The last ten years have seen significant international frameworks regarding social security and social protection. The ILO adopted Recommendation 202 on National Floors of Social Protection at its International Labour Conference in 2012. This Recommendation prescribes national floors of social protection for all countries that – within national fiscal affordability and political path dependencies – are to ensure four minimum social protection guarantees for all citizens: (1) Health care for all and minimum income (2) for children, (3) for the unemployed, and (4) for senior citizens or persons living with disabilities. This was preceded by the African Union Social Policy Framework adopted in Windhoek in 2008. This Framework defines a “minimum package” which includes “essential health care, and benefits for children, informal workers, the unemployed, older persons and persons with disabilities”. In the view of the AU Social Policy Framework, as such Social Protection “can have a significant impact on poverty alleviation, improvement of living standards, reduction of inequalities and promotion of economic growth and has been shown to be affordable, even in low-income countries, within existing resources, if properly managed”. Even before the AU Social Policy Framework, the Southern African Development Community SADC adopted the Code on Social Security in Lusaka in 2007. The Code lays out social protection benefits for all parts of the population in measures of social insurance, social assistance and social allowance. In Article 4.4 the Code stipulates: “Every Member State should progressively raise its system of social security to a higher level, which should include achieving the meaningful coverage of everyone under the system, bearing in mind the realities and level of development in the particular Member State.”

Madagascar is no stranger to the international advancement of social security and social protection. Despite the recent political crisis, the country has gradually embarked on stock-taking, piloting and developing new social protection frameworks and programmes reflecting the international developments. A first draft of a social protection policy has been formulated with a vision of strengthening human capital development, improved income and eradication of poverty, development of prevention programmes and guaranteeing the rights to social protection for vulnerable groups. This draft was informed by numerous studies, notably an ILO study of August 2013, examining the current status and future potential in the four social protection guarantees of the social protection floor, and a comprehensive study of the entire social sector by the World Bank in 2011 and 2012. A national social protection strategy has been elaborated by the Ministry of Population, Social Protection and Women Promotion in order to enlighten this policy.
While the existing formal employment-related social security system covers only 10% of the population, the vast majority of the country lives in poverty. Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world. Of 20.8 million people (2010), 91% live with less than $2 (ppp) per day, mostly in rural areas. This includes between 50-80% of small and medium scale farmers. A record 60% of the population even live in extreme poverty. Unemployment is particularly high with youth. 9 out 10 jobs are found in the informal economy. The political crisis and temporary shrinking of the economy have left a burden on the country and Madagascar has been subject to severe hunger and health crises in recent years.

In the light of the above, in Madagascar three angles seem particularly relevant for the advancement of social protection. First of all, the rampant lack of basic needs in food, income, housing and health provision beg to be addressed. There is no better and more tested instrument for quick and sustainable relief than social protection. Recent cash transfer pilots (UNICEF) and proposals to roll them out to all households with school-going children in the policy draft could not come at a more opportune time. Some social protection measures have also been deployed to build the resilience of the population to natural disasters.

Secondly, there is a need for comprehensive social protection setups that will allow the country to leap-frog into the provision of a social protection floor directly from the need for acute hunger and poverty relief. The growing body of evidence of best practices and established instruments from other countries, particularly also in Africa, can help and assist greatly with this.

Thirdly, the country embarks on a journey to determine social protection and social security for its citizens for years, decades to come, thereby touching on overarching questions of social justice and determining issues of inequality, taxation, organisation of the economy and national development. Social protection as a cross-cutting policy issue is subject to profound political decisions and should thus be prominent on the political agenda, in the media and within civil society.

It is with a view of these angles, that the Southern African Social Protection Experts Network SASPEN and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung collaborate with their partners in Madagascar to conduct this international workshop. Its objectives are to facilitate national dialogue and debate, the appropriation of the social protection political discussion by social partners and civil society and international exchange and South-to-South learning.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a German NGO committed to the promotion of democracy. SASPEN is a recently launched network of social protection experts and stakeholders in the Southern African region, which brings together academics, policy makers and activists from various fields and disciplines. FES and SASPEN are committed to providing information about the Social Protection and frameworks and instruments regarding social protection to stakeholders in governments, civil society organisations, trade unions, research institutions and media. Therefore FES and SASPEN propose to organize in Antananarivo, Madagascar a forum to exchange and engage with experts of the network and foster the public discourse on social protection with representatives of international and national bodies including the Government of Madagascar, Employers and Trade Unions and Civil Society, the United Nations and other stakeholders. The other aim is to contribute to the improvement of the framework documents on social protection which process is led by the Ministry of Population, Social Protection and Women Promotion.