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Convergence in human and social development

Excerpts from the summary and chapters I and II of the report of the twenty-seventh session of the Committee for Development Policy (E/2025/33). The full report is available at <https://undocs.org/E/2025/33>.

Ahead of the Second World Summit for Social Development and as Member States reflect and deliberate on advancing sustainable development by 2030 and beyond, the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions remains imperative. Generally, convergence in economic, human and social development has not been the norm and advances remain fragile in the face of what are expected to be increasingly frequent and severe climate-related and other shocks. However, many developing countries have seen significant improvements regarding poverty and important aspects of health and education. These achievements need to be made more visible to inspire action. How poverty is defined and measured, how poverty eradication goals are framed, and how indicators are chosen have significant practical importance for the effectiveness of policy. Metrics matter, and an excessive focus on relative poverty reduction obscures the very tangible achievements made by many countries in the reduction of poverty in all of its forms and dimensions over the past decades, particularly on the African continent.

In the 2030 Agenda, eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, was named as the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. The Pact for the Future reiterated this objective as an imperative for all humankind. However, 10 years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the world is off track. The priority and urgency of eradicating poverty will be one of the three core themes at the upcoming Second World Summit for Social Development and is central to other global processes such as the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, the thirtieth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty. Ensuring that no one is left behind or pushed behind, a concept that has found widespread resonance since 2015, is critical moving forward. The current global context calls for breaking-the-mould approaches and pragmatic solutions, for which research and evidence are critical, as recognized in the choice of theme of the Economic and Social Council for 2025.

Convergence in development outcomes between and within countries has been at the centre of analytical work on development. With new challenges and changing development contexts, a sophisticated understanding of convergence is needed, one that includes multidimensional poverty measures, lessons from the efforts that have been made to “leave no one behind”, and a comprehensive concept of human development. There is a need to address both new and persistent inequalities to ensure inclusive and multidimensional convergence. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita can no longer be the benchmark for success in development.

Convergence between least developed countries and other developing countries has been a focus of the work of the Committee since the inception of the least developed country category. Analysis of the development of countries based on the criteria that officially define the category shows that least developed countries have made progress and even achieved some degree of convergence on social indicators, such as reducing child and maternal mortality and achieving gender parity in school completion. However, convergence overall has been limited, particularly in economic and environmental indicators. Beyond the official indicators, least developed countries showed faster improvements in some

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP) is a subsidiary advisory body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It provides independent advice on emerging issues that are critical for the implementation of the United Nations development agenda. The CDP is also responsible for recommending which countries should be on the United Nations list of least developed countries (LDCs). More information at <https://cdp.un.org>.

areas, such as electricity access and immunization rates, but lagged in others, such as Internet access, disaster resilience and refugee displacement. Over time, there have been notable shifts in global convergence trends. Periods of regression, such as in the 1970s and 1980s, were followed by periods of greater convergence, such as from 2005 to 2015, but in the more recent period progress has stagnated on several dimensions. Likewise, the human development index scores for least developed countries suffered a reversal after the pandemic. It is not yet clear whether the recent stagnation and reversals will be short-lived or are indicative of a longer-term challenge. However, recent trends demonstrate that any convergence is vulnerable to shocks of multiple natures, which are expected to become more frequent and more severe, requiring the incorporation of resilience-building and disaster risk reduction in convergence strategies.

One of the factors behind the insufficient convergence is the meagre progress on structural transformation. Many least developed countries have become more commodity dependent over time, with deep implications for inclusive growth, employment, and poverty eradication. A number of other factors have affected recent advances, including recurrent crises, a persistent digital divide, rising living costs, development finance constraints including the burden of external debt, and political instability. Conflict, insecurity and displacement have also significantly stunted convergence. The new context presents new challenges: for example, artificial intelligence can present significant challenges for countries and people who are not equipped to take advantage of its potential and instead are vulnerable to the labour and other disruptions that it creates. In a context of ecological crisis, while convergence and structural transformation remain goals, new pathways towards those goals need to be explored, for example through new technologies and new value chains, which in turn requires countries to invest in productive capacities, including innovation and technological capacities.

Social convergence within the poorest countries is closely linked to enabling upward intergenerational mobility. Key policies in this regard include policies rebalancing economic and financial inequalities between locations and between wealth groups, as well as those strengthening child health and education. This underscores the importance of harnessing the positive relationship between reducing poverty and accelerating social convergence. Reducing monetary poverty rebalances economic and financial inequalities, whereas reducing multidimensional poverty improves status in health, education and living standards. Integrated approaches that consider cross-sectoral co-benefits have often proved to be more effective than approaches focusing on single dimensions of deprivations individually.

Despite the insufficient progress and convergence by least developed countries overall, several developing countries, including some least developed countries, have made significant strides in narrowing development gaps and shown remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. It is important to recognize those facts, both to value the potential lessons of these experiences and to eliminate outdated narratives that can be damaging or limiting for public action. Hans Rosling's *Factfulness*, for example, highlights common biases and inattention to facts surrounding global poverty eradication and development, and their implications for action. A focus on relative poverty reduction goals, such as in target 1.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions), severely downplays the large improvements in multidimensional poverty in the countries that face the highest poverty rates, including many countries in Africa, which can perpetuate pessimistic narratives about the continent's capacity and achievements. Also contrary to the most common narrative, African countries weathered the COVID-19 crisis well, with some of the best records in sanitary and economic aspects. Nevertheless, many countries in Africa were hard hit by the subsequent effects of the pandemic on the global economy and the cost of capital.

A renewed focus on poverty is essential for the global development agenda. The focus should be on poverty in all its forms and dimensions, and attention should not be restricted to monetary poverty. As pragmatic and evidence-based contributions to the work of the Council and of Member States in the relevant forums, the Committee recommends the following:

- (a) **Measurement of poverty:** the ambitions set out in the 2030 Agenda call for integrated, strategic policy responses that can address multiple deprivations. This in turn requires that the interlinkages between different dimensions of well-being or of deprivation be visible. Multidimensional metrics on non-monetary poverty provide more useful information than dashboards in this respect, enabling integrated action. The Committee recommends using a combination of global and national multidimensional poverty indices. For example, the global multidimensional poverty index of the United Nations Development Programme and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and national multidimensional poverty indices (currently reported as Sustainable Development Goal indicator 1.2.2) can be reported alongside the international poverty line and national monetary poverty measures.

Such poverty indices should be integrated into convergence analysis to track progress for groups left behind across multiple dimensions;

(b) **Relative and absolute poverty reduction:** using only relative poverty reduction measures can underplay the very significant advances made by many of the poorest countries, which deserve recognition and sustained support and provide lessons for other countries and jurisdictions. While the fastest relative reductions in multidimensional poverty are not in least developed countries, some of the fastest absolute reductions are. Absolute changes in poverty rates and information on the number of people exiting poverty should be highlighted alongside relative poverty reduction, expanding the visibility of successes in the poorest countries;

(c) **Focusing on the poorest groups and leaving no one behind requires disaggregated data:** the Committee stresses the importance of assessing convergence both between and within countries, recognizing intracountry disparities and people's experience of interlinked deprivations, and exploring trends among the poorest of the poor. This requires poverty metrics using data disaggregated by subnational regions or by location, age, gender, ethnicity, disability status and other context-appropriate variables. Disaggregated data can guide impactful policies, with a focus on the interlinked deprivations experienced by these groups;

(d) **Encouraging public action by means of communication:** given the changing development context, it is crucial to communicate poverty data clearly to inform public action. This includes not only government actions but also initiatives by other stakeholders, including the general public. Clear communication of poverty metrics will help to drive coordinated efforts to address these challenges. Showcasing positive experiences based on evidence illustrates what is possible and can be a powerful incentive for action, not just by States but by all actors, particularly in challenging times.

The Committee will continue its work on these matters, as well as on domestic inequalities and decent employment, in its contributions to the Second World Social Summit.