DEVELOPMENT STUDIES – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Broadening Social Protection Thinking

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Abstract This article argues that the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) has made substantial contributions to the global social protection discourse, initially through its work on vulnerability, accountability and participatory approaches, and more recently through the work of the Centre for Social Protection (CSP) on social protection as a mechanism for achieving both economic development and social justice. These contributions are discussed at the 'ideas' level, where IDS/CSP has contributed three influential conceptual frameworks – 'transformative', 'adaptive' and 'inclusive' social protection – as well as at the 'instruments' level, where the CSP has been active in debates and policy processes from programme design through to impact evaluation.

1 Introduction

The social protection agenda has grown steadily in the last two decades. From its original conception as 'social safety nets' to more complex programmes with sophisticated theories of change, social protection is now mainstreamed in development programming. Countries and donor agencies across the world have adopted social protection strategies to complement and strengthen their efforts at reducing poverty and vulnerability. Within this evolution, an ideological tension underpins social protection's ultimate goal: is it primarily a means to achieve economic development targets (an 'instrumentalist' agenda), or is it a means to achieve social justice (an 'activist' agenda)? These two highly politicised narratives have influenced technical choices in social protection policy design, implementation and evaluation, reflecting the power of global development agencies as well as the nature of the social contract negotiated between the state and citizens in each country context.

We argue that the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) has influenced this debate by challenging development orthodoxies throughout its half-century of existence, and that this tradition pointed the way towards a progressive alternative to 'social protection as safety nets' thinking. IDS' work over several decades – on topics such as

vulnerability, food security, participation, empowerment and social justice – all laid the foundations for a rights-based approach to social protection. More directly, the Centre for Social Protection (CSP), established at IDS in 2006, has developed several frameworks as conceptual contributions to this alternative paradigm.

Section 2 of this article briefly reviews the origins of social protection and its evolution within the global development policy agenda. Section 3 reflects on the main contributions of IDS to the global social protection discourse, divided into 'ideas' and 'instruments'. Section 4 concludes by briefly reflecting on future social protection trajectories.

2 Where did social protection come from?

Until the 1980s social protection in the developing world was dominated by the Bismarckian model of social security, with an emphasis on employment-related social insurance, following the International Labour Organization (ILO) 'minimum standards' categories (ILO 1952).[1] This meant that social protection targeted mainly formally employed workers, who paid contributions into unemployment insurance and pension funds that protected them against income shocks if they lost their jobs or retired from work.

This left self-employed and informal sector workers excluded from any formal social security arrangements. However, in low-income economies the formal sector employs only a small minority of the workforce, while the majority make their livelihood as subsistence-oriented farmers, urban street traders and informal service providers, and a significant proportion of youth and working-age adults are unemployed, having never made any social security contributions.

All these categories of poor and vulnerable people had no access to social protection, except possibly humanitarian assistance in emergencies (such as food aid during droughts). Social assistance to the poor, especially 'handouts' of food or cash, was seen as economically harmful – potentially causing 'dependency syndrome' by discouraging beneficiaries from looking for work – and as fiscally unaffordable at the scale required in countries with high poverty rates and a small tax base.

A series of events in the 1980s and 1990s increased income insecurity across the world, and exposed the limitations of the social security model. These shocks and processes included:

● **structural adjustment programmes**, that cost millions of civil servants their jobs and imposed cutbacks in government spending on food subsidies and essential social services;

● **political and economic transitions** in former socialist economies of Europe and Asia, that were accompanied by an erosion of the 'cradle to grave' social protection that citizens had been entitled to receive from the state;

- mass mortality **famines** in Ethiopia, Sudan, North Korea and elsewhere, which were increasingly understood as 'human-made' rather than 'natural' disasters;

- the **HIV and AIDS pandemic**, that 'hollowed out' families by attacking working adults, leaving behind orphans without carers or living with grandparents in 'skip generation' households;

- the **Asian financial crisis** that, like public sector reform programmes, also displaced millions of workers from the formal sector into the informal economy or unemployment; and

- ongoing **'informalisation' in labour markets** worldwide, that has created a 'precariat' class of workers (Standing 2011) with insecure employment and no social security benefits.

Instead of social security and 'decent work' conditions being steadily extended to cover higher proportions of the workforce, following a linear 'modernisation' paradigm, social security access and benefits as well as workers' rights were increasingly threatened and reduced. People were left to rely on their own resources or on informal social protection, which proved inadequate to meet the range of vulnerabilities and depth of needs.

The immediate response by many governments was to introduce 'social safety nets', mainly in the form of in-kind transfers and public works, which were designed to support affected people through a transitional period (Barrientos and Santibañez 2009). Livelihood packages such as the Programme of Actions to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment (PAMSCAD) in Ghana provided some relief, but only to a small number of people for a limited period. More structured and comprehensive alternatives to these residual and reactive interventions were needed.

At the end of the 1990s the World Bank launched the first globally influential social protection framework: 'social risk management' (Holzmann and Jørgensen 1999). This approach understood poverty as being driven and exacerbated by uninsured risk, and asserted that risk management is fundamental for economic growth. The World Bank subsequently published its *Social Protection Sector Strategy: From Safety Net to Springboard* (World Bank 2001), which identified three main objectives for social protection: it should contribute to jobs, security and equity. The underlying paradigm was based on the imperative of economic growth and trickle-down economics. Pro-poor services and programmes are relevant only to the extent to which they are a means to increase economic growth, and this will only be achieved through trade and capital market liberalisation, urban job creation, deregulation and privatisation.

In the first decade of the 2000s social protection became internationally recognised as an entry-point for poverty reduction. To a large extent, this was a consequence of the economic crisis that occurred during the 1990s and the associated increased levels of poverty and inequality.

A pro-poor growth approach to economic policy emerged, where economic growth was to be achieved by paying due attention to poor and vulnerable populations. In this context, many countries implemented social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers, social grants and 'productive safety nets' on a large scale, targeting millions of poor households. Famous examples include Bolsa Família in Brazil and Oportunidade*s* in Mexico, the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia and the Child Support Grant in South Africa, all of which were evaluated as successful in terms of achieving a number of desirable outcomes. Social protection, as a key mechanism for poverty alleviation and enhanced access to essential services, gathered political support in the global development discourse. It became a 'silent partner' (Fiszbein, Kanbur and Yemtsov 2013: 4) for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Nonetheless, the social protection discourse was deeply divided, not only on technical questions like how – and whether – to target the poor, or whether cash transfers should be made conditional on children attending health clinics and schools, but more fundamentally, on the diametrically opposed ideological visions of society that were encapsulated in these ostensibly 'technical' choices (Kabeer 2007, 2014). The two visions can be categorised as an 'instrumentalist' approach and an 'activist' approach (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007). The former is reflected in the 'social risk management' framework, and draws from orthodox economics to hypothesise that social protection, by helping poor people manage risk better, is efficient for development. The 'activist' approach advocates for social protection as a right and a vehicle for achieving social justice, for instance by establishing a 'universal social minimum' as a right of citizenship (Thomson 2007). This thinking draws from sociology and politics as well as development studies, and asserts that poverty is embedded in complex social and political contexts that create social as well as economic risks, which interact with and reinforce each other.

After the financial crisis in 2008 there was a stronger recognition of rights-based approaches to social protection. The International Labour Office (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) introduced their 'Social Protection Floor Initiative' (ILO and WHO 2009). In 2012 the International Labour Conference adopted the 'Social Protection Floors Recommendation', which encourages member states to establish rights-based social protection floors as a fundamental element of their national social security systems, to ensure progressively higher levels of social protection throughout the life-cycle (ILO 2012). In the context of the post-2015 development agenda, agencies representing both the 'activist' and 'instrumentalist' strands of the discourse – the ILO and the World Bank – are now collaborating on the 'universal social protection' agenda, concurring that social protection systems are 'an essential part of National Development Strategies to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development with equitable social outcomes' (ILO and World Bank 2015: 1).

Currently, an estimated 1.9 billion people in the world receive social safety net programmes in the form of conditional or unconditional cash transfers; nutritional feeding programmes; public works programmes; and/or fee waivers. Likewise, virtually every country in the world has at least one social safety net programme in place. Nevertheless, only one third of the world's poor are covered by these social protection programmes (Honorati, Gentilini and Yemtsov 2015).

3 What has IDS contributed to social protection thinking and practice?

IDS' specific contributions to the evolution of the global social protection discourse are twofold. Firstly, IDS has influenced the conceptualisation of social protection – what it is and what it is for ('ideas'). Secondly, IDS has informed the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection policies and interventions – what to do and how to do it ('instruments').

However, several strands of IDS work influenced the genesis and evolution of the global social protection agenda, even before it emerged as a central pillar of development policy in the early 2000s. This includes IDS work on conceptualising vulnerability (Chambers 1989; Swift 1989a), policy responses to food insecurity (Swift 1989b; Maxwell 1991) and linking relief and development (Maxwell 1994), as well as the political economy analysis of instruments such as public works, school feeding programmes and food aid (Singer, Wood and Jennings 1987).

3.1 Ideas

IDS contributes to the development discourse by engaging directly with topical debates and by asking questions that challenge mainstream thinking and practice, to move development policies and programmes forward in a socially progressive direction. As social protection has evolved, IDS has played various roles, ranging from enthusiastic proponent to critical friend.

In the 1980s, Robert Chambers' thinking on policy responses to vulnerability anticipated the social protection agenda by at least a decade. In a classic 1989 *IDS Bulletin* article,[2] Chambers observed that: 'Vulnerability… is not the same as poverty. It means lack or want, but defencelessness, insecurity, and exposure to risk, shocks and stress.' It follows that '[p]rogrammes and policies to reduce vulnerability – to make more secure – are not, one for one, the same as programmes and policies to reduce poverty – to raise incomes'. Nonetheless, given the devastating consequences of risks and shocks, especially but not only for poor people, '[r]educing vulnerability can be as important an objective as reducing poverty' (Chambers 1989: 1, 5).

This fundamental distinction seems to have been forgotten by many governments and international development agencies, who have appropriated social protection for the poverty reduction agenda. Making the 'business case' for social protection and demonstrating its 'value-for-money' increasingly requires demonstrating its contribution to reducing income poverty. But this was not the original intention. Social

protection was originally conceived as a mechanism for managing uninsured risk and minimising the damaging consequences of life-cycle stresses and livelihood shocks; it was never intended as a mechanism for propelling people out of poverty.

Early approaches to social protection, such as the World Bank's 'social risk management' framework, which emerged out of the social safety nets and social security paradigms, were oriented towards protecting economically vulnerable people against livelihood-related risks, such as unemployment and retirement. The basic tools of social insurance and social assistance were clearly essential, but IDS felt that social protection should equally be about protecting socially vulnerable people and achieving social inclusion and social justice. In 2004 IDS published a working paper called *Transformative Social Protection* (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004) that argued for a focus on social equity and a rights-based approach. Transformative social protection has subsequently been adopted or adapted by several agencies (including UNICEF and the World Bank) to orient their development support and programming, and by several countries (including Rwanda and Zambia) to frame their National Social Protection Strategy or Policy.

The *IDS Bulletin* has always offered a platform for exploring issues in a more engaging way than is possible in peer-reviewed academic journals.[3] For example, in 2007 a special issue titled *Debating Social Protection* invited the originators of the World Bank's Social Risk Management and IDS' Transformative Social Protection frameworks to present their approaches and have them critically scrutinised – including by IDS MA students – following which the proponents were given a right to reply. Other contributions took the form of pithy articles that took sides for or against hot topics in social protection, such as cash *versus* food transfers, targeted *versus* universal programmes, and conditional *versus* unconditional social grants. The devil's advocate tone was set by the anti-conditionality paper, provocatively titled 'Superfluous, Pernicious, Atrocious and Abominable? The Case against Conditional Cash Transfers' (Freeland 2007).[4]

Migration poses particular challenges and dilemmas for social protection worldwide – an issue that became highly topical in 2015 with the so-called 'migrant crisis' in Europe. At the legal and ethical levels, should social rights and claims to social protection be 'portable' across borders, and do host countries have a responsibility to ensure that non-citizens have access to domestic social protection schemes? IDS research together with the Sussex Centre for Migration Research culminated in several articles and a book in which Sabates-Wheeler and Feldman (2011) explored the ways in which legal, physical and political environments influence the extent to which poor, and often irregular, migrants are able to access and benefit from social protection. This work drew on policy analysis and case studies of migrants in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

As global policy attention shifted towards climate change and resilience, IDS engaged by bringing together the three linked policy arenas of

climate change adaptation (CCA), disaster risk reduction (DRR) and social protection (SP), in a synthesised framework called 'adaptive social protection' (Davies *et al.* 2008), which highlighted the potential for social protection to reduce or manage vulnerability to future climatic risk, while achieving socially just outcomes. An IDS/CSP working paper with another provocative title, *Resilience: New Utopia or New Tyranny?*, pointed out that resilience 'is not a pro-poor concept, and the objective of poverty reduction cannot simply be substituted by resilience building' (Béné *et al.* 2012: 3).

A new IDS/CSP working paper 'Can Social Protection Increase Resilience to Climate Change?' (Solórzano 2016) shows how conventional forms of social protection, such as Oportunidades, a conditional cash transfer programme in Mexico, have limited impact on building households' resilience. The role of these programmes is mainly preventative, by increasing the adoption of self-insurance mechanisms and anticipation of risk behaviour. The paper cautions against expectations that households will develop strong and secure livelihoods in order to adapt to climate change as a consequence of productivity-enhancing safety nets. Adaptive capacity is dependent on other factors over which social protection has very little influence. However, the safety net role of social protection is fundamental to reduce vulnerability to climate change.

In 2010 the CSP partnered with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and others to produce two online briefing papers – 'Social Protection in Africa: Where Next?' and 'Social Protection in Africa: A Way Forward' (CSP *et al.* 2010a, 2010b) – which argued against complacency and warned that the rapid gains achieved during social protection's 'honeymoon decade' could be lost just as rapidly if it turned into just another development fashion. Ten guiding principles were proposed to guide the engagement of development partners with social protection policy processes in Africa, including 'Support national policy priorities' to ensure that policies and programmes are nationally owned rather than replicating standardised imported models.

In 2011 IDS hosted a conference titled 'Social Protection for Social Justice', which reinforced the argument that a transformative approach to social protection should address social injustices and iniquitous power relations as well as material deprivations. Several participants argued for upgrading social protection from charitable donations to a justiciable right: 'From social protection recipients to citizens', according to the subtitle of one contribution to the subsequent *IDS Bulletin* (Tessitore 2011). The conference concluded that adopting this political rather than technocratic approach to social protection has profound implications for local, national and global governance, such as the need to ground social protection in a social contract and to establish effective accountability mechanisms (Chopra and te Lintelo 2011).

The CSP's contribution to the post-MDG discussion was 'inclusive social protection' (Roelen and Devereux 2013), which argues for extending

coverage, institutionalising and building social protection systems, and moving explicitly towards a rights-based approach. These themes and preoccupations are mirrored by powerful actors such as the United Nations agencies which campaigned successfully to get social protection into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – notably as Target 3 under Goal 1: 'Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable' (UN DESA 2015).

3.2 Instruments

IDS' approach to social protection resonates with calls to put people at the centre of development programming. Complementing his conceptual work on vulnerability *versus* poverty, Chambers' championing of participatory approaches has been seminal in the shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches in development programming. Chambers and colleagues emphasised the importance of 'putting poor people first' throughout the project cycle, from programme design to implementation and evaluation in this *IDS Bulletin*. Increasing community participation in identifying poor and vulnerable people is one way of ensuring local ownership of targeting decisions, for instance. While community-based targeting raises many challenges, such as the potential for 'elite capture' of benefits, later work has provided answers on how more effective participatory processes can overcome this tendency (Chambers 2014).

Related strands of IDS work over the years – notably in areas such as power and empowerment – have informed thinking on integrating rights into social protection programmes. IDS fully supports bottom-up accountability mechanisms such as social audits and grievance procedures or 'complaint response mechanisms' to rectify targeting errors and ensure that all citizens and residents claim their right to social protection as an entitlement (Goetz and Gaventa 2001; Vij 2011). Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) argued for an actor-oriented approach to participation, whereby recipients of social policies are empowered to act as citizens on their own behalf, as opposed to functional concepts of participation that frame recipients exclusively as 'users' or 'consumers' of predetermined public services. By expanding participation into more active citizen engagement, social rights and responsibilities are included, exercised through self-action and regulated through social accountability mechanisms.

Social protection emerged partly out of 'safety net' responses to food insecurity, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. IDS' work on food security dates back to the Institute's founding in the 1960s. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, IDS engaged critically with food aid as an instrument to address humanitarian crises (e.g. emergency food aid), seasonal hunger (e.g. public works programmes) and chronic hunger (e.g. school feeding schemes). In *Food Aid: The Challenge and the Opportunity*, Hans Singer and co-authors asked prescient questions that anticipated the 'cash *versus* food' debate some 20 years later: 'Is food aid doing more harm than good?… Would a cheque not be better than food?' (Singer *et al.* 1987). More recently, IDS led a report for the Committee on World

Food Security on how social protection can contribute to realising the right to adequate food for all, which included a proposal for a 'food security floor' to complement the 'social protection floor' (HLPE 2012).

School feeding and public works (food- or cash-for-work) are now considered as indispensable instruments in the social protection toolkit, but they have also been subjected to critical scrutiny, by IDS and others. Old-style school feeding schemes were criticised for 'dumping' Western food aid in low-income countries, undermining local agricultural production and trade. Recently, 'home-grown school feeding' (HGSF) has emerged as an alternative approach that contracts local farmers to supply food and local caterers to prepare school meals, creating 'structured demand' to stimulate local production while ensuring that schoolchildren receive meals that are compatible with local diets. Despite its intuitively appealing theory of change, Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler (2011: 341) question whether HGSF can actually 'promote transformational change in family farming systems' and deliver social protection and agricultural development simultaneously, or are there tensions between the social and economic objectives that could compromise both outcomes?

IDS has supported the shift in public works, from discretionary temporary 'workfare' programmes towards demand-driven 'right to work' programmes, as exemplified by the employment guarantee schemes in India. Joshi and Moore (2000) explored whether the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS) in India has the potential for political mobilisation of the poor. Chopra (2014) examines the extent to which the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) represents an effective pathway towards establishing a rights-based social contract in India.

In Ethiopia, IDS has been influential in debates about using public works as both an employment-based safety net and a developmental tool since the 1990s, when food-for-work was seen as a mechanism for 'linking relief and development' (Maxwell 1993; Maxwell and Lirenso 1994). This thinking evolved into the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), which was launched in 2005 and comprised Public Works (temporary employment on community infrastructure projects for food-insecure people who can work) and Direct Support (free food or cash transfers for food-insecure people who cannot work). The CSP has engaged continuously in design debates and evaluations of the PSNP, including exploring how it can be adapted from highland farming communities to lowland (agro-)pastoralist communities (Sabates-Wheeler, Lind and Hoddinott 2013), and arguing that Direct Support should evolve into one pillar of a 'comprehensive institutionalised social protection system for all vulnerable Ethiopians' (Devereux and Teshome 2013: 101).

Recently, 'graduation model' programmes have enjoyed attention and popularity, because of their claims – backed up by evaluation evidence from several countries – to be able to graduate people sustainably out of extreme poverty, by delivering a carefully sequenced package of support

for a period of about two years (Banerjee *et al.* 2015). These interventions bring together elements of social protection (cash transfers, financial inclusion) and livelihood programmes (asset transfers and skills training). They are popular with governments and agencies who are attracted by the evidence of success and the promise of an 'exit strategy'. The CSP cautioned against overambitious expectations, and proposed a framework for analysing the factors that 'enable' or 'constrain' graduation outcomes in practice (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2013). In 2014 the CSP hosted an international conference in Rwanda to share experiences from the original graduation projects in Bangladesh with researchers, policymakers and practitioners from Africa, Latin America and other Asian countries. The CSP's contributions included the idea of 'intergenerational graduation', which argues that graduation can only be considered truly sustainable if children grow up better-off than their parents (Roelen 2015).

4 Conclusion

Social protection has come a long way in a short time, and it looks like it is here to stay. Where is it going next? In 2014 the CSP convened online discussions and ran Foresight scenario workshops to address this question: 'Where next for social protection?' (Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs 2015). Key drivers that were predicted to influence the evolution of social protection in the coming years include widening inequalities, demographic ageing in some countries and youthful populations in others, large-scale migration and urbanisation with implications for social protection 'portability', and ongoing 'flexibilisation' of labour markets with associated loss of social security benefits.

Instead of a linear convergence towards a single model, multiple trajectories are likely, depending on political ideologies and institutional capacities in each country at different points in time. Progressive governments with adequate financial and human resources might adopt rights-based approaches such as a universal Social Protection Floor, while regressive governments with limited resources will continue to favour minimal safety nets targeting subgroups among the poor.

Social protection is a richly rewarding area of development policy to work in, because it offers a direct pathway from thinking and research to policy influence, and because the impacts are visible almost immediately, in new or improved programmes that are bringing positive changes to the lives of millions of poor and vulnerable people. Many technical and ideological debates in social protection remain hotly contested, and advocating for 'what's right' is as important as building the evidence base on 'what works'.

In the coming years, IDS and the CSP will continue to argue for a social justice approach, and will support efforts to build or strengthen national social protection systems in low- and middle-income countries. This implies not just scaling up social protection projects and extending their coverage, but recognising that social protection is just one component of an integrated strategy to reduce vulnerability and achieve social justice for all.

Notes

* The authors are grateful to Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Keetie Roelen and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1 The Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) provides for nine contingencies: medical care and family benefits, as well as benefits in the event of sickness, unemployment, old age, employment injury, maternity, invalidity and death of the breadwinner.

2 This article was selected as a 'classic' contribution in a compilation that celebrated 40 years of the *IDS Bulletin*, ten years ago (Devereux and Knowles 2006).

3 Early issues of the *IDS Bulletin* included this frontispiece: 'The major aim of the Bulletin is to publish brief and direct – sometimes provocative – articles on themes of current importance to those concerned with problems of development: students, teachers, and above all, practitioners'.

4 The author explained his choice of title: 'In his comic novel of [1817], "Melincourt", Thomas Love Peacock wrote of the trade in sugar that it was "economically superfluous, physically pernicious, morally atrocious and politically abominable". Much the same could be said of 'Conditional Cash Transfers' (CCTs) today' (Freeland 2007: 75).

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