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First MOST Forum of Ministers of Social Development for the Asia-Pacific Region

Building Inclusive Societies

22-23 March 2017

(Preceded by a senior officials meeting on 20-21 March)

Concept Note

Limited circulation. Not for citation

1. Introduction and Background

The first MOST Regional Forum of Ministers of Social Development for the Asia-Pacific countries under the auspices of UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme will be hosted in March 2017 by Her Excellency Dato' Sri Rohani Abdul Karim, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, President of the Intergovernmental Council (IGC) of the MOST Programme.

The aim of the Forum – a flagship activity of MOST Programme – is to share knowledge, expertise and experience on developing and implementing innovative, evidence-based, effective public policies and to establish relevant, credible and actionable agendas for translating rigorous social science knowledge into policy action. Twenty-two sub-regional Forums have been organized since 2001 in different parts of the world. More than 200 Ministers and Ministerial representatives have so far participated in the MOST Forums of Ministers of Social Development.

Under the Malaysian Presidency of the MOST IGC, for the first time in its history, the Forum will bring together Ministers in charge of the social development portfolio from across the entire region. Earlier MOST has organized, in co-operation with host countries, some subregional forums of Ministers for South Asia (in 2006 on Decentralization in South Asia (Pakistan), in 2008 on the Right to Education in South Asia (India) and in 2011 on Social Protection in South Asia (Sri Lanka). Furthermore, a High-level Forum on Management of Social Transformations of ASEAN countries was co-organized with the Government of Vietnam in 2013 focusing on the social dimensions of global environmental change.

A wide range of stakeholders will contribute to the Forum, including UNESCO, UNESCAP, UNDESA, UNDP etc. from the UN system, as well as researchers, senior officials and civil society representatives. The Forum will be a high-level opportunity to showcase success stories in the region, to identify the priority policy areas for each country, to promote evidence-based policy solutions, to harmonize policies across the national borders, and to enrich the policy design and implementation processes by cutting-edge research from the academic establishment.

The Forum will enable high-level exchange on best practices on the theme and subthemes, as well as presentation of relevant research by researchers and programmes and activities by UN system representatives, review of policy options, and interactive discussion among all participants.

The first MOST Regional Forum of Ministers of Social Development for the Asia-Pacific countries will serve as a platform for exchange and knowledge sharing, contributing to policies supported by research!

2. Thematic Focus on Inclusive Social Development

The choice of “Building Inclusive Societies” as the theme of the Forum reflects the spirit of Agenda 2030 centred on Sustainable Development Goals. This new developmental paradigm has placed the concept of inclusive social development at the centre-stage of policy discourse for affluent and developing countries alike. Understanding and measuring inclusion in various policy contexts is a new analytical and practical frontier for the national governments, international organizations and academic communities.

The Government of Malaysia has recognized this new imperative from the very outset, and has partnered with UNESCO in 2015 to launch a pioneering initiative that brings together national stakeholders to assess and enhance inclusive policies through the application of cutting-edge social science policy tools and methodologies. In Malaysia, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, this initiative is producing new knowledge in the area of inclusive policy and spurring innovative policy practices. The Forum will be an ideal space for showcasing the ideas and experiences derived from these experiences.

The theme of the MOST Forum of Ministers is also responding to the comprehensive MOST Strategy which was endorsed by UNESCO’s Executive Board at its 199th session in April 2016. The Strategy is stressing that within the research-policy nexus, MOST will address a set of well-defined priorities of the 2030 development agenda in the context of UNESCO’s institutional competence, in particular- but not exclusively- those related to SDG 16 *“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Within the overall primary emphasis on SDG 16, the thematic focus of MOST includes particular emphasis on topics of high contemporary relevance, such as policies for social inclusion; the future of the planet; citizenship, good governance and peace-building; migration and displaced people; and the socially transformative dynamics of digital technologies.*

In order to enhance the focus of the deliberations and to optimize the value of the Forum’s outputs, three sub-themes are proposed as the items on the Forum’s agenda: (1) Ageing (2) Women and (3) Social innovation in the efforts to build inclusive societies. The latter sub-theme is to be approached primarily through the angle of how social innovation can be employed in the development and delivery of inclusive policies benefiting all ages in Asia-Pacific.

Ageing

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Political Declaration adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002 marked a turning point in how the

world addresses the key challenge of “building a society for all ages”. As former Secretary-General of the UN, Mr Kofi Annan, indicated in the foreword “The world has changed almost beyond recognition since the first World Assembly on Ageing in 1982. Where once population ageing was mostly a concern of developed countries, today it is gaining real momentum in developing countries as well. And where once ageing may have been thought by some to be a stand-alone issue or afterthought, today we understand that such a dramatic demographic transformation has profound consequences for every aspect of individual, community, national and international life.

The Madrid Plan of Action offers a bold new agenda for handling the issue of ageing in the 21st-century. It focuses on three priority areas: older persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments. It is a resource for policymaking, suggesting ways for Governments, non-governmental organizations, and other actors to reorient the ways in which their societies perceive, interact with and care for their older citizens. And it represents the first time Governments agreed to link questions of ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights, most notably those agreed at the United Nations conferences and summits of the past decade”.

The Political Declaration adopted in Madrid is inter alia stating “We emphasize the importance of international research on ageing and age-related issues as an important instrument for the formulation of policies on ageing, based on reliable and harmonized indicators developed by, inter alia, national and international statistical organizations”. The Platform of Action is stressing that “Harnessing of scientific research and expertise and realizing the potential of technology to focus on, inter alia, the individual, social and health implications of ageing, in particular in developing countries”.

At the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 an inclusive society was defined as “a society for all”,

It should be noted that Agenda 2030 has as its overarching objective to leave no one behind!

On the one hand, the Asia-Pacific region is currently home to over half of the world’s population of older persons, defined as people at 60 years or older. The region is experiencing population ageing at an unprecedented pace, due to the tremendous improvements in life expectancy combined with falling fertility rates. The number of older persons in the region is expected to more than quadruple from 533 million in 2015 to more than 2.45 billion by 2050. By then, almost two thirds of the world’s older persons will be living in the Asia-Pacific, with one in four people in the region expected to be over 60 years old. Due to the longer life expectancy for women, the majority of older persons are women, with the sex ratio decreasing in the older the age group. According to the WHO (2007). The fastest growing group among older women is the oldest-old (aged 80 or above); as in general women outlive men for 4-5 years. As indicated in the draft Regional Review report by UNESCAP of “A Gender Perspective on Ageing in Asia Pacific: Social Inclusion and the Health Promotion in the Millennium Development Goals” “Population data so far has shown that women in general and older women in Asia-Pacific in particular are less likely to participate in the labour force, despite that they live longer. Education and labour participation are indicators for social inclusion. By looking at these one can assert that

older women in the region are not fully included socially” and “many developing or underdeveloped countries in the region still have a strong hold in maintaining a patriarchal hierarchy, seeing women as “born to serve’ their family and men in society”.

As indicated in the Madrid Platform of Action “Older women outnumber older men, increasingly so as age increases. The situation of older women everywhere must be a priority for policy action recognizing the differential impact of ageing on women and men are integral to ensuring full equality between women and men and to the development of effective and efficient measures to address the issue. It is therefore critical to ensure the integration of a gender perspective into all policies, programmes and legislation”.

While the timing and pace of ageing differs across Asia and the Pacific, all countries will experience an increasingly older population in the years to come. This emerging demographic challenge needs to be addressed in the conceptual framework of social inclusion of the ageing populations, with a special attention payed to gender dimensions. Furthermore, from the perspective of inclusive social development, approaches to ageing need to be set within the internationally agreed agenda of a “society for all ages”, which emphasizes issues such as intergenerational solidarity, risks and opportunities across the life-cycle, and the connections between family structures and the social conditions of different generations. Ageing is also part of the Asian global demographic frame, and linkages with the youth population and sex ratio should be envisaged.

Women

Many countries in the Asia – Pacific region have made formal commitments to gender equality, however, women still encounter significant cultural and economic barriers to fully participate in the community. From poverty and deprivation to insecurity and violence against women, ensuring the rights of women remains a serious concern in the Asia Pacific region. As a region heavily impacted by climate change, lives of women, especially of those living in the rural areas, are put at increasing risk. This challenge is compounded by the recent period of global recovery of economic recession and instability. At the same time, women offer a wealth of skills, knowledge and entrepreneurial spirit which are instrumental to improving well-being for all.

This has significant implications when considering ageing, as the social and economic status of women is already constrained, once they become older, their rights, their ability to be heard and hence their equality, may be further undermined. Older women are often subject of poverty, family violence and disempowerment.

Today there is more evidence that women’s empowerment and gender equality are linked with peace and stability in society. In particular, when women participate in decision-making about conflicts and peace and take the lead against violence extremism in their communities, it is more likely crises will be solved without any recourse to violence.

Women who are engaged in multiple spheres of life are more successful in inclusive social development of the country. Therefore, it is vital to ensure equal access of women to education, work, physical and art activities in order to ensure their development and well-being through all ages. If women's status is not raised during the childhood and adult years, their empowerment can be further undermined in their latter years.

Realising the potential of women to shape and drive the development agenda requires innovative and concerted interventions from all stakeholders including governments, civil society and the private sector. There is an urgent need to identify strategic entry points toward planning and implementation of development programmes for women which deal with the deep and multi-faceted structural roots of the challenges faced by women in the Asia Pacific region.

Gender equality is one of the two global priorities of UNESCO.

Social Innovation

Building inclusive societies for all ages is not simply a matter of business as usual and a better implementation of existing policy frameworks. Such an agenda calls for new forms of knowledge, new kinds of policy processes and new societal dynamics. It is this three-fold newness, each dimension of which relates to the others, that is generally summarized by the phrase "social innovation". It is clear therefore that, in this sense, social innovation is central to the MOST Programme and to implementation of Agenda 2030.

Within the framework of this MOST Ministerial Forum, social innovation is to be considered insofar as it is and can further be employed in the design and delivery of inclusive policies benefiting all ages in South-East Asia.

Malaysia has been harnessing social innovation emerging in various quarters of society, looking into ways to upscale and consolidate the local practices that can be replicated nationwide for the betterment of people's lives. Other countries have followed suit in building national regulatory and policy frameworks that foster social innovation.

3. Building the Foundation for the Forum

UNESCO will prepare for the Forum by raising global and regional awareness about the event in the run-up period, and by creating linkages between the various existing major initiatives and the Forum. As such, the Forum will not be approached as a one-off event but as a process with a series of initiatives building up to it and following after (see also Section 5).

The Regular Session of the Intergovernmental Council of MOST (16-17 March), to be held immediately prior to the Forum with the participation of 34 Member States of UNESCO, will serve as a major political and substantive foundation for the Forum. The organization of the IGC of MOST back to back with the Ministerial Forum will also allow for Member States of the IGC to participate in the Forum and be exposed to the MOST Flagship activity which will contribute to South-South and North-South learning, and inspire the IGC Member States to host Ministerial Forums in their regions.

In addition, the following meetings and initiatives will be used to build a solid foundation for the Forum:

- A possible MOST School to be organized in March by the Vice-President of the MOST IGC Bureau, representing Asia-Pacific, with UNESCO Bangkok and other partners, in Bangkok, Thailand
- A commissioned paper from a distinguished researcher or research organization setting the analytical background for the enhanced focus on the Forum's discussions
- A Senior Official's meeting on the two days prior to the Forum to be attended by the UN system, researchers and senior officials discussing key issues and the draft Ministerial Declaration.
- The Third Global Review of the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, focusing on creating a society for all, taking place in the Commission for Social Development in February 2017, the results of which will be presented at the Forum.
- A side-event organized by MOST, in cooperation with UNDESA, during the 55th session of the Commission for Social Development (February 2017), focusing also on raising awareness about the Ministerial Forum and its themes. The theme of the MOST event will be "Combating inequalities to end poverty". The keynote speaker will be Her Excellency Dato' Sri Rohani Abdul Karim, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development.

4. Outcomes of the Forum

The Forum will culminate in the adoption of policy oriented Ministerial Declaration. These documents will reflect the exchanges and interventions during the Forum in which UNESCO, the ESCAP Secretariat, senior officials accompanying ministers, numerous researchers and members of the UN system and civil society also will express their views and opinions. The Declaration will provide:

- An overview of the key policy concerns and priority issues in terms of inclusive social development in the region;
- Succinct recommendations for follow-up action until the next Ministerial Forum.

In addition to the Declaration, the Forum will re-analyse whether to reinforce a mechanism to monitor the follow-up of the recommendations and provide an accountability structure for all stakeholders involved. The mechanism would identify key areas of work and responsibility, responsible task teams or stakeholders as well as specific performance indicators and reporting lines.

The visibility of the Forum will be ensured by the dissemination of its outcomes within the MOST network, the Asia-Pacific policy and research communities and through UN channels such as the Commission for Social Development, ECOSOC and ESCAP. The impact will be further amplified by presenting the outcomes at the major global events organized in the aftermath of the Forum. Moreover, through the participation of IGC and UNESCO in the Commission for Social Development (a functional body of ECOSOC), the outcome of the Forum will be made available to other regions, with a view to enriching their perspective and potentially impacting on related policies and enabling inter-regional co-operation in areas of common interest.

5. Follow-up to the Forum

Follow-up of the recommendations of the Forum of Ministers is crucial to ensure that the political commitment, informed by research, is translated into tangible action and results. It is also indispensable in terms of enabling the results of each Forum feed into the next one, thereby promoting sustainability and, thus, effective and lasting impact of the Forums of Ministers, regarded as a flagship regional mechanism within the overall MOST Action Plan.

Experience to date points to certain key mechanisms and modalities in this respect.

It is desirable that the Minister hosting the Forum take the lead in the coordination of the follow-up, with UNESCO's involvement and support from the Secretariat.

Proper follow-up mechanisms are put in place within each country engaging Ministry officials, researchers and community organizations. Within this mechanism, a national focal point is appointed from each Ministry having attended the Forum, with the responsibility to participate in a network of national focal points to follow-up on the various activities, exchange ideas etc. Ideally, focal points are civil servants in order to ensure continuity of the Forum.

The research community, the regional and the UN System partners that will participate in the Forum are fully engaged in the follow-up of the Forum through clearly identified follow-up responsibilities. The outcome might also feed into the Forum which ESCAP and UNDP might consider to launch.

National Commissions to UNESCO and MOST National Committees, where they exist, are encouraged to contribute to the implementation of the results of the Forum at the national level.

Furthermore, the Forum connects to the Intergovernmental Council (IGC) and the Scientific Advisory Committee of MOST. The outcome of the Forum will be transmitted to the Intergovernmental Council of MOST. As such, the findings of the Forum will feed into the debates and discussions at the IGC on how to address inclusive social development and support inclusive policies agendas in this perspective. Through the IGC, the outcome of the Forum will be made available to other regions, with a view to enriching their perspective and potential impacting on related policies and enabling inter-regional cooperation in areas of common interest.

In addition to the IGC, the Scientific Advisory Committee of MOST will support the follow-up of the recommendations of the Forum, by providing scientific feedback on research gaps, showcasing relevant research developed at international and regional level and replicating the research conducted in the context of the Asia-Pacific Forum to other regions.

Appendix

Sharing of responsibilities between the Government of Malaysia and UNESCO in the organization of the Forum

The proposed MOST Forum will be organized and held in accordance with the established framework of collaboration between the host Government and UNESCO in organizing MOST Ministerial Forums. As an initial basis for discussion, the following usual division of tasks and responsibilities may serve as a reference. The details will be specified shortly in a formal Letter of Exchange between the Honorable Her Excellency Ms Dato' Sri Rohan Abdul Karim, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, and Ms Nada Al-Nashif, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences.

Shared Responsibilities between the host Government and UNESCO

The host Government and UNESCO agree on the theme of the Forum and the content of the the draft agenda of the Forum and the senior officials meeting; the concept paper to be circulated prior to the Forum to guide the discussions; and the draft of the Ministerial Declaration (to be submitted for consultation to all participants, and to be adopted at the end of the forum).

Usual responsibilities of the host Government

The host Government shall be in charge of the logistical issues and costs associated with the event, including:

- Identifying which Ministers to invite (ie. which Minister is in charge of the Social Development portefolio in each Asia-Pacific Member State)
- Official invitation letters to Ministers in charge of the Social Development portfolio in Asia Pacific, also encouraging them to appoint a focal point to attend the senior officials meeting
- Protocol arrangements for the Ministers, including issuing of visas free of charge for participants (when required) in due time; ensuring transportation from/to the airport;
- Arranging security for Ministers
- Covering accomodation and all meals for Ministers or their representatives, as well as for senior officials attending also the senior official meeting
- Covering accomodation and meals for all IGC Vice-Presidents who might attend the Forum
- The invitation letters to the Vice-Presidents of the MOST IGC Bureau
- Covering lunch for all the participants in the Forum
- Hosting a welcome reception or dinner for all participants in the Forum

- Covering the conference venue and all needed logistics, including simultaneous interpretation, if needed, and technical secretariat staff
- Publicizing the Forum – providing access for the press to previously agreed sessions with the participants, organizing press conference, and producing press releases for the local media; ensuring a team of rapporteurs to produce the report of the Forum.
- Proposing participants in addition to Ministers
- Circulating the draft declaration to all participants prior to the Forum
- Possibly organizing field visits to be exposed to “best practices” in policies in Malaysia

Usual responsibilities of UNESCO

- Identifying possible participants apart from the Ministers: i) Representatives of regional research institutions and main social sciences networks in Asia-Pacific countries ; ii) Representatives of UN entities and other intergovernmental organisations; iii) Representatives of civil society
- Sending out invitation letters to the above
- Commissioning research papers from experts prior to the Forum
- Preparing the draft agenda, draft concept paper and ministerial declaration for feedback from the Ms Dato’Sri Rohani Abdul Karim, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development
- Circulating the concept paper for the Forum to all participants prior to the Forum

Arrangements with respect to international travel costs vary considerably from one Forum to another and will require specific discussion in due course.