

Session II: Increasing outreach of social protection through better and decentralized social protection services

*Comments by: ISIDRO ANTONIO C. ASPER, VP for External Affairs,
Federation of Free Workers, Philippines*

The presentations are all well-intentioned. In each case, the principle of subsidiarity is made to operate; they try to bring down governance and social services nearer to the people especially targeting the vulnerable ones, as they should. The ICROP in South Africa and the Labour Net in Karnataka are two examples of a decentralized delivery system that tries to bring Mohamad to the mountain because the mountain cannot go to Mohamad, so to say. This is why, I think, that these two examples stand out among the rest.

But the principle of subsidiarity has a twin operating principle: and this is the principle of personal responsibility. In the end, people must take responsibility for their own protection, simply because they are both the object and subject of development, achieved among others through social protection services that the state tries to ensure to reduce their risk and vulnerability.

All the presentations link the provision of social protection services to employment, which is almost always a good case to lift the poor and vulnerable out of their poverty “by the sweat of (their) own brows”, so to say. In this respect, all the case examples presented are all to the mark.

By way of playing devil’s advocate on the presentations, here are some of the gaps I see:

The kind of employment provided in the case examples can still keep the beneficiaries in continuing poverty, as the jobs they are made to work on does not provide them with sufficient and regular income to lift them out of their poverty. So it was wisely said in the past that employment is key to mitigating poverty; but only when said employment partakes of the characteristics of decent work.

Nothing has been said about consultations with the intended beneficiaries of the social protection services, except perhaps in the case of the Labour Net that is at the same time organizing the workers in their trades and training them in marketable skills. In which case, people merely become recipients of services that have no transformative effect on them to become personally responsible for their own action and protection.

If social protection is a human right, then it is a matter for the vulnerable people to assert that right, and for government to ensure and guarantee that the services intended for them are theirs by right, and not provided as “welfare” and “charity” coming from above.

Also, we can never be sure that the design of the delivery system together with the package of benefits intended for the vulnerable people are what they really need until they express themselves through consultation and negotiation.

This is why a social dialogue mechanism has to be established in each case, that would involve them in the design, packaging and delivery of social protection services.

There are three activities in social dialogue: exchange of information, consultation and negotiation leading to an agreement. For these activities to be meaningful, it needs to be assured that the beneficiaries are empowered, i.e. that they take personal responsibility for their own deliverance.

Empowerment requires that the subject of social protection be freely informed of their choices; this requires guarantees for their exercise of freedom of information to enable them to make the right choices for themselves. Possessed of the correct information, both consultation and negotiation would become more effective and efficient.

Effective social dialogue, especially in its aspects of consultation and negotiation all the more requires that people – the subject and object of development – are organized in any mode that will suit their purposes, and in order that they gain a collective voice.

So far, this is not the case, in the light of the various legal and administrative restrictions for them to freely organize and to collectively bargain in each country in the ASEAN as well as in the broader Asia. One only needs to refer to the reports of the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) and the observations made by the Committee on Freedom of Association (CFA) to know the extent to which these rights are suppressed in law and practice.

Decentralization of course requires harmonization of national policies and programs so that synergies can be maximized. But more importantly, decentralization is as effective only as the extent to which people in the grassroots are organized and gain collective voice. And then they can take actions on their own behalf, and good governance is achieved because it is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people.