

Social security still a raw deal for many

A recent global report on social security could serve as a useful starting point to understand the appeal of populism across the world. The World Social Protection Report 2017-19 of the International Labour Organisation could also be viewed as a blueprint for action by political parties of the mainstream.

A vast majority of people (4 billion) live without any safeguard against the normal contingencies of life, according to the study. Less than half (45.2%) have guaranteed access to only one social protection benefit in the face of a whole gamut of risks such as ill health, unemployment, occupational injuries, disability, and old age. More than half the population in rural areas are not covered by universal health programmes, as compared to less than a quarter in urban locations. The goal of comprehensive coverage evidently remains a mere slogan in several parts of the world.

Yet, there is growing political support for the idea that public investment in social security is critical to eradicate poverty, boost economic growth, and reduce inequality. About 29% of the population enjoy comprehensive social protection. There has been a 2% increase in coverage in the last two years — a sign that the commitment is woefully inadequate given the magnitude of the challenge. Major obstacles in this regard are fiscal austerity measures. The report reinforces the alternative approach it has advocated for long, of economic stimulus and productivity-enhancing growth. Targets under the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals lay out the framework for concerted efforts in this respect.

An earlier ILO study documented the challenges facing countries, at their current rate of progress, to meet the 2025 target of eradicating child labour. The latest report sheds some light on why the task seems almost elusive. Nearly two-thirds of children are not covered by any form of social protection, meaning that their education is unlikely to rank as a priority among households. Furthermore, 41% of mothers of newborns receive no maternity benefits. Only 27.8% of persons with severe disabilities worldwide receive appropriate support, says the report. This precludes effective interventions to alleviate the impact of different impairments on daily living.

The expansion of old-age pensions to include 68% of people in the retirement age is a move in the right direction. However, the levels of support are not adequate enough even to lift people out of poverty, the report says. A trend away from the privatisation of pension protection in Poland, Argentina, Hungary, among others, is perhaps a moment for other countries to rethink.

A highlight in the report is the practical tools and guidance on calculating the cost of different social benefits. It thus dispels the notion that universal coverage is beyond the reach of poor countries.

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