

Planning for a 'Society for All'

Schindlmayr T*

Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, New York, United States of America

Abstract

Social integration remains an elusive goal. Governments committed themselves at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development to foster social integration and eliminate social exclusion. Numerous individuals remain excluded from the policy-making process and their voices are unheard, particularly those from marginalised groups. This paper outlines preliminary thoughts on the 'inclusive policy process', whereby governments proactively seek the views of citizens in their decision-making. Such a process could be seen as a first step towards a 'society for all'.

Keywords

Social integration, Copenhagen Declaration, 'inclusive policy process', mainstreaming, 'society for all'

Introduction

At the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, world leaders called for the fostering of stable, safe and just societies. Together, the resulting Copenhagen Declaration and Copenhagen Programme of Action represent a social contract at the international level. At its core is the desire to establish a 'society for all'. At the centre of this is the notion of social integration in intergovernmental discourse and national policy-making. Social integration was described as the creation of a 'society for all', in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. The Summit noted that social integration is an important determinant of poverty and unemployment which, in turn, significantly affect the ability of societies to achieve social integration. Therefore, addressing all three core issues holistically is essential. It recognised that the failure to achieve social integration could lead to social fragmentation and polarisation, widening disparities and inequalities of income and wealth, and strains on individuals, families, communities and institutions.

Commitment Four of the 1995 Summit outlined the components of achieving social integration. It states that:

“We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.”

Social integration is both a goal and a process that promotes inclusion and counters social exclusion for such reasons as age, race, gender, and disability. Governments are the main agents for creating a ‘society for all’, where the human rights of individuals are respected. Social policy needs to be designed to ensure that the goal of Copenhagen can be achieved and to ensure that those individuals who have historically been excluded fully participate.

The Division for Social Policy and Development has embarked on an initiative to explore ways that enhance social integration and to create a ‘society for all’. This paper outlines some of the preliminary thoughts on how governments can start planning for a ‘society for all’. In particular, it focuses on the notion of an ‘inclusive policy process’, whereby governments proactively seek the views of individuals in their decision-making. This paper will elaborate these thoughts and ideas by reporting on the results of a recently held workshop, attended by academics and practitioners, that addressed these questions.

Towards socially inclusive societies

The Copenhagen Programme of Action placed the focus of social integration not on ‘vulnerable’ individuals or groups, but on the dynamic relationships in all societies that create vulnerability and social exclusion. Social inclusion (the opposite of social exclusion) may be considered a means to achieve social integration. Social integration was no longer to be achieved by making people adjust to society, but by making society accepting of all people. Previously, most social policies and programs aimed to improve the situation of social groups by helping them overcome their ‘difference’ (however that was defined) so that they could ‘fit’ better into ‘normal’ society. The message of Copenhagen was that social policies should promote more flexible and tolerant societies that embrace all people.

Achieving better social integration in the longer term requires changing the dynamic relations in society that create inequality. Social institutions and mechanisms should be accessible to people and responsive to their needs; ensure opportunities for every individual to participate in all spheres of public life; strengthen participation and involvement of civil society; maintain social stability and promoting social justice and progress; promote non-discrimination, tolerance and mutual respect, and the value of diversity; promote equity and equality of opportunity and social

mobility, as well as gender equality and equity and empowerment of women; and eliminate physical and social barriers with the aim of creating a society accessible for all, with special emphasis on measures to meet the needs and interests of those who face obstacles in participating fully in society.

The term 'socially inclusive society' should be understood as an umbrella concept that includes a number of areas, policy approaches, and social mechanisms that are separate from but complementary to political institutions and mechanisms. Among the components making up a socially inclusive society are:

- inclusive planning structures and approaches, including budgeting
- participatory methodologies for obtaining information, analysing it and channelling it to policy making
- extra-political institutions and/or mechanisms that allow competing groups and interests to reconcile differences and reach compromise
- forums and mechanisms for the organisation and participation of civil society
- services and resources that provide social protection for all members of society
- policy-relevant academic research and data collection.

Moving beyond mainstreaming

Some specific groups, such as youth, older persons and persons with a disability, remain largely excluded from the policy-making process and their voices are not heard. Mainstreaming has been central to the political and social integration of marginalised groups' to date, laying the groundwork for the promotion of an enabling environment. Much of the legislation and policies introduced were reactive, intending to correct historical injustices. In most cases, anti-discrimination legislation was introduced along with enforcement measures. Several countries introduced policies giving preferential treatment to individuals from marginalised groups to facilitate them playing a larger role in society. These have often been controversial in their implementation. In many places, however, anti-discrimination legislation remains defied and there are numerous instances where it has not been implemented. The limited number of governments adopting preferential policies, coupled with controversies about its philosophical underpinnings and implementation, suggest that this route may not be the best way forward.

Societies are only as strong as their weakest link. To achieve a 'society for all', marginalised social groups need to actively participate throughout the entire policy process — not treated as an afterthought by politicians and administrators. Policy-makers could be more proactive by introducing mechanisms that allow those historically excluded from the policy process to express their views and be assured that they are incorporated into government policies and programs. By

finding ways that integrate the most marginalised groups into the policy process, society would have established systems that allow everyone to contribute. Achieving this requires new directions that complement, build upon and perhaps replace mainstreaming programs.

Steps towards an ‘inclusive policy process’

No social entity can exist for any period of time unless people identify with it. To ensure this occurs all societies need to develop effective and lasting inclusive mechanisms. Despite attempts to minimise marginalisation, many individuals remain isolated from the process. Research suggests that citizens want to be more actively involved in the decision-making process. However, a lack of transparency in the processes and a failure by governments to convey to their citizens how their opinions were taken into consideration during the deliberation process leave many disillusioned. Political reforms associated with pro-market reforms have largely ignored social policy issues and have frequently side-stepped the most disadvantaged. There is a need to introduce measures that correct the apparent democratic deficits in many countries.

Governments have committed themselves through international human rights treaties¹ to the full participation of every citizen in political and social processes. At Copenhagen they agreed to the promotion of a people-centred environment with broad-based participation in the formulation and implementation of policies. However, in many countries, traditional approaches to citizenship seem not to be working. Citizens are increasingly questioning governments, their actions and the policy process in general. Many ask if the decisions taken by politicians and administrators are in society’s best interest. Improved access to information technology helps facilitate discussions and debates on political matters. Several factors prevent governments from realising their stated commitments. Difficulties in conceptualising and implementing the necessary requirements, such as changes to the regulatory framework, or not recognising the benefits of participatory processes are some of the barriers.

Establishing an ‘inclusive policy process’ is one possible element, albeit an important one, for governments to realise their international human rights commitments, foster social integration and aspire towards a ‘society for all’. It envisages mechanisms that enable governments to actively seek the views of citizens when formulating social policies. This notion goes beyond the

¹ Examples include:

Art. 2 *Human Rights Declaration (1948)* states that everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms of the Declaration without distinction

Art. 2(1) *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)* notes that state parties to the covenant recognise the rights outlined in the covenant without distinction of any kind

Art. 25(a) *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)* notes that everyone should have the right and opportunity to partake in public affairs without distinction

Art. 2(2) *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)* states that rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind.

mainstreaming concept of governments considering marginalised groups, to establishing means whereby governments encourage and facilitate their active participation throughout the entire policy process. Having an approach in place that allows greater community participation should ensure that policies are inclusive from the outset, addressing people's expressed needs and avoiding social exclusion. As the topic is multifaceted and interdisciplinary, pertinent issues need to be identified and analysed before developing practical steps that countries can implement (see Appendix 1). This raises such issues as: What are the best methods of engaging citizens into the policy process? How can governments move beyond mainstreaming to become more proactive in consulting all citizens on social issues? How can the policy dialogue be best opened to benefit marginalised groups?

Regulatory framework

Changing the political process requires alterations to the regulatory framework, regardless of the type of government in place. In some developed countries, there has already been a shift towards greater community involvement. These governments were concerned by the democratic deficit, whereby citizens felt increasingly removed from decision-making. Common law countries, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, seem to be at the forefront of involving communities into the policy process. The introduction of appropriate legislation and establishment of government departments have facilitated greater community participation. These countries have obvious similarities in terms of their political and judicial structures. Can the approach be replicated in countries where such features are absent?

Establishing a national framework is one option. Is it a prerequisite or can elements of the 'inclusive policy process' be achieved at other levels of government? Perhaps, an 'inclusive policy process' approach is more suitable at the local government level.

Monitoring of the 'inclusive policy process'

To date, few monitoring tools capture social dimensions. Attempts, such as the Human Development Report, do not go far enough in capturing the complexities associated with social integration. This lack of appropriate indicators is a significant reason why it is difficult to hold governments accountable. Moreover, economic and social statistics do not adequately capture the realities faced by marginalised groups.

Finding appropriate measures to monitor social integration is a first step towards an 'inclusive policy process' Tools such as participatory monitoring, social accounting, gender-based budgeting, and triple-line budgeting could be modified and extended to assess the efforts of governments. Monitoring needs to be rights-based to comply with international norms. Some form

of quantitative approach will be necessary for governments to track their progress. How can this be best achieved? How should governments communicate results of the monitoring process to its citizens?

Conclusion

Social integration and a 'society for all' remain elusive, but not unachievable, goals. To fulfil their promises at Copenhagen, governments need to reconsider the way they interact with their citizens, particularly those from groups that remain marginalised. In many jurisdictions community participation is often viewed as a tokenistic gesture or a requirement necessary under the law. Policy-makers do not necessarily recognise the benefits of engaging with their communities both in terms of the policies themselves and the overall benefits to society.

The idea of an 'inclusive policy process' is an extension of the debates revolving around deliberative democracy. It would allow all individuals to participate in decision-making and eventually lead to better policies for all.

Appendix 1. 'Inclusive policy process' — likely steps needed

1. Raising awareness and open dialogue on programs:
 - Amongst policy-makers, bureaucrats and the public of the need for reforms to the budget and legislative process.

2. Setting defined social issues dealing with social integration in the decision-making process:
 - Need to gather relevant and reliable information necessary for the policy process for starting community participation and legislative processes (e.g. censuses, Demographic and Health Surveys, other surveys). Introduce internal controls to ensure confidentiality and privacy
 - Establishing processes that consider fiscal undertaking (gender responsive budgets)
 - Use a range of consultative tools to collect public opinion
 - Level of community involvement depends on the topic under discussion.

3. Integrate social factors into the regulatory process:
 - Adoption of appropriate legislation to reform the legislative and budgetary process
 - Make amendments to the regulatory framework as required. Legislate for reporting requirements.

4. Monitoring, auditing and reviewing of progress:
 - Social assessments projects to identify the implementation of the policy

- Auditing methods that consider social dimensions (e.g. social accounting, gender-based budgeting, triple/quadruple bottom line reporting)
- Development of social integration measures and indicators
- Provide indicators to make comparisons over time
- Use consultative techniques to gain feedback. Leads back to Phase One.