

Let's Talk Goals

Social Protection and Leaving No One Behind

What is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Why does it matter? What does it mean for us as Jamaicans? This is the second in a series of articles on topical issues relating to development in Jamaica, written by sector specialists on inclusive growth, social protection, community development, trade and investment. In this week's article, we explore the topic of social protection and its relevance in development, specifically in poverty reduction and reducing vulnerabilities.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is underscored by the principle of *leaving no one behind*. This encompasses the approaches to development that ensure an end to poverty, discrimination and inequality by advancing policies that recognise and target vulnerabilities of individuals, households and society as a whole. A key strategy in leaving no one behind is a social protection system that provides coverage for a wide cross-section of the population. Social protection is recognised in the SDGs through 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”*. Jamaica has a National Social Protection Strategy [<https://www.pioj.gov.jm/product/jamaica-social-protection-strategy/>] published in 2014 that takes a life-cycle approach to assessing social protection needs, targeting and provisions.

At its core, social protection is about reducing the exposure to income security risks for all individuals. Income, or the ability to procure basic goods and services, is at the core of human existence. Basic goods and services in a market economy such as ours have to be produced and sold, and for consumption, they need to be purchased by someone. Many persons will utilize income streams from employment, or from family legacies to provide for basic needs; others will need to depend on the welfare support of one type or another from state agencies, non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions and others.

Effective social protection systems employ a life-cycle approach, recognising that the risks to income security are throughout life, which include illness, disability, unemployment, ageing and retirement. Social protection systems are therefore needed with wide population coverage to buffer individuals against the impact of these risks. Many of the risks and attendant implications are really outside of our control, and may confront us when we least expect.

The nature of social protection coverage may differ from one individual or family to another, and also may be varied across time. Social protection provisions include social security offerings such as social insurance, life and health insurance, and pension. Then there are labour market provisions such as

worker protection laws, unemployment insurance and active labour market programmes. Very importantly, there is social assistance involving cash or in-kind transfers which are usually provided through social safety nets from government and non-state entities. Social protection also extends to shelter care for children and adults, and food security for the most vulnerable.

At some juncture in life, every citizen in a modern society will require some element of social protection. This brings into focus the rights-based approach to social protection and the role of government in ensuring a structure that can cater to all and reduce risks brought on by vulnerabilities. The focus of social protection in sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda recognises that ultimately, lack of social protection coverage leads to social instability and potential for poverty in very real ways. Risks may be unavoidable or unexpected, and have often led to loss of jobs, inconsistent income flows, loss of ability to work and earn, and different disadvantageous circumstances. The lack of preparedness for retirement has significant implications, and because of the nature and extent of informal employment, many retired persons have faced economic difficulties.

Jamaica's labour market is characterised by a large informal sector and there is little or no provision for social security during an individual's working years. While it is greater in the formal sector, contributory social insurance and pension coverage are relatively weak. Therefore, people end up facing daunting risks, as their social security inflow may be too small or non-existent, while the propensity for savings had been low. These lead to serious ramifications for quality of life, including health care and basic needs, on the part of citizens. On the other hand, there is the likelihood of an increasing welfare burden on the government, as demand for social transfers increase. These situations have led to initiatives like the Social Pension Programme, which specifically targets retired persons who are without any formal arrangement for pension.

As we seek to pursue long-term development that leaves no one behind, this cannot be achieved without greater levels of social security coverage among the working population, and improved targeting of safety nets for the most vulnerable. Workers in the formal and informal economy are encouraged to contribute voluntarily to programmes like National Insurance and available private schemes, with support from employers where available, while government improves targeting and assistance that address the needs of the most vulnerable.