

Social Services and the SDGs

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Let me start by thanking His Highness, Sheik Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamad Al Qasimi, Crown Prince and Deputy Governor of the Emirate of Sharjah and Chairman of the Executive Council, as well as the Department of Social Services for inviting me today to address the role of social services in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

I am extremely grateful for the warm welcome I have received in the United Arab Emirates and in Sharjah. Every time I visit the UAE I feel overwhelmed by your hospitality and impressed by the leadership and vision of your country, including the clear ambition and commitment to strive towards the achievement of the SDGs. The UAE's Vision 2021, launched by H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum in 2010, is an inspiring action plan for the UAE's growth and development in the next 4 years. I take this opportunity to congratulate you on the alignment of the UAE's Vision 21 with the SDGs, and congratulate the Emirate of Sharjah for hosting such an excellent conference focusing on the importance of strengthening social services for transformational change. The UAE's efforts and progress in this field are exemplary.

2018 marks 100 years since the birth of the founding father of the UAE, H.E. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayhan. Sheikh Zayed's leadership founded the nation of the UAE and its core values of tolerance, progress for prosperity, environmental stewardship and leadership, as well as charity. In 1971 Sheikh Zayed established the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, which helped development work in 40 developing nations in the Arab world, Asia and Africa, as well as building schools and hospitals in the UAE, and sustaining orphanages across the globe. This visionary anticipated, almost 44 years ago, the path of sustainable development, ending poverty and greater equality

which were captured in the 2030 Agenda, adopted in September 2015. The same concern for people prevails today when the UAE is one of the very few countries with a Minister for happiness.

There can be no more appropriate venue, within the UAE to host today's conference. I am therefore very pleased to be here to speak on the subject of Social Services for the SDGs, and look forward to our engaging discussion.

On 27 September 2015, United Nations (UN) Member States adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 169 of these Member States were represented at the highest levels including by Presidents and Prime Ministers. The Agenda is an ambitious plan of action for people, planet, peace and prosperity, seeking to strengthen the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a unified manner. For the first time the Agenda has brought into focus aspirations for peaceful and just societies everywhere.

While it may appear that the goals and targets are distinct and different, in reality they are an indivisible matrix of interrelationships. Progress on one goal and one target has multiple co-benefits on other goals and targets. Thus the 2030 Agenda must be seen as an integrated development agenda and must be pursued in an integrated way.

This new development agenda calls for efforts to combat poverty in all its forms everywhere and greater equality so that, as countries continue to develop, the benefits of growth can be enjoyed by all. At the heart of the Agenda are the principles of reaching the furthest first and leaving no one behind; the concept of equality and universality are key. The agenda clearly states that the SDGs will not have been met unless they have been met for all – the poorest, the weakest, the most marginalized and the most vulnerable.

The second significant aspect of this Agenda is the call it contains for deeper engagement of all citizens and the development of partnerships for its realization. The individual, the family, the community, the village, the city and the country should engage like never before. Academia, civil society, business and other institutions need to partner with local and national governments. Without this deep immersion the 2030 Agenda will be a dream, an opportunity lost and along with it dash the hopes and aspirations of common people.

These basic aspirations were the principles powering the shaping of this transformative agenda. I needed to express this before shifting attention to the role of social services in shaping the implementation and reaching the goals and targets.

One last thing I would like to add is the centrality of evidence based decision making, in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Indicators are an integral part of the Agenda. The development of national statistical systems, the appropriate use of big data and the analysis of data to make appropriate decisions will be crucial for the success of policies especially in providing social services. Disaggregated data collection and impact measurement will need to be prioritized in all statistical systems.

The 2030 Agenda provides an important opportunity to strengthen the role and contribution of universal social services in national development processes. It provides an opportunity to reassess how social services can support in the delivery of the SDGs, in particular by establishing universal social protection systems, including social protection floors (SPFs), ensuring that no one is left behind and that prosperity is shared.

Globally, strengthening of social services is at the heart of efforts to implement the commitments of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Social services constitute the foundation of any dynamic and thriving economy, upholding

opportunities for social welfare and opportunities for future growth and sustainability.

In approaching the Goals and principles, evidence from across the world suggests that poverty and inequality levels are considerably reduced with efficient and effective implementation of social protection programmes. The most significant reductions in poverty and inequality have been shown to occur in countries with comprehensive social policies that aim at universal access and coverage in social protection, as well as universal access to quality education, health care and other services.

Investment in social services must be comprehensive in its scope but also in its reach; reaching the furthest first, as well as the most vulnerable and most marginalized, including women, girls, youth, the disabled, elderly, indigenous peoples and migrants. Reaching the furthest and taking a whole of society approach, must be the basic intent of all social services if societies are to be strengthened and are to become more resilient, equitable and progressive.

Social work makes important contributions to development in its social, economic and environmental dimensions, and social workers can play active roles at many levels:

- At the local level engaging directly with communities and people to “leave no one behind”;
- At the national level when designing framework policies and institutions; and
- At the global level in advocating for a strong role for social work and in fostering learning across countries. This requires involving social workers in UN processes – such as the annual High Level Political Forum that reviews progress on the SDGs – and strengthening collaboration with UN organizations for which social work is key for fulfilling their mandates.

Social services are highlighted explicitly or implicitly in several SDGs, including:

- SDG 1 on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere, particularly Target 1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable;
- SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, particularly Target 3.8: Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all;
- SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, particularly targets to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education and have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education;
- SDG 5 on achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls, particularly Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate;
- SDG 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, particularly Target 8.5: By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value;
- SDG 10 on reducing inequality within and amongst countries, particularly Target 10.4: Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve gender equality.

Moreover, given that social protection systems, including social protection floors, are one of the areas where governments directly interact with people, social protection also plays a key role in attaining SDG 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive

societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, particularly Target 16.6: to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

Some of the associated indicators include:

- Proportion of population covered by social protection floors (disaggregated by vulnerability);
- Proportion of population living in households with access to basic services;
- Coverage of essential health services; and
- Health worker density.

These are but a few of the indicators and the Sharjah Department of Social Services can align their indicators with those which are a part of the SDGs.

The SDGs recognize that the poverty is multidimensional and provide an opportunity for public institutions and social workers to develop integrated intervention programmes at the grassroots, introducing a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty, especially urban poverty. Local leaders and leadership structures, and local capacity building and awareness programs, are key to success. Communication, cultural appreciation and specific targeting are essential to solving issues on a local scale. Social workers must be seen as “bridge builders” and social work including voluntary service should be encouraged in communities to build broad and inclusive engagement.

Social service provision priorities depend on national needs. For example, in Europe, the aging population is placing greater pressure on the provision of pensions and health care, in the face of a shrinking labour force. In other countries, where populations are booming, education, job creation and investment in human capital are essential pillars to social investments.

In Asian cities, rapid urbanization has posed many multi-dimensional challenges, including growing inequality and exclusion, concerns about safety and security, changes in family patterns, informal jobs and settlements, provision of affordable and quality services, including adequate housing, and environmental risks. By 2030 90 % of the world's urban population growth will take place in developing countries and 60% of the future urban areas are still to be built. In cities such as Mumbai, Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur, we see people moving to the cities and towns in search for a better quality of life, however, as they do, community living and social cohesion are often disturbed and the reality of inadequate public service provision can severely intensify hardships. In many contexts there is a breakdown of both social support and informal social control systems which create new sets of problems with the rise of crime, violence, drugs, alcohol abuse, domestic violence etc.

Equally, challenges exist in many of Arab States. Although social security programmes and institutions have been established in many countries, effective social security coverage still remains a lot lower than it needs to be. Many cannot benefit from social services because of irregular contract status or unemployment, which affects over 10% of the total regional population and over 30% of youth. It is well known also that unemployment has risen dramatically particularly since the drop in oil prices. Since 2010, many countries have established mandatory unemployment insurance schemes for the involuntarily unemployed looking for jobs, and job creation schemes have been instated, including skills development, capacity building programmes and support to women to help find suitable employment, which have improved social security in the region.

The UAE's Vision 2021 is driving change in 6 key areas including the strengthening of social services including the judiciary, health and education systems, infrastructure planning and development, as well as social floors and the provision necessary to support the development of a competitive knowledge economy.

On delivering quality education, the UAE is also strong, dedicating nearly 20% of the government's major spending for developing the education system and providing free education to UAE citizens in public schools all the way to higher education. These efforts have reduced the illiteracy rate in the UAE to less than 1%. Furthermore, in line with the UAE's Vision 2021, entrepreneurship and R&D skills are embedded within education and schooling from early ages, ensuring that citizens have the required skills to drive the development of the knowledge economy; supporting opportunities for economic growth, decent work and employment for the next generations (SDG8).

In health care, the UAE has a comprehensive, government-funded health service administered by the Ministry of Health and Prevention. Most infectious diseases have been eradicated and new vaccination campaigns are taking place, ensuring that the UAE reaches the highest levels of universal health care and life expectancy for all. The UAE can certainly be seen as an example for best practice for overhauling and upgrading health capacities and developing organizational and legal frameworks in the field of public policy for health care.

The UAE is ranked as third in the MENA region for gender balance and 8 ministers in the UAE Cabinet are women and in 2015 the Federal National Council got its first female speaker who was the first woman ever in the GCC to hold this position. The empowerment of women is not only essential for the achievement of the SDGs, most notably SDG 5, but is essential for the social fabric of societies, the strengthening of the family unit, the protection of culture, as well as efficient and effective development.

The training of the social service workforce will be key to strengthening social services for the SDGs. Developments in national skills training and in the education systems, including early education, must be complemented at decentralized levels; ensuring

effective partnerships at the local and national levels between government, private and national sectors, will be crucial to upholding effective and efficient social services for all. Local level social service workers will provide critical link between civil society and government actors in the fields of health, education, social protection, child protection and justice. Support must in particular be provided to community-based services that particularly reach those most vulnerable.

At the same time, there are many new opportunities and challenges for which social workers must be prepared. Those include the growing number of elderly people and the surge in the diseases and needs that come with old age. One challenge which is also an opportunity is the emergence of frontier technologies and new ways of delivering social services through ehealth. This opens up infinite possibilities to provide health or education services. But it also places new demands on social workers and requires new skills and new institutional capacities which must be addressed.

One of the greatest threats to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as a whole will be the threat of shocks, including economic shocks, political shocks, environmental shocks and technological disruptions including the wave of automatization. If we are to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda our societies must anticipate such shocks, and develop in resilient ways that allow for adaptation to change and the preservation of livelihoods. Long term planning, including the UAE's Vision 2021, which anticipates the change needed to adapt the UAE's development path to ensure a sustainable development trajectory, will be essential to sustaining and protecting the lives and livelihoods of UAE citizens.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that the SDGs will not be achieved unless they are achieved for all. Social services are intricately embedded within the 2030 Agenda, and in meeting the Goals, policy makers must strive to deliver social services for all,

in local contexts, and in multi-dimensional ways, so as to eliminate poverty in all its forms and reducing inequality by 2030.

I will stop here, and look forward to our engaging discussion. Thank you once again and I wish you a successful and fruitful conference.

Thank you.