

Regional Experts Group Meeting on Social Protection

Cairo 13-14<sup>th</sup> May 2008

***Investing in Social Protection in Africa***

Opening statement by HelpAge International

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Your Excellency Dr. Ali El Moselhi, Minister of Social Solidarity  
Your Excellency Ambassador Ahmed Abulkheir  
Members of the Bureau  
Mme Sadequa Rahim, African Union Commission  
Senior Government Officials  
Other distinguished participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to be here today to make a brief introductory statement to this regional experts group meeting on social protection. I would like to commence by offering our sincere thanks for your generous hospitality in hosting this meeting.

We hope that this meeting will reinforce the view that extending social protection is an investment in people. It is not just an economic investment, though that is a critical element, but also a commitment to social justice. In supporting solidarity between generations it is an investment in the future.

This regional expert meeting marks another important milestone in the struggle to secure change for the many of all ages who work to better their lives, and secure improvements for their families and communities.

I want to acknowledge the African Union, through their Social Affairs Department, for leading this important endeavour. HelpAge International is honoured to have a Memorandum Of Understanding with the African Union, a reminder of our shared vision to realise positive change and secure the human rights of the poorest men, women and children of this continent.

Thanks also to the U.K. Department for International Development for their financial support to enable this meeting to take place.

### **Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen**

In Zambia in March 2006 and in Cameroun in September 2006 a number of governments came together under the auspices of the African Union and made commitments to support their most disadvantaged people by developing social protection programmes, including regular income through cash transfers. Economic and physical security and support for the caring of dependents and those affected by HIV and AIDS were especially highlighted.

Agreements were made for governments to come together in two years - again under the auspices of the African Union - to review progress and exchange experiences. In the past two years much has happened, and progress has been made.

For 2008, the African Union has convened a series of three regional meetings bringing together all governments of Africa to debate what has happened; and recommend next steps for consideration at the first ever African Union Conference of Ministers for Social Development, to take place in October of this year in Namibia.

To prepare for these meetings six national consultation processes on social protection have taken place, in Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Tunisia. The summary report of these consultations is in your pack and the findings will be presented during this meeting. The consultations brought together government, civil society, bilateral, multilateral and UN agencies and social protection experts.

### **Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen**

#### **Why is investing in social protection important?**

All governments acknowledge the need to address the poverty of their most vulnerable citizens. Some experience poverty throughout their lives, while others may fall into poverty because of a crisis such as loss of income or ill health. We will debate in the course of the next days some of the impacts of social protection in addressing these issues. We hope that these debates will highlight the potential of social protection programmes to

- Contribute to improvements in health, nutrition and social status across the life course
- Enhance the capacity of very poor people to manage risk, including their chronic food insecurity and hunger
- Strengthen the 'social contract' between state and citizen
- Reduce income inequality and encourages a stronger sense of social cohesion
- Give specific support in HIV/AIDS contexts through ensuring regular support for affected households

- Support achievement of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals – of the countries in Africa that are making progress all have an extensive social protection system
- Support households to invest in economic enterprises including local business and employment
- Support economic growth and stability

### **Can this be afforded?**

A major debate revolves around the affordability of social protection programmes. This is appropriate, as governments must consider how social protection schemes can be delivered over the long term. Again this will I am sure be a key debate in the coming days.

While affordability is a key issue, it is arguable that the benefits are substantial. For example in Tanzania it is calculated that poverty rates could be reduced by up to 40% with investment of up to 1.5% of GDP for an old age pension and disability allowance. In South Africa, household survey data demonstrates that social transfers have reduced poverty by 47%.<sup>1</sup> The Government of Lesotho has recently increased the amount of the social pension to approximately US \$27 a month and lowered the entry age to 65 - and the total expenditure on the pension is still under 2% of GDP.

### **Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen**

In conclusion, we hope that the debate here will reinforce understanding of how social protection can work as an investment in the potential of the poorest to deal with their own poverty.

At the same time the sustainability of these mechanisms must be assured. This will come from government commitment, careful planning and budgeting, and good design. There is no blueprint, no one size fits all. This regional experts meeting we will look at these issues in detail.

To finish I want to thank you again for your participation - we pledge to play our part in collaborating with you as we take forward this transforming work.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Sampson M et al., *Designing and Implementing Social Transfer Programmes*, Cape Town, EPRI, 2006.

