecurity and low and erratic income, and they lack basic social security and protection. Given the gendered structure of African societies, and their low status, women and girls are more severely affected by the scourge of poverty and other social ills in the continent.

There is also no doubt that these problems have also led to the fragmentation of the family and alienation of kinships and community which has served as social support systems for many. Whereas in traditional communities there have always been a sense of belonging and sharing, they have also experienced deprivation, powerlessness, violation of human dignity, social isolation, gender inequity, corruption and ineffective service delivery systems.

Poverty is one of the most pervasive challenges which many people have to deal with. Poor people experience poverty in many different ways- as hunger and food insecurity, its psychological dimensions of powerless, voiceless, dependency, shame, and humiliation (but maintenance of cultural identity and social norms of solidarity helps poor people continue to believe in their own humanity, despite inhumane conditions.) lack of access to basic infra-structure; thirst for literacy because many see education offering an escape from poverty; poor health and illness – cost of health care as well as income lost due to illness; having the ability to manage physical, human, social and environment rather than income and gender inequality

Many would argue that the most important issue in addressing poverty is to increase income but for the poor it is social assets which refers to social networks such as kinship networks, neighbours, and informal associations. Other assets include the following:

1. Physical (land and material belongings)
2. Human (healthcare, education and training and labour power)
3. Environmental (grass, trees, water, etc)

Therefore, lack of social assets in particular exposes individuals, households and communities to increased risk of impoverishment. Despite all the challenges mentioned above, people have also shown resilience, resourcefulness and solidarity for the survival of communities.

The right to development is embodied in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the AU Constitutive Act of the African Union Commission. The AU Commission's vision, therefore, is to mainstream sound and sustainable social development in all development policies. The promotion of 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 are among the priorities of the AU Commission. Thus, Africa should invest in its human resources and above all ensure equitable access of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups to social services especially in rural areas.

One of the key roles of the Department of Social Affairs, therefore, 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 carrying out this vision, the AU Commission works in close collaboration with development partners and different agencies. It is also in this spirit that the AU Commission collaborates with its partners to assess progress made in implementing the MDGs related to social development.

Measures which have been taken by the African Union Commission in addressing the social challenges at the continental level since the 1990s include, amongst others:

- An African Common Position on Human and Social Development in Africa was adopted by the African Heads of State and Government in June 1994 as Africa's contribution to the World Summit for Social Development,
- The Declaration and Plan of Action Employment and Poverty Alleviation to guide Member States to develop policies on poverty reduction and reduce social exclusion.
- Continental Social Policy Framework aimed at poverty reduction and closing the inequality gap.
- Conducting of a Study on Social Protection Systems in Africa.
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- The African Youth Charter;
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa;
- The Plan of Action on the Family in Africa;
- The Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing;
- The Declaration and Plan of Action on the African Decade of Disabled Persons;
- Abuja Declaration and Framework Plan of Action on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Other Related Infectious Diseases;
- The Strategic Framework for Migration Policy in Africa
- Africa's Health Strategy
- The Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

The challenge is to ensure that these instruments are implemented at the national level to have real impact on socio-economic development and the lives of the people and to put in place proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The AU Commission will continue to pursue its advocacy, follow-up and monitoring role to ensure the well-being of the people of Africa.

## **II. RATIONALE**

This is the first AU Conference which will bring together all African Ministers in charge of Social Development. It falls within the framework of the various instruments adopted by the African Union and more specifically the African Common Position on Human and Social Development in Africa which was Africa's contribution to the World Summit for Social Development in 1994. Similarly in 2001, the global community adopted the MDGs with clear targets for the achievement of social development. After a decade, it is pertinent to take stock of the situation, identify what has worked well, the good practices and constraints. It will be an opportunity to learn from each other and provide a basis for integrated social development policies. The Conference will aim to:

- identify and promote measures needed to accelerate the attainment of longer, healthier, and better lives for the people of the continent especially the vulnerable group;
- support the strengthening of national systems to provide the basic services and cater for the welfare of the people in general and the marginalized and poorer groups of the society, in particular;
- promote the rights of all the sectors of the society, including the elderly, people with disabilities, the family, and women and include them in the development policies and programmes

## **III. JUSTIFICATION**

Upon the recommendations made by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sessions of the AU Labour and Social Affairs Commission, in Decision EX.CL.290 (IX) on the Fourth Session of the AU Labour and Social Affairs Commission adopted by the 9<sup>th</sup> Session of the AU Executive Council and endorsed by the 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly of Heads of State and Government in July 2006, the AU Commission was mandated to organize a meeting of Social Development Ministers to consider social development issues in Africa and adopt a Social Policy Framework for Africa

## **IV. MAIN OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of the Conference are:

1. To review and adopt a Social Policy Framework for Africa;
2. To review and assess progress made by Member States in implementing the various instruments in the area of social development, identify gaps, constraints and best practices;
3. To forge partnership with development partners and CSOs in supporting AU Member States to implement the various instruments on social issues;

The Conference will also :

1. Popularize the various existing instruments on social issues;
2. Share and exchange good practices on social development in Member States including policies and programmes;
3. Adopt recommendations to enhance social development in Africa and promote the rights and welfare of the most vulnerable group of the society.

## **V. EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

The Conference will adopt:

- A Social Policy Framework for Africa
- A Declaration on Social Development
- An African Common Position on Social Integration to constitute Africa's contribution to the 47<sup>th</sup> UN Commission on Social Development

## **VI. FORMAT OF THE MEETING**

The Conference will be organized in two phases:

### **(a) Experts Meeting: 27 – 28 October 2008**

During the first two days of the Conference, Experts/ officials from Member States will consider the documents and provide their inputs and make appropriate recommendations for the Ministers' consideration and approval.

### **(b) Ministers Meeting: 30 – 31 October 2008**

The Ministers will consider the Report of the Experts' Meeting and adopt its recommendations and the Social Policy Framework for Africa

## **VII. AGENDA**

Apart from the Draft Social Policy Framework for Africa which is the main item on the Agenda, the Conference will also consider specific items related to:

- The Family within the framework of the Plan of Action on the Family;
- People with Disabilities, in particular, the Plan of Action on the African Decade for Disabled Persons

- The Elderly and Ageing – The establishment of a Steering Committee on Ageing to oversee the implementation of the AU Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing in Africa;
- Study on Social Protection Systems in Africa

## **VIII. DOCUMENTATION**

### **(a) Working documents:**

The key working documents for the Conference will include:

- A study on Social Protection
- Draft Social Policy Framework in Africa

### **(b) Reference documents:**

The reference documents will include:

- Various existing AU instruments related to social issues;
- Other regional and international social development documents

Relevant information will be placed on the AU Website ([www.africa-union.org](http://www.africa-union.org)), and will also be circulated during the Conference.

## **IX PARTICIPANTS**

It is expected that the 1<sup>st</sup> AU Ministerial Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development will bring together: Ministers responsible for Social Development and Experts/Officials from AU Member States, the RECs, the AU Commission, UN Agencies, Development Partners, International, Regional and National Organizations, including NGOs, CSOs, CBOs, dealing with social development issues, Independent Experts and Resource Persons, and Special Guests.

## **X. ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS**

The Commission of the African Union will be responsible for the invitations to Member States and other invitees as well as the preparation of the Agenda, the Programme of Work and related documents.

## **XI. BUDGET AND OTHER RESOURCES**

While the AU Commission will contribute the amount earmarked in the budget for the convening of the meeting, financial and technical support might be provided by partner organizations to facilitate the preparation of documents and sponsor the participation of representatives from Member States, CSOs, independent experts and resource persons.

## **XII. CONTACT PERSONS:**

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