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Transformative Social Policy Lessons from UNRISD Research

Findings highlight the *developmental* role of social policy, even as it addresses issues of intrinsic value such as social protection, equality and social citizenship, and call for rescuing social policy from the residual role it was assigned during much of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Issue

Social policy is state intervention that directly affects social welfare, social institutions and social relations. It involves overarching concerns with redistribution, production, reproduction and protection, and works in tandem with economic policy in pursuit of national social and economic goals. Social policy does not merely deal with the “causalities” of social changes and processes; it is also a contribution to the welfare of society as a whole.

Social policy may be embedded in economic policy, when the latter has intended welfare consequences or reflects implicit or explicit socioeconomic priorities, such as reducing politically unacceptable levels of unemployment or producing the human skills for development. But most elements of social policy are explicit, such as direct government provision of social welfare through, for example, broad-based education and health services, subsidies and benefits, social security and pensions, labour market interventions, land reform, progressive taxation and other redistributive policies.

Social policy can also be used to transform gender, racial and other social relations—through, for example, “affirmative action”, anti-discrimination legislation and laws pertaining to marriage and the family. Social policies can also be deployed to regulate existing or to produce new social institutions and norms. Thus an important feature

of social policy is the establishment and enforcement of standards and regulations that shape the role of non-state actors and markets in social provisioning.

UNRISD research has highlighted the developmental role of social policy, even as it addresses issues of intrinsic value such as social protection, equality and social citizenship. The research also offers arguments for rescuing social policy from the residual role it was assigned during much of the 1980s and 1990s.

This Research and Policy Brief presents some of the key lessons from the UNRISD research. How these lessons are absorbed or translated into national policy will, of course, depend on national contexts. Furthermore, the complex interplay among the various policies suggested by these lessons must be borne in mind, as must the importance of context and the historical circumstances of each country.

Lessons from the Research

I. The multiple tasks of social policy

Value-driven arguments for social policy must work in tandem with instrumental ones. Social policy must deal with four major concerns: distribution, protection, production and reproduction. It must be concerned with the redistributive effects of economic policy,

The UNRISD Research

Research under the Institute’s “flagship” project, *Social Policy in a Development Context*, was carried out from 2000 to 2005.

The approach was both historical and comparative, involving over 100 researchers worldwide. Studies were carried out in East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Nordic countries, and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as on thematic issues related to *pro-poor macroeconomics*, *gender dimensions*, *democratization*, *commercialization of health care*, *water privatization*, and *public sector reform*. Books and papers published out of this research are listed on page 6, under Further Reading.

protecting people from the vagaries of the market and the changing circumstances of age, enhancing the productive potential of members of society, and reconciling the burden of reproduction with that of other social tasks, as well as sharing the burden of reproduction.

Different welfare regimes have placed different weights on each of these. Thus, while one may speak of “distributionist” or “productivist” welfare states, one has to recognize that such descriptions merely capture positions on a continuum. Because considerable complementarities and synergies generally exist among these goals, the pursuit of only one of these goals to the exclusion of others can cause problems that might undermine the pursuit of the chosen goal. Thus, for example, a focus only on the distributive functions of social policy would ultimately be economically unsustainable. This has been the fate of the “populist” regimes whose exclusive focus on distribution often led to inflation and stagnation that ultimately left the poor worse off. Similarly, a purely productivist approach to social policy would encounter political opposition, producing political instability that would undermine the growth objective. And finally, a policy regime focused on protection would fail on both grounds, and it would not cope with the dynamics of demography.

In general, “late industrializers” (such as countries of Northern Europe and East Asia) have given greater weight to the productive or developmental aspects of social policy than did pioneer industrializers like the United Kingdom. Indeed, this focus has been the *differentia specifica* of “developmental welfare states”. However, partly as a response to globalization, to pressures for competitiveness and to the ascendancy of ideologies much more inclined against redistribution, there is a growing bias even in the developed countries toward a productivist role. This is evidenced by the shift of welfare regimes toward what have been referred to as “social investment” and “workfare states”.

II. Ideologies

Ideologies are important to social policy because they determine the underlying motives and norms for a number of policy measures: are they an aspect of social rights, or are they social privileges accorded by an authoritarian or paternalistic regime? State elites are often motivated by a particular kind of ideology: to provide the national community with a kind of “moral good” which may include “nation-building”, “self-sufficiency”, “social cohesion”, “socialism”, “solidarity” or “mutual responsibility”. It is ideologies that determine the weights attached to various costs and benefits of social interventions, that underpin the moral entitlements of individuals to social support and that shape the purpose of social policy to empower citizens or to pacify them.

III. Social policy and poverty

Social policy in developing countries is not only about poverty eradication. Historically, social policy has had other objectives, such as national or social cohesion and equity. Indeed, in a number of countries that have successfully dealt with poverty within a relatively short period of time, the relief of poverty was not even the most explicit motive for the introduction of social policies. In the Nordic or East Asian countries, for example, “poverty reduction” per se was not one of the main pillars of their social policies. The point is not to dethrone “poverty” from the policy agenda, but rather to stress that the factors that may eventually reduce poverty are not those that address its proximate causes, nor are they the most obvious ones like targeting the poor.

IV. Late industrialization and social policy

Social policy is not something to engage in only after reaching a certain development threshold; nor is it an exclusive domain of advanced welfare states: social policy is a key instrument for economic and social development. There is some kind of “Gerschenkron thesis” for social policy whereby late industrializers have tended to adopt certain welfare measures at much earlier phases in their development than did the “pioneers”. This is partly in order to handle the “social questions” that arise with rapid industrialization. In addition, both “learning effects” and “contagion” can lead to leap-frogging and a much earlier adoption of certain “technologies”—including social policy—at much earlier stages of development than a linear view of development would suggest. The implication is that quite a number of welfare measures can be introduced at fairly low levels of income in response to both normative and functionalist imperatives to use social policies for distributive, protective and proactive ends.

V. The instrumental value of social policy

Social policy is not only an expression of normative values, but can also serve as a major transformative instrument in the process of development. The great challenge is how to mobilize the instrumental value of social policies without undermining the intrinsic value of the goals being pursued.

Social policy can contribute to capital accumulation through “forced” savings collected as social insurance funds. In some late industrializers pension funds were crucial in financing major infrastructure projects, such as the electrification of Finland. Social policy also contributes to the formation of human capital by ensuring the education and the health of the population and by improving the efficiency of labour markets, for example, and other markets for social provision. It ensures the legitimacy of the political order and contributes to political stability. It contributes to “social capital” by enhancing social cohesion and resolving

social conflicts. Not only does social policy contribute to the “supply side” of development; it also affects the demand side by influencing the levels and structures of demand. Finally, social policy can be one of the “focusing devices” of technological change by providing the human capital wherewithal for technological innovation and adaptation, as well as by sanctioning or disallowing certain technologies.

VI. Labour markets

Labour market policies are an extremely important arena for addressing issues of poverty and development. Labour markets are not simply institutions for the static efficient allocation of existing labour resources, but they are also the site for the realization of basic civil and social rights though what the International Labour Organization calls “decent work”. Moreover, they perform the developmental role that is often obscured by the preoccupation with market clearance: as noted above, they can be sources of savings through contributory schemes such as pensions, and they can also resolve coordination problems and address “market failures” in the production of human capital by creating investment incentives for both employers and employees. It is also in the labour market that reconciling production and reproduction clearly emerges as a social concern of developing economies, in addressing the need to facilitate women’s labour force participation (through the provision of public childcare services) which, apart from being a social right, can also produce positive macroeconomic effects (it uses the human capital investments made through female education, it has multiplier effects by creating a demand for various caring services, and so on).

Not surprisingly, a common feature of all the development success stories has been their intervention in labour markets, or the pursuit of “active labour market policy”, to use current parlance. While such policies are generally implemented at the micro level, they have great macroeconomic effects on inflation, growth and distribution. The extension of social policies to larger sections of the population has often been accompanied or facilitated by greater formalization of employment. Informalization has tended to undermine the construction and financing of social protection measures (such as pensions) and acted as a major source of social exclusion in many developing regions, including even more developed ones like Latin America.

In the process of development, labour markets are some of the most politically explosive ones. The importance of what the Germans referred to as the “social question” in the process of industrialization often expresses itself most sharply in this market. It is also state policies in the labour market that often most vividly distinguish authoritarian and democratic states in terms of the rights of labour to organize itself.

VII. The gendered nature of social policy

Social policy is always filtered through social institutions—families and communities, markets, the care economy; health and education systems, the public sector—that are “bearers of gender”. It is thus always gendered not only because it shapes how society cares for its young, old and frail, but also because it affects the participation of women and men in both household and non-household economic activities.

A core aspect of any economy is the “care economy”. How problems of care are addressed by social policies not only colours the texture of society but also fundamentally determines the lives of women by either broadening their capabilities and choices, or by confining them to so-called traditional roles. It also affects both the pattern and rate of economic development.

VIII. Leaning toward universalism

For poor countries there is a strong case for leaning toward universalistic policies when addressing issues of poverty. In many of the late industrializers that confronted problems of social dislocation and poverty, it became obvious that where poverty was widespread, targeting was unnecessary and administratively costly. Targeting is fraught with such problems as information asymmetries, incentives distortion and moral hazard. In addition, the process of identifying the poor opens up space for discretion and arbitrariness, and subjects the recipient of support to stigmatization and invasive processes. Thus the “universalism” guiding social policy in many countries was in fact dictated by underdevelopment—targeting was simply too demanding in terms of available skills and administrative capacity.

One potent criticism levelled against many social security systems in developing countries is that they are “segmented” and only benefit the few, in the formal sector. This argument has been used to advocate for targeted social policy in favour of the poor. Historically, however, the foundation of many of today’s most successful universalistic welfare states was such “stratified universalism”, or exclusive voluntary provision of social services to members. In most late industrializers—such as Germany and Japan, for example—welfare entitlements were directed at those parts of the workforce that were most crucial for economic growth, best organized, and thus politically most powerful: skilled industrial workers.

However, late industrializers tended to climb the ladder toward universalism much faster than the pioneers of industrialization. The political regime in place conditioned the speed with which universalism spread. In contrast, structural adjustment programmes and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, driven by a targeting rationale, begin by dismantling the exclusive rights of formal labour on the grounds that this will

lead to greater labour market flexibility and will attract donor funds for pro-poor policies.

IX. Macroeconomics and social policy

In the successful developmental experiences, macroeconomics gave special attention to economic growth and structural changes as instruments for the social objective of eradicating poverty and improving social welfare. In the 1980s, macroeconomics was detached from these social moorings, becoming increasingly socially blind. Economic policies and the instruments chosen to implement them were no longer constrained by social objectives, such as protecting people's incomes or eradicating poverty. Instead they were almost exclusively assigned the tasks of reducing the twin deficits, containing public debt and inflation, liberalizing product and factor markets, privatizing state assets, and liberalizing external trade and capital flows.

The ability to achieve rapid poverty reduction depends critically, *inter alia*, on the nature of the development, social and macroeconomic policies adopted to promote rapid growth and equitable income distribution. While scholars and policy makers of different economic persuasions generally agree on the broad lines of suitable pro-poor development and social policies, the nature of macroeconomic policies consistent with poverty reduction remains controversial, and the discord has intensified with the liberalization of international capital movements.

Tellingly, the countries that have achieved rapid poverty reduction and are poised to reach the Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty—China, India, Viet Nam and a few others—mostly adopted macroeconomic policies that differed markedly, or at least in part, from those promoted by the neoliberal approach. These countries adopted policies in consonance with their local structures and institutions.

X. The international environment for social policy

National-level social policy is pursued within an international context, and this global environment impinges on social policy in various ways. It can set limits on which instruments can be used in the pursuit of social goals. It can, through the provision of resources (including finance, ideas and norms), facilitate the design and implementation of social policies in developing countries. Consequently, it is important to design global economic and governance structures as if the social values pursued by social policy actually matter. This was one of the central features of the Keynesian Bretton Woods international regime that permitted nation-states to pursue their welfare and developmental policies while engaging in greater economic interaction with other states.

Social policy is imperative for strategically opening up economies not only because it provides the human capital necessary for enhancing competitive capacity, but also because it provides the necessary protection for citizens from the vagaries of global markets.

XI. Democracy and social policy

There is no simple one-to-one relationship between political regime and social policy. Many democracies have not done well with respect to some of the central preoccupations of social policy, while far-reaching social policies have been implemented by authoritarian regimes. In the latter contexts social policy has been largely dependent on the ideological predilections of the ruling elite or bureaucracy, often to “buy peace” or to carry out the mandate of the popular movements that may have placed them in power. However, democracy provides more space for the social articulation of interests and has, over the years, been used by social movements to push for social policies. Consequently, while one may not witness radical redistributive policies under a democratic regime, one does not find the kind of egregious neglect of social policies that can occur in an authoritarian regime.

A strong case can be made that social policy and how poverty is dealt with affect the development of democracy. They can contribute to its consolidation as well as enhance its quality by improving the security of the overwhelming majority of citizens, improving social solidarity (a cornerstone of citizenship), weakening clientelistic social relations, and enhancing the capacity of citizens to participate in public life as autonomous actors. In other words, social policy may impact the political system and democracy through social cohesion. However, all this depends on the nature and effectiveness of social policy and the political perceptions around it.

XII. State capacity

Policy choices must be aligned with institutional capacity. The state is a key institution as an organizer, if not necessarily a provider, of social protection and provisioning. States that are well institutionalized are better able to translate political commitments into effective social policies and delivery systems. Social policies are demanding in terms of the quality of social institutions they require, as well as in terms of financial resources, efficiency, transparency and integrity. “Capacity” refers not only to the direct provision by the state of social services through public expenditure, but also to the state's ability to regulate and stimulate non-state actors in the fulfilment of requirements in social sectors. The necessary capacity is not only administrative or technocratic, but even more importantly political, in terms of building the necessary consensus or social pacts for the coordination of otherwise segmented and conflicted initiatives.

Much commercialization of service provision is premised on the regulatory capacity of the state, the responses of the bureaucracy to the new policy regime, and the development and performance of the private sector. In many cases the industrialized countries are looked to as examples, and their experiences are assumed to be equally applicable to developing countries. However, the more developed the market, the greater the regulatory capacity of the state. Consequently, just because deregulation has worked in the industrialized countries does not mean it can work in the less developed countries. Liberalization in countries with weak markets may demand of the state a regulatory capacity that it simply does not have. In many cases this has led to inefficient monopolistic markets without the redistributive imperatives of state enterprises, producing both inefficiency in production and inequity in access to social services. These effects have been compounded by the general weakening in capacity of the public sector labour force, as well as by its wanton retrenchment.

Increasingly, service provision is being transferred to non-governmental organizations. Experiences with voluntary service provision suggest that there are often difficulties in scaling up to the national level activities that work at the micro level. Voluntarism tends to entail inherent institutional limits to coverage. In any case, the juxtaposition between voluntary and compulsory insurance schemes can be misleading. In many cases compulsory social insurance programmes tended to emerge either when the very broadest pre-existing voluntary movements pushed for them or when a weak pre-existing movement proved entirely unable to meet the demands for running the system. In addition, the success of a voluntaristic approach depends crucially on the institutionalization of such basic rights as the right to organize, as well as on the administrative capacity of both the state and voluntary organizations.

XIII. Financing social policy

The instruments for financing social policy must be fiscally prudent and compatible with other social goals, including equity and efficiency. Many regimes have ultimately foundered on the basis of a macroeconomic populism that paid scant attention to this delicate balance or confined itself to “give but not take” policies. Most populist policies and programmes ultimately fail because they do not ensure fiscally responsible financing. Successful welfare regimes have also tended to be higher tax regimes. More conservatively inclined regimes have reduced state capacity for social provisioning by reducing taxes on the rich.

In many countries mineral rents make up a major source of revenue. There is also considerable evidence that such wealth is misused and that these resources are not used effectively for social development. Some have construed this to suggest that a “resource curse”

befalls all countries richly endowed with mineral resources. But there are cases confounding the hypothesis, and these need to be better understood.

XIV. Social movements and social pacts

Social movements and social contestation are important determinants of social policy. Such movements have affected social policies in direct and indirect ways. In the most direct way, social mobilization has placed certain items on the policy agenda. In many cases, elite understanding of what is required to preempt or forestall social unrest may have driven social reform. Social pacts have played an important role in shaping social policies in a number of countries, especially in democratic ones.

XV. A diversity of instruments

A wide range of instruments may be used to reach certain universal goals. Even in “models” that are, for heuristic or comparative purpose, identified as “welfare regimes” (for example, the Nordic countries), there are substantial differences in instruments used and paths traversed over time.

Instruments have included fiscal policy, land reform, social legislation, classical welfare measures, regulation of the private sector, and so on. The choice of instruments and the dominance of one set of instruments over others is often the result of a complex interplay of forces—political compromises, ideological predispositions, institutional structure, and responses to the economic and political environment—the combination of which may be unique to each country. The political feasibility of a particular set of policies is determined by a country’s history and reflects the constellation of social forces. This speaks against one-size-fits-all approaches. Societies must be allowed more room and more instruments for devising policies appropriate to their circumstances.

XVI. Policy regimes

Social policy should be formulated within a policy regime framework that includes social policy, economic policy and political regimes. An important determinant of the success of social policies is the recognition of sectoral affinities or synergies between institutions located in different spheres of the political economy. In such situations, the structure and direction of movements in one sector complement those in the others.

Further Reading

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