MAINSTREAMING SOCIAL PROTECTION AMIDST CASCADING RISKS

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Category: Opinion

One of the starkest stories of our era belongs to the year 2020 where the novel coronavirus has disrupted normalcy, hijacked social protection from a policy standpoint and crippled the achievements towards sustainable development goals and the 2030 agenda. This came at a time when the Asia Pacific Region is going through cascading risks from a proliferating economy, a global pandemic and regular disasters which have the potential to make regional development a water-shed moment.

Social Protection for sustained development & health coverage

While universal social protection can be viewed from a rights-based approach, it must assume a policy-based approach which brings forth a new algorithm into all sectors of work and social life at large. The pandemic has exposed the fault lines of health systems around the world and in the wake of this realisation, universal health coverage will pose greater challenge than ever before. While countries around the world have made appreciable progress towards social protection and better health systems, yet billions around the world do not benefit from social protection as it lacks inclusivity and gets altered with political tones. If countries need to meet the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, no one must be left behind and especially vulnerable communities must be lifted out of poverty, inequality bridged and social policy measures to protect them be implemented in heart and spirit.

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Gaps in social health across Asia

Health is not just stethoscope and pills. Unless health is viewed from a social dimension, efforts in singularly shaping healthcare will collapse. This essentially means that we address poverty and health, we address culture and health, well-being and health, labour laws and health, doctor and patient relations, preventive health and community development.

Health workers working in challenging environments need to be paid well and importantly paid on time. Income protection is directly linked to workplace motivation and satisfaction. Labour market policies in the healthcare sector does not link low wage health workers and their healthcare needs. What is importantly needed, be it health or non-health occupation is social protection from a social health perspective.

Vulnerable groups of people are natural victims to poverty-based diseases, are taken for granted by employers and continue to suffer and co-exist in the same ecosystem that must protect them. When selected sectors fail to address inequality and glaring gaps exist, the responsibility to protect her citizens falls back on nation states. Failing which we will not just see inequity in the ecosystem thriving, but also have direct implications to crime rates going up, happiness index deteriorating and political opportunism multiplying.

A strategic way ahead

Cascading risks calls for long term social protection to strengthen community resilience and household resilience towards multi-pronged vulnerability that co-exists. While many countries have introduced relief measures in response to a pandemic to safeguard jobs, mitigate commercial losses and facilitate a floating health system with research and development, this solution is ad-hoc and simply limiting. The way forward will be to create shock responsive social protection while protecting human rights and also simultaneously increasing fiscal space for inclusive social policy safety nets towards securing and achieving the 2030 agenda and universal thematic desires on various fronts.

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