Promoting Social Integration in the ESCAP Region *

Introduction

The 1995 World Social Summit was the first high-level conference of its kind, but calls for international action in the social field were being made long before 1995. Early responses to these calls came from the Asian and Pacific region in the 1980s. In 1991, the Fourth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Development convened by ESCAP at Manila adopted the regional Social Development Strategy towards the Year 2000 and Beyond. This was followed by the adoption of the Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP region at the Ministerial Conference in preparation for the World Social Summit, held in Manila, Philippines in 1994,. Thus, countries of the region went to Copenhagen armed with a regional Social Development Agenda which addressed poverty alleviation, employment expansion and social integration and identified specific, time-bound social development goals and targets and called for concerted action for their attainment. In 1997, these goals and targets were amended by the Fifth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Development. In June 2000, five years after the World Summit, ESCAP governments joined the rest of the world in Geneva to report on their achievements towards attaining their respective set goals. In this era of rapid change, the implementation rate of the regional and global social development action plans was relatively slow. But this news did not stop governments attending the Geneva meeting from recommending additional initiatives for the further implementation of the 10 commitments adopted in Copenhagen.

While it could take pride in having led the rest of the world in formulating a regional agenda for action on social development, the ESCAP region was in no position to take the chequered flag for plan implementation. Reviews on the implementation of the Agenda for Action on Social Development have been undertaken by the region on a biennial basis starting from the Fifth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Development which was convened by ESCAP at Manila in November 1997. While acknowledging the progress and continuous efforts made by many countries in the region in poverty alleviation, employment generation and social integration, that Conference noted with concern the social challenges that remained to be addressed. There was some concern as well about the slow pace of implementation. Thus, in addition to revising some of the goals and targets of the Agenda, the Conference adopted the Manila Declaration on Accelerated Implementation of the Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP Region. Over the last few decades, the Asian and Pacific region, on the whole, appears to have made substantial progress in almost all areas of social and economic development and to have kept pace with most of the rest of the world in the midst of a liberalization and globalization process. The available indicators pertaining to income, education, health, life expectancy and other aspects of quality of life appear to have shown clear improvements over time, for most disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups except perhaps for the poor. The situation of women was enhanced. The needs, and rights, of children and older persons have been given attention. The concerns of migrant workers, refugees, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups were being addressed. Encouraging

developments have taken place in many countries in the extension of democracy and people's participation. Accompanying most of these developments were technological progress and innovations particularly in the field of information, high rates of savings, investment, production, employment, trade and economic growth and the allocation of scarce public resources to strategic areas of social development.

But, among and within countries and population groups in the region, there was a considerable variation in growth rates and in the distribution of benefits from growth. Moreover, the high rates of economic growth achieved in some countries did not bring commensurate social progress to most of the people in those countries. While major advances have been made in some countries and in some issue areas, the situation has been stagnant or has deteriorated in others. The recent energy and, food crisis experienced in the region ate into previous gains. Furthermore, double-digit inflation in some countries worsened further the situation for many, especially the poor and other vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups including women, children, older persons, disabled persons, minority groups and migrants workers. Unfortunately, some of these groups suffering heavily from man-made economic disasters such as the food crisis had to endure additional suffering from various natural disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, floods, fires, typhoons and *tsunamis*. Moreover, in some countries, high maternal and child mortality rates continued to pose new social challenges. Thus, in most countries, emerging social issues relating to the food crisis, liberalization and globalization process, disaster preparedness and climate change have added to the traditional problems of crime and public safety, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, migrant workers as well as to education and employment, health and environment, income and social security.

The challenges presented by those recent events were met with interesting reactions by various stakeholders. People of the region, at all levels, demonstrated that they had the resilience, strength, resourcefulness and the spirit of cooperation in dealing with emergency and crisis situations. Furthermore, the donor community made available a considerable amount of financial and technical resources which were not available before. Ironically, it was the crisis situations which indicated to the policy makers concerned that there was indeed an overwhelming number of poor and other disadvantaged and vulnerable persons in the region who were marginalized by their societies and who were generally excluded from significant economic and social activities. During the crises, these people helped swell the ranks of those who needed to gain access to basic social services, welfare assistance and income support or were looking for employment. It had also become apparent to these social groups that their needs were not being met fully and that, along with other citizens, they had the right not only to contribute to the development process but also to partake of the benefits from social progress. Thus, in some countries where urgently felt needs for social development and welfare programmes, income- or employment- generating programmes or reforms for good governance were not given due attention, governments met with public protests in various forms and from various social groups including those who were marginalized or "socially-excluded". Finally, as crisis situations create competition for scarce resources and inducements for seeking alternative employment and income opportunities in the region, issues relating to the employment of women and children, including both the legal and the illicit, drug abuse, trafficking, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, have come to the fore. Calls have been made for the provision of social protection to the disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups mentioned above as well as to those who suffer from the HIV/AIDS virus and their families. Clearly, in the aftermath to the food and financial crisis that beset most countries in the region especially of their poor, the promotion of social integration has increasingly been recognized by all concerned as one of the major items on the regional Social Development Agenda which should be given high priority.

This paper discusses the issues, approaches and policy options towards social integration in the ESCAP region in the context of the Copenhagen Declaration and the Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP Region.

Social integration in an era of rapid change

The promotion of social integration is the fourth of 10 commitments adopted at the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD). That commitment reads as follows: "To promote social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons." (UN ECOSOC, 2001 Report on the World Social Situation. In brief, using a rights-based approach, social integration aims for a society for all, promoting social inclusion and countering social exclusion of individuals or groups by reason of age, sex, lifestyle, belief systems, physical characteristics and disease. These exclusions are often intertwined with poverty and unemployment. It could be said that social integration has a unique feature in that it is both an important determinant of and is significantly affected by progress in eradicating poverty and unemployment.

It would be worthwhile to consider social integration issues in the region in light of what trends and issues are in store for all concerned. The following builds upon the overview of the issues and conclusions discussed by ESCAP at its fifty-fourth session which considered the theme study contained in the publication, Asia and the Pacific into the Twenty-First Century: Prospects for Social Development, 1998 (ST/ESCAP/1887). At that time, the Commission had observed that while the trends and issues were many and complex, they all had the capacity to affect social development prospects adversely unless they were addressed appropriately at policy and programme levels.

Today, in evaluating their prospects for promoting social integration, countries of the region need to consider changes in the demographic, economic, and political fields in the region and in the rest of the world and be prepared to respond to these changes, in addition to using lessons of past experience to improve and strengthen their social development programmes particularly those promoting the creation of a society for all.

Demographic trends

As both birth rates and mortality rates decline, the demographic structure will change in favor of increasing the proportion and absolute number of older people in the population. This will generate new demands on communities which will not be met if preparations for them are not made earlier. As in other areas of concern, however, the regional decline in birth rates will not mask the reality that in some countries the rate of population ageing will remain high. In these countries there will be a tendency to aggravate poverty and perpetuate other unwholesome social conditions.

The family will find itself under increasing stress in the light of these developments. The family will find it more difficult to perform the same roles that it had performed in the past -- to provide care for the elderly as well as socialization opportunities for the young. The youthful members of the family who are joining the workforce will face the brunt of growing age-dependency ratios. The family will need assistance to reinforce its strength. The State will also feel the strong demand for social protection by the disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups.

Furthermore the above trends will be exacerbated by responses to changing opportunities in the economic sphere, which will increase migration and urbanization. This will give rise to increased labour mobility within and amongst countries. There will be a clear trend towards very large cities. Issues relating to older persons living alone particularly women in rural areas will emerge, as will issues relating to lifestyle.

Economic trends

The trends towards greater liberalization and globalization will continue. As the economic environment becomes increasingly competitive, workers will find themselves under increasing strain to raise the level of their productivity. The globalization process will serve to heighten this need for greater efficiency from all participants in the work process. What the impact of this new development on the mental and emotional states of workers and their families, on their relationships with one another and with the rest of their communities will be, is difficult to predict at this stage but there is no doubt that it can alter the physical and mental state and stability of individuals and families.

Another phenomenon can intensify as a result of continuous liberalization and globalization: temporary labor migration, as already mentioned. The expansion of the area of economic interaction among countries and the dismantling of policy barriers between them will provide a powerful stimulus to people to move across international boundaries in response to differential economic opportunities.

Political trends

In the field of international relations, the end of the cold war made it possible to expand the area of participatory democracy not just for the directly affected peoples but for all peoples of the world. Further, an historic opportunity has now emerged to utilize the new peace dividend for social development purposes. In the ESCAP region, this development can give rise to a heightened awareness among people in the region of the importance of social justice and equality for all people and the universality of their rights as human beings, of the right and obligation of people individually and collectively to participate in the making of decisions affecting their lives, and of their freedom to pursue happiness and well-being as determined by themselves. Expectations of to benefit from the new peace dividend raises peoples' expectations that the implementation of their social development agendas will be accelerated.

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Implications for social integration policy

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The implications of these trends and issues to social integration development policy are both reassuring and worrisome, for they have the potential not just of yielding untold benefits to mankind but also of destabilizing social conditions and institutions. Carefully responded to or managed, they can raise all of humanity to higher levels of well-being but left to themselves to unravel as blind forces, they can severely slow down all meaningful progress in social development.

Social integration policy must continue to be addressed alongside the two other major concerns, namely, poverty eradication and employment expansion. In all instances however it must take into account the prospective developments in the various fields of human endeavor in the region and in the rest of the world as described above and address the implications they carry for individual countries and the region as a whole.

Demographic changes have implications for the family as a basic social unit, for income, for housing, for education and health, for the built infrastructure, for means of transport and communication, for the internal organization of communities and cities, among others. Social integration policy must come to grips with all these particularly as they affect such social groups such as older persons, with older women in rural areas being particularly vulnerable; migrant workers who move to urban centres in their country or abroad; working women and youthful workers who will join a shrinking workforce and deal with the income and health security needs of a growing elderly population. The urbanization process will continue to exert pressure on society to deal with lifestyle issues such as those brought about by the spread of the HIV/AIDs virus and other communicable diseases; the ill effects of tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse; and trafficking in women and children.

Changes in the economic arena have implications for worker education and training, for services, for family support, for social security, for transport and communication including in the information field, for urban planning and development, among other things. These too must be recognized by social integration policy.

Political trends have implications for political accommodation among various sectors of the population, for their reception of diverse and even conflicting views among themselves in the political process, for the speed of communication between peoples and their government, and for the existence of religiously and culturally imposed restrictions on the minds and bodies of women and men in society. Responses to these challenges must be incorporated in social integration policy.

Implications for specific social groups

The implications of these trends and issues for specific disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups in society, including the youth, older persons, women, persons with disabilities and others are still unclear at this point. However, some indications can be gleaned from below. Other cases such as those of the poor, migrant workers, minority groups (racial, religious and cultural) and other social groups will be discussed elsewhere. Whether these can be dealt with adequately in social policy could spell the difference between succeeding and failing to enhance the well-being of these disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Youth

The youth constitutes at least 28 per cent of the region's population but their importance is greater than this proportion suggests for the reason that the future of their countries will depend critically on their overall participation and leadership. The youth need quality education, healthy lifestyles, high standards of health care, employment, and opportunities for social participation. In addition, the girls among them appear to suffer from pernicious social practices: incest, rape, trafficking, pornography and prostitution.

Following the World Summit on Children in 1990, the need to improve the social conditions of the youth and enhance their abilities for future leadership, was brought to the fore. . Their need for quality education and health services should be given top priority. Social protection measures should be adopted designed to minimize if not eliminate offenses against girls and women in general. The positive side of the prospective changes in the various spheres of human endeavor, as already described, must be accentuated and directed to the improvement of the welfare of the youth.

Older persons

As noted above, many countries in the region are experiencing rapid population ageing. This is particularly marked in high income economies in the region such as Australia, Japan, Hong Kong (China), New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Singapore, where the proportion reached 17.8 per cent in 2006 as compared to 11 per cent in 1990. Many countries have not been prepared to deal with this phenomenon. As a result the social status of older persons in many countries has declined. Older persons experience increasing social isolation and suffer from low levels of self-esteem. A key issue relating to older persons is how to care for them. Health maintenance is already a formidable task for many countries; adding the needs of an ageing population will make that undertaking even more daunting.

There will be need to formulate comprehensive programs on say, pensions and health care, for addressing problems of ageing and of the elderly. Further, there will be need to maximize the positive impacts of the demographic, economic, and political changes in the global environment and ensure that much of them are channeled to the direction of the older persons in the population.

To cope with these challenges, the Asian and Pacific Region adopted the Macau Plan of Action for Older Persons in 1998, accepted it as a regional indicative plan in 1999 and crafted the regional plan with the global plan in the Shanghai Implementation Strategy in 2002. That global plan is known, and being implemented as, the Madrid International Plan of Action for Older Persons since 2002.

Women

The situation of women has improved considerably in recent decades, especially after regional meeting which came up with the Jakarta Plan of Action and the global conference which adopted the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995, but problems remain in many areas.

Women continue to suffer from inequality with men. The Economic and Social Survery of ESCAP in 2007 estimated that restrictions on women's access to work, education and health services, come at significant economic costs. It is estimated that about US$42-47 billion a year is lost because of restrictions on women's access to employment opportunities – and another US$16-30 billion a year because of gender gaps in education. In addition to these economic costs, there are large social and personal costs. Gender discrimination in the region is most visible in the low access of women and girls to education and health services, to economic opportunities and to political participation. Female primary school enrolment can be as much as 26% lower than that of males. Further, with more women marrying late, outliving their husbands, and living alone with off springs after widowhood or separatio n, the number of female -headed households is increasing. In the current social context, these households tend to be poorer, to be more vulnerable to any kind of social dislocation, than male-headed households.

There is a strong need to strengthen all the initiatives that have been launched in favor of women in order to redress the situation. Further, the trends in the various fields of human activity that are emerging need to be bent in favor of women so that women will have the same opportunities as men to grow and make their contribution to the communities in which they live.

Persons with disability

There are indications that the prevalence of persons with disabilities will increase as the twenty-first

century unfolds. Persons born with disabilities will be more likely to survive; the high levels of stress and accidents that modern life generates will result in disabilities; an ageing population will add to the number of persons suffering from disabilities; and so will victims of wars and conflicts and natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, floods and *tsunamis*. Though much has been accomplished in the various countries in terms of providing persons with disabilities with a caring and supportive environment -- marked by appropriate technology, architecture, urban planning -- this remains short of its goals.

The first step in enhancing the well-being of persons with disabilities is to know and understand the situation and concerns of the disabled, including eliminating society's negative perception of this social group and promoting their inclusion in the social development process including carrying out those changes that will enable persons with disabilities to participate in economic and social activities in their respective communities. In this light, current initiatives in favor of persons with disabilities must be pushed forward particularly those relating to ESCAP initiatives under the Decade of Disabled Persons in Asia and the Pacific which was followed by the Biwako Millenium Framework in 2002. Also, efforts must be exerted to ensure that the trends in the various spheres of human activity as already described make a positive impact on the well-being of persons with disabilities.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities received its 20th ratification on 3 April 2008, triggering the entry into force of the Convention and its optional protocol 30 days later.

Policy options and future directions

As the major executor of social development, Governments need to focus their policies towards specific initiatives and instrumentalities that contribute to the speedy realization of social integration objectives, both at the sectoral level and at the level of the disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups, taking into consideration the implications of current trends and issues emerging in the rest of the world. These policies must aim at promoting an enabling environment, building capabilities, fostering partnerships, promoting good governance, and mobilizing regional support as means for accelerating the attainment of the goals of creating a society for all.

An enabling environment

Governments must promote an environment that creates opportunities for all disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups to overcome their limitations whether these are self-arising or imposed by external institutions or practices as well as develop their capacities to benefit from and contribute to the development of their communities. Thus, the youth need opportunities for education, for skill development, and for social interaction that will enable them to grow, physically and spiritually, as adults. Women need opportunities to be treated as equals with men, to make gender-specific contributions to the growth of society. Older persons need opportunities not just to live in secured surroundings with their families and friends but to make further contributions to the enhancement of community life. People with disabilities need an environment in which their disabilities are accepted, understood, and accommodated, and where they are allowed to contribute productively to the society to the fullest extent.

At another level, Governments must promote an environment that enables various actors in civil society to pursue their own tasks and responsibilities in the complex process of social development. This

environment must enhance the opportunities of the private sector to expand and flourish, of NGOs to improve their capacities for identifying the needs of people and delivering social services to them, and of other members of civil society to make their own contributions towards welfare enhancement of the people around them.

Above all, this enabling environment must widen the avenues of participation of the people themselves in the formulation and implementation of decisions affecting their lives.

Capability-building

Governments recognize the fundamental importance of capacity-building at all levels of society for the acceleration of the attainment of social development objectives. Capacity-building requires, at the simplest level, developing the ability to identify social needs and subsequently forming the capacity to formulate coherent programmes for meeting these needs and monitoring and strengthening these programmes. The capacity-building programmes must be addressed by the bureaucracy, including administration of local government units, NGOs and, ultimately, the people themselves.

In the same context, capacity-building requires the formation and establishment of the capacity to generate and provide for the essential social needs at the community level. This means encouraging self-help organizations, to produce social provisions and assisting their members with such support as financing and credit. The encouragement can include training for technical and managerial responsibilities.

Governments must strengthen the various capacity-building programmes they have launched and implemented for concerned sectors in the past. They must pursue these programmes with greater vigor in the years ahead.

Partnerships

Governments, in the spirit of the millennium development goals, realize that the active participation of various elements of civil society, including non-governmental organizations, the business sector, trade unions, professional groups and community-based organizations, is indispensable to the successful implementation of social development programs. Governments must mobilize them for that purpose. While governments, through their auxiliary agencies, will continue to play the leadership role in policy making, planning and strategy formulation, these organizations can make vital contributions to resource mobilization and the actual provision and delivery of social services to target groups.

The media can also make a contribution to the successful implementation of the countries' social development agenda. They can do this through the dissemination of information and the heightening of awareness on various aspects of the social development effort and, as a consequence, the generation of enlightenment and motivation among the people to act on their own behalf in enhancing their lives and the conditions in which they live. In the final analysis, it is this enlightenment and motivation that will energize people to become not just the objects of social development but the means themselves for making it happen. Governments must mobilize the various sectors of civil society, including the media, in the implementation of the social development Agenda to ensure the success of this effort.

Good governance

Governments recognize the fundamental importance of improving and enhancing their leadership role in

the whole social development processes. Not only should they embark on their own capacity-building to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of their people, as already mentioned, they must raise the level of government performance as a whole. Governments must raise the level of government performance through the introduction and maintenance of transparency in all government activities, the enforcement of accountability among civil servants, and the encouragement of popular participation in the making of vital decisions. Although they have observed these rules of behaviour in the past, Governments must continually strive to observe them with greater strictness in the future.

Regional support

Although firmly committed to principles of self-reliance and self-help in the formulation and implementation of their social development agenda, Governments in the region recognize the importance and centrality of assistance and support that can emanate from the international community. They are determined to obtain maximum benefits from cooperation amongst themselves and from the assistance of international agencies working in the interest of developing nations like themselves.

Governments in the region have underscored the importance of their intergovernmental cooperation. For example, they have attached importance to strengthening the role of ESCAP in the realization of their social development goals. ESCAP has long taken the leading role in the promotion of international cooperation for social development in Asia and the Pacific. It has firmly placed the social dimension of development on the regional development agenda. Under its auspices, regional conferences have been held to forge a regional consensus on how to address the serious social ills that confront individual countries. First among these was the Fourth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Welfare and Development in Manila in 1991, which launched the Social Development Strategy for the ESCAP Region Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond. Next was the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference in Preparation for the World Summit for Social Development in Manila in 1994, which adopted the landmark Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP Region, now known as the regional Social Development Agenda. It was followed by the Fifth Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Social Development in Manila in 1997, which called for the accelerated implementation of the regional Social Development Agenda.

As the focal point of the United Nations in this region, ESCAP has cooperated with other United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, and intergovernmental organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, the Association of South East Asian Nations, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Pacific Community in the analyses of social and related problems in the region and the formulation of action programmes for addressing these problems. It has disseminated information on progress and issues of social development and provided advisory services and technical assistance on various areas of social concern in the region.

Appreciating these contributions, Governments in the region must mobilize the special capabilities of ESCAP in finding support from the international community in the acceleration of implementation of their regional social development Agenda as they stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The most remarkable feature of social development in the ESCAP region was its unevenness across

space and irregularity over time. Problems arising from poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and social conflicts were deep and extensive in some countries and much less so in others. From the early 1990s when the social development Agenda of the region was adopted up to the middle of the next decade, progress in overcoming problems was fairly rapid only to be slowed down and, in some countries, reversed.

Governments have been the principal agents for the creation of a "society for all"--the ultimate objective of social integration-- where all members of the society are protected in their human rights and given fullest leeway in their participation in all significant political, economic and social processes. Perceivable progress has been registered in making government processes transparent; in eliminating discrimination in terms of age, gender, race, colour or creed; in promoting tolerance for diversity, social justice, responses to the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups, and in addressing problems of crime, violence, and use of illicit drugs. However, discrimination, political violence and human trafficking persisted in many parts of the region.

Governments in the region have gone well past planning and targeting in the enhancement of their social development capabilities. Most have substantially completed the enactment of enabling laws and the establishment of appropriate institutional arrangements but many are still grappling with limitations in governance, institutional capabilities and financial resources.

In addition to internal difficulties, influences emanating from outside national boundaries impacted adversely on social development in many countries in the region. Most devastating of these influences was the food, energy, 1997 financial crisis and natural disasters (cyclones, earthquakes, floods and *tsunamis*) that swept the Asian and Pacific region in recent years. The adverse social impacts of this phenomenon have been extensively documented elsewhere and will not be described here. It is enough to say that past crises destabilized the globally exposed among the countries-- sharply devaluing their currencies, closing down hundreds of their business establishments, pulverizing thousands of jobs, and shrinking the incomes of large masses of people, workers and non-workers alike -- and in the process intensified poverty in these countries, reduced the levels of health and welfare of their populations, and disrupted and set back various gains in the social field. Although the impact was less harmful in the less globally open countries, over time, these isolated countries fared worse than those that were more globally integrated.

Thus, although substantial progress has been achieved, the tasks of social development in the region remain daunting. The goals of social integration stand mostly unachieved. The instruments and means for overcoming problems remain far from being adequate, while the certainty of future crises, be they natural or man-made, increases the inadequacies.

Recommendations

Without prejudice to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other sound recommendations on social integration, I would like to add the following.

(1) Recognition should be deepened that the task of social integration is not the responsibility of governments alone but is shared by all sectors in the economy and society. Governance should continue to be strengthened, including in particular the improvement of transparency in decision-making, the establishment of accountability among civil servants and the eradication of graft and corruption in the state bureaucracy;

(2) Partnerships should continue to be strengthened between government and civil society, including the private sector, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, universities and research institutions, family organizations and other stakeholders to maximize their contributions to the attainment of social integration objectives;

(3) All socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups including children, women, older persons, persons with disability, the poor, minority groups and others should be included in the social integration agenda;

(4) Monitoring and evaluation of outcomes should be made, preferably by a non-partisan media, of all social integration objectives; and

(5) International cooperation should be promoted in the research, development, monitoring and implementation of social integration programmes.