

# Introduction: Social Protection for Social Justice

Stephen Devereux, J. Allister McGregor and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler

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**Abstract** The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are drawn from a conference hosted by the Centre for Social Protection at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton, UK, in April 2011. The conference brought together academics and practitioners who understand social protection to be more than a palliative agenda for alleviating poverty and vulnerability, believing instead that social protection should be fundamentally interested in realising economic and social rights for all. This alternative agenda is one grounded in social justice, and it opens space for understanding how issues of rights, governance, distribution and access are critical for breaking the production and reproduction of vulnerability over time. The selection of articles in this *IDS Bulletin* aims to elaborate the linkages between social protection and social justice, to identify opportunities for operationalising the ‘transformative’ aspects of social protection and to strengthen the case for integrating social protection into broader social policy.

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## 1 Social protection and social justice

Social protection has established itself as a core function of development policy in recent years, but in many respects, it remains firmly rooted in its origins in social safety nets and humanitarian relief, where assistance was provided on a ‘discretionary’ rather than an ‘entitlement’ basis, usually for a limited time period, often in the form of food, and recipients were pejoratively labelled as ‘aid beneficiaries’. Social protection in practice has moved beyond this in many respects: quasi-welfare programmes such as social pension schemes provide regular ongoing transfers; cash transfers have displaced or complemented food aid in emergency and non-emergency contexts; ‘beneficiaries’ are now ‘recipients’, ‘participants’ or even ‘claimants’.

Nonetheless, we believe that social protection remains insufficiently focused on achieving social justice outcomes, in terms of both objectives and implementation. The primary goal of most social protection interventions is to protect minimum subsistence in low-income households. Certainly, the ‘triple F’ (food, fuel and finance) crisis underlined the importance of social transfers in assisting affected people to survive livelihood shocks and preserve their assets. But social

protection can do more than help poor and vulnerable people to manage risk in the short term; it can – and should – also tackle the underlying causes of their vulnerability. Since many sources of risk and vulnerability are social and political, this makes it imperative to understand the sociopolitical context and to engage with the holders of power and the drivers of inequality, to achieve socially equitable outcomes. From this perspective, several key messages emerged or were reinforced at the conference.

Progressive forms of social protection are reconfiguring social policy and constructing new social contracts between states and citizens, or between supra-national entities and disenfranchised population groups such as refugees and migrants. Whether the governance system is a hierarchy of patronage or a formal democracy, a core responsibility and source of legitimacy of governments is to protect the people they govern against physical harm or economic hardship. This notion lies at the heart of social contract theory, and the idea of a guarantee of minimal subsistence has been recognised by social historians such as E.P. Thompson (1963) and in the ‘moral economy’ approach advanced by James

C. Scott (1976). In this context, social protection schemes are a form of welfare provision, whereby states (or agents acting on their behalf, such as donors) provide resources to people who are struggling to meet their subsistence needs, or require insurance against potential future shocks such as unemployment or disability. But many governments remain unwilling or unable to deliver social protection, which is left to civil society or external agencies. In such cases, there is no social contract, and no direct line of accountability between providers and ‘beneficiaries’. This issue is particularly pertinent in countries where poverty and aid dependence mean that international donor agencies dominate the design and financing of social assistance and social insurance.

Moreover, social protection can be – and often is – delivered in ways that make no effort to transform the relationships that generate the vulnerabilities and impoverishments they address. It is perfectly possible for clientelistic systems of patronage to transfer resources that maintain the subsistence of clients, while at the same time reinforcing the relationships that systematically extract resources in ways that leave clients impoverished, marginalised and vulnerable (Beck 1994; McGregor 1994). Critically, therefore, social protection is much more than a service delivery sector.

*The decisions a society makes about whether and how to guarantee basic subsistence for all people reveal the vision that society has about itself.* Who benefits from social protection is also crucial. If access is rationed on the basis of favour and patronage; if resources are misappropriated by specific groups and systematically denied to others, then the economic and social effectiveness of such interventions will be greatly reduced – they might even entrench inequalities of wealth and power.

*Social protection must be delivered in ways that do not stigmatise people.* Programmes should respect the dignity of claimants and empower them to become active citizens rather than passive beneficiaries. The ‘transformative social protection’ agenda (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004) is concerned with changing the relationships that are responsible for the persistence of vulnerability, marginalisation and impoverishment.

*Social protection should be linked to other dimensions of social policy, such as tackling discrimination and social exclusion, which are often the root causes of poverty.* This will depend both on what is delivered (e.g. Do social transfers reinforce or break the dependencies that reproduce poverty?) and how it is delivered (i.e. Do the relationships around delivery empower recipients as claimants or stigmatise them as ‘welfare dependents?’). Too few social protection interventions are designed and delivered in ways that truly respect and empower programme participants.

In a growing number of countries, rights to social protection are being enshrined in law, but in many cases, laws that are enacted are not fully implemented or adequately enforced. The cases of India and South Africa (both explored in this *IDS Bulletin*) suggest that effective establishment of claims-based social protection is not just about technical issues of design and delivery, but requires other elements of effective governance, in particular, a functioning and independent judicial and legal system.

*The most progressive social protection interventions are underpinned by enforceable legislation, which transforms a charitable gesture into a justiciable right.*

## **2 Review of conference papers**

Over 50 papers were presented at the ‘Social Protection for Social Justice’ conference, 13 of which appear as articles in this *IDS Bulletin*. Here, we highlight key arguments made by most of the conference papers, which were organised around four themes:

- ‘Constructing Democratic Governance: Social Protection and New Social Contracts’ focused on the politics of social protection.
- ‘Social Protection and Transformation of Social and Economic Drivers of Vulnerability’ reflected our view that mainstream social protection has given great attention to poverty reduction but not enough to ‘vulnerability reduction’.
- ‘Social Protection and Sustainable Adaptation to Climate and Environmental Change’ elaborated the linkages with climate change and climate justice.
- ‘Social Protection, Inequality and Redistributive Justice’ demonstrated the potential of social protection to address a range of economic and social inequalities.

## 2.1 Theme 1: Constructing democratic governance

*What is the nature of the social contract between government and social protection claimants? Has social protection provided mechanisms for civil society mobilisation and citizen empowerment, or does it serve as a residual safety net that buys off social unrest?*

Several papers explored the conceptual linkages between social protection and social justice.

**Sam Hickey** defined social justice as the ways in which social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties. While there are many different perspectives on justice, in developing a social justice approach to social protection, the ‘relational’ perspective is powerful because it offers an explanation of why injustice comes about. But he cautioned that social protection is not enough to achieve social justice and that introducing the language of rights and justice might not be politically strategic, as policymakers are wary of the fiscal and legal implications of having to meet justiciable claims.

**Naila Kabeer** noted that social protection was an immediate popular response to the financial crisis, but only as a reaction to market failure, i.e. within the hegemonic neoliberal paradigm, where the state plays a minimal role. Although the state is the only institution that is obligated to provide social protection, this does not necessarily imply a return to a state-centric approach. New arguments are needed for a Universalist approach – these debates are ongoing in countries like Brazil, India and South Africa – and for convincing sceptical policymakers about the right to social protection (e.g. social protection as an investment in human capital).

In a paper delivered by Thandika Mkandawire, **Jimí Adésínà** critiqued the ‘social protection paradigm’ as the ‘social’ side of neoliberalism – a narrow agenda dominated by conditional and unconditional cash transfers, that originated in safety net responses to structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s. Most social protection interventions target the poor or ‘ultra-poor’; their success is demonstrated through ‘randomised control trial’ impact evaluations and they are disconnected from broader social policy. In Africa, five sets of actors are driving the ‘social protection paradigm’: international financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank), bilateral donors, NGOs (often single-issue advocates), consultants, and lower-level government

bureaucrats. Adésínà argued for a ‘transformative social policy’ that reflects a wider vision of society and fulfils multiple roles, including production, redistribution, protection, reproduction, social cohesion and nation-building, all underpinned by principles of equality and social solidarity.

One panel considered the role for external actors in constructing social contracts. **Charlotte**

**Harland** argued that social protection is intrinsically about the relationship between the state and its citizens. While support and learning from international agencies is useful, external actors that aim to achieve social change through ‘transformative social protection’ are implicitly demanding fundamental changes in local power relationships. The profoundly political nature of this type of intervention is unacknowledged or avoided in most of the social protection literature. **Esther Schüring** and **Julie Lawson-McDowall** agreed that social protection should be part of a social contract that governments conclude with their citizens. The case of Zambia is instructive because international donors have been instrumental in driving the social protection agenda, through pilot projects that the government has failed to scale-up. Explaining this ‘stagnation’ in social protection requires assessing whether the government has failed to adopt ‘correct’ policy recommendations, whether these recommendations were wrong, or whether progress achieved has been incorrectly evaluated.

This led to a consideration of the role of domestic actors in constructing social contracts through social protection. **Sajjad Hassan** spoke about the range of interventions that the Indian government has recently introduced or upgraded to claims-based legislated rights, notably the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between national-level rhetoric and ground-level realities – in practice, these social protection instruments continue to function as ‘quick fix’ handouts that fail to address the structural causes of poverty, such as inequality, social exclusion and ‘elite capture’ by local power structures.

In Nigeria, according to **Franklins Sanubi**, the concept of social protection is perceived as foreign, and government welfarist initiatives are

interpreted as cynically motivated to buy political support, rather than as the democratic evolution of a social contract. In such contexts, domestic civil society must take a proactive role in building political commitment and holding government accountable for extending economic and social rights to citizens. **Rosalinda Ofreño** provided an example from the Philippines, where a civil society movement – the People’s Social Protection Agenda – is calling for social, gender and environmental justice, and the delivery of social security for all.

Two panels explored the politics of social protection implementation. **Deepta Chopra** argued that the MGNREGS in India has limited potential to contribute to establishing social contracts, partly because of confusion about what it actually is – anti-poverty measure, job creation scheme, rural development programme, social protection intervention or flagship government programme? The ‘transformative’ feature of MGNREGS is not the employment it offers, but the empowerment that derives from the right to demand work. Building on this, **Nidhi Vij** showed how the introduction of ‘social audits’ to MGNREGS has created a platform for participatory governance. Social audits give villagers a ‘voice’ to hold local administrations and programme implementers accountable for delivery, empowering poor people and potentially transforming community-level social relations and political structures.

The final set of papers in this theme focused on actors and agents in social protection delivery. **Savina Tessitore** made a strong case for upgrading the status of ‘recipients’ to ‘citizens’ in social protection programming. This requires the ‘constitutionalisation’ of social rights and the legislation of social policies, backed up by primary guarantees to design and implement these policies, and secondary guarantees to monitor, arbitrate and ensure compliance. **Hania Sholkamy** commented on the role of social workers in delivering a conditional cash transfer in Egypt, noting that the agents who actually deliver social protection have been almost invisible in the literature. Yet, they are intermediaries between the state and ‘beneficiaries’ of state policies, and have complex relationships with the policies they are responsible for implementing. **Dolf te Lintelo** argued that the role of informal social protection

has also been overlooked, because of the preoccupation with states and donor agencies. Instead of seeing the state as a benefactor disbursing social welfare and rights, a critical appraisal of the state might lead to the conclusion that informal social protection is often necessary to protect poor people against the insecurities and vulnerabilities that derive from state action – or inaction.

## 2.2 Theme 2: Drivers of vulnerability

*How can social protection move beyond immediate ‘vulnerability management’ towards sustainable ‘vulnerability reduction’, by addressing the underlying, structural, social and political drivers of poverty, vulnerability and inequality? How can social protection avoid ‘dependency’ and stigma, and build resilience and autonomy?*

Some agencies do recognise social protection’s potential to transform vulnerability and inequity into resilience and social justice. **Richard Morgan** explained that UNICEF’s approach to social protection is driven by the notion of reducing both social and economic vulnerabilities, not merely managing the manifestations of vulnerability with social assistance programmes. Discrimination and exclusion lead to material vulnerability, which can only be sustainably tackled by addressing power and social relations. This is what a transformative approach to social protection implies, and it resonates with UNICEF’s renewed focus on equity.

Delivering social protection is particularly challenging in fragile situations. However, well-designed interventions can contribute to strengthening both livelihoods and institutions. **Wale Osofisan** contrasted experiences with cash transfer programmes in Sierra Leone and Kenya, demonstrating how weak institutions and eroded infrastructure in post-conflict Sierra Leone resulted in elite capture and undermined trust in public institutions. Conversely, in northern Kenya, innovative institutions such as grievance procedures and ‘rights committees’ were established on the Hunger Safety Net Programme that empowered pastoralist communities to hold the government accountable.

An innovative approach to social protection was introduced for Kenya’s urban poor after the post-election violence of 2008. Apart from cash transfers

to meet basic needs and small grants to promote livelihoods, the programme included a social transformation process to reduce discrimination within the community. **Amina Abdulla** reported on an evaluation that found increased dietary diversity and access to education and health care, as well as positive social changes such as strengthened social networks, increased self-confidence and greater space for social action and participation.

**Aditi Jha** argued that vulnerabilities associated with social and political marginalisation can be reduced if citizens' agency in the social and political spheres is extended, transforming powerlessness and resignation into ownership and empowerment. An innovative programme in India empowers community representatives by raising awareness of their entitlements, and mobilising them to take collective action to claim their rights to social protection and improved service delivery. Also in India, **Abdul Thaha** considered the vulnerability that derives from 'identity discrimination', taking the case of Muslims in Andhra Pradesh. The state government has reserved places for Muslims in education and employment, which is controversial but has achieved some redistributive equity.

Another source of economic and social vulnerability is disability, which should be a central concern for social protection but, as **Marguerite Schneider** demonstrated, is often neglected by interventions that target households rather than individuals, and prioritise economic impacts rather than social outcomes. Challenges include defining and assessing disability, designing interventions for different types and severities of disability, and ensuring that social grants and other public services are fully accessible to people with disabilities.

Gender is one driver of vulnerability that has become so 'mainstreamed' in development policy it often disappears. **Nicola Jones** and **Rebecca Holmes** reported that whether programmes are gender-aware depends on the '3 i's' of social protection: *institutions* (e.g. whether political parties believe that gendered interventions can influence elections); *interests* (e.g. whether a programme is run from the Ministry of Gender or Agriculture); *ideas* (e.g. whether elites perceive gender inequity as a major driver of poverty and vulnerability that requires redress). **Stephen**

**Devereux** presented a case study from South Africa, where many women working on commercial farms have been evicted and 'casualised'. Having lost their access to employment-related social security, these women depend on social grants which, although generous, constitute a social policy response to structural labour market problems and failures of economic policy to generate 'decent work' and job security.

Moving from women to children, **Keetie Roelen** interrogated the concept of 'child-sensitive social protection', arguing that a more nuanced approach is needed, that disaggregates 'children' by age and gender, that recognises the multidimensional nature of child poverty, and that considers not only children's current wellbeing but their future 'well-becoming'. **Peter Whiteford** followed with a case study from Vanuatu, which illuminated the multiple sources of deprivation and vulnerability that children face. Drawing on cross-country evidence, **Nicola Hypher** showed that pro-poor reductions in child mortality are occurring in countries with rising access to social services and coverage of social protection instruments, such as conditional or unconditional cash transfers and social health insurance.

Social protection aims to reduce vulnerability, but targeted interventions can also be a source of new vulnerabilities, because they create new social categories: specifically, included recipients and excluded non-recipients. **Tessa Hochfeld** asked whether South Africa's Child Support Grant generates social stigma, given that it is (probably unfairly) associated with welfare dependency and high teenage fertility. This negative rhetoric is internalised by women recipients, many of whom feel ashamed at being dependent on 'handouts' from the state. **Ian MacAuslan** elaborated on how cash transfer programmes can generate resentment within communities, because they ignore the reality that targeted recipients are embedded within complex networks of social relations. Such social costs, which should be considered in programme evaluations, can be avoided if communities participate in programme design and implementation, for instance with community-based targeting.

Similar social costs have been observed in India's MGNREGS, which has limited potential for social transformation, according to **Laura Camfield**, because it fails to address inequities

at the community level. MGNREGS offers equality of opportunity but not equality of outcomes – most benefits accrue to landlords, higher castes, large families and administering officials. An evaluation from a wellbeing perspective concluded that the programme’s beneficial impacts are offset by its corrosive effects on trust and social relationships.

One strand linking this set of presentations is how social protection can go beyond merely providing compensation to people facing inequitable social structures and power hierarchies, and truly empower them to overcome these sources of vulnerability and social injustice.

### 2.3 Theme 3: Adaptation to climate change

*Recent conceptual innovations such as ‘adaptive social protection’ have sketched out the linkages between social protection and environmental concerns. How can social protection be better integrated with climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and related concepts, to achieve socially just outcomes that are also environmentally sustainable?*

Social protection is increasingly recognised as having a role in building resilience to climate change. **Paul Siegel** presented a ‘no regrets’ approach (that would improve wellbeing whether or not climate change occurs), called the ‘risk-adjusted social protection floor’, which aims to build resilient, equitable and sustainable economic, social and environmental systems that are based on the universal provision of basic human needs. This approach draws on the ‘social risk management’ and ‘adaptive social protection’ frameworks, but adds social guarantees and other rights-based instruments to existing insurance products for disaster risk management.

Adaptive social protection combines elements of social protection, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, to enhance the resilience of livelihoods that are most vulnerable to climate change. **Mark Davies** presented ongoing work in South Asia that demonstrates the potential gains from such a coordinated or integrated approach, but recognises the many conceptual and policy challenges – not least the risk of propping up livelihood systems that may be unsustainable in the long term. **Terry Cannon** focused on disaster risk reduction in a

context of increasing climate risk, arguing that disasters are socially constructed because vulnerability is determined by power inequalities (Who live in marginal environments? Who is responsible for most greenhouse emissions?). A rights-based approach to social protection offers a way forward, because conventional disaster responses are reactive and do not address the political origins of vulnerability.

Moving from conceptual frameworks to policy responses, **Carol Watson** suggested that mechanisms for building social protection into climate change adaptation should target people living in areas facing significant environmental risk, especially farmers and pastoralists. Mechanisms include cash transfers to bolster livelihoods, agro-pastoral input subsidies, public works programmes to enhance environmental infrastructure, and social insurance against drought and production failure. **Paul Siegel** presented a case study of Rwanda, which is implementing an integrated adaptive social protection approach. Public works projects prioritise land conservation, hillside terracing, water resource management and reforestation. A proposed community-based multi-hazard early warning system would trigger rapid responses, such as flexible scaling-up of public works and cash transfers when economic and environmental conditions deteriorate.

Finally, **Rachel Godfrey Wood** asked whether social cash transfers – the dominant social protection instrument with a substantial evidence base of positive impacts – have a role to play in climate change adaptation. She concluded that cash transfers can build adaptive capacity, by meeting basic needs and reducing immediate vulnerability, financing costs of responding to climate shocks, reducing pressures to adopt damaging ‘coping strategies’, and enabling improved risk management. Cash transfers can even facilitate mobility and transition into alternative livelihoods, if required. This tension, between investing in climate-vulnerable livelihoods or supporting diversification towards less vulnerable livelihoods, was a recurring theme in this set of discussions.

### 2.4 Theme 4: Inequality and redistributive justice

*Big claims are often made for the potential of social protection, notably cash transfers, to reduce income poverty and inequality between rich and poor. How robust*

*is the evidence base for these claims? Which forms of social protection, in which contexts, are most effective at reducing socioeconomic inequalities and contributing to redistributive justice?*

Reducing inequality is central to achieving social justice, and social protection has an obvious role as a redistributive mechanism. **Kate Carroll** pointed out that even where poverty reduction is occurring, market-led policies mean that inequalities are often increasing. Rights-based National Development Strategies are needed, based on wealth redistribution, self-reliant growth, ecological justice and women's rights through recognition of the care economy.

**Gabriele Koehler** demonstrated that social protection policies in South Asia do reflect rights and justice concerns. Many programmes are claims-based and some have 'affirmative' elements to redress social inequities faced by *Dalit*, Muslim or tribal communities. On the other hand, these schemes typically do not consider the underlying causes of exclusion, and in this sense, social protection takes too narrow a focus.

**Dipankar Datta** presented a case study from India: the role of civil societies in strengthening social assistance schemes in Orissa. Civil society has mobilised to reduce corruption and elite capture on programmes such as the Public Distribution System and MGNREGS, for instance by mobile phone and web-based tracking; creative use of community media; and promoting Right to Information hubs. The challenge is how to scale-up this model from individual communities to national coverage.

**Indra Tiwari** reminded us that the family remains the core institution with responsibility for individual wellbeing, and noted that the proliferation of social rights and targeted social protection programmes risks undermining the role of families and communities. **Ellen Ehmke** adopted a 'welfare regimes' perspective to explain the trajectory of social protection in India, arguing that, despite the egalitarian provisions made in the Indian constitution, the welfare regime continues to emphasise differences between various groups within the Indian population, and remains fundamentally inequalitarian.

**David Fryer** critiqued the claims made for cash transfers as a 'revolution' in development policy, arguing that social grants are an elite response

to the poverty and inequality that capitalism and neoliberalism create. The only policy changes with genuine transformative potential are those that increase the agency of subordinate classes. In liberal democracies like South Africa, poverty is mitigated through social grants, but the state refuses to intervene in the labour market to ensure full employment, and workers' rights are inadequately protected. **Rachel Sabates-Wheeler** pointed out the challenges that migrant workers face in accessing their right to social protection, from either their home or destination communities. More often than not, social grants and social security are not 'portable', and even where formal entitlement rules are established, migrants have to negotiate with employers and administrators to enforce their claims and secure their rights.

How is social justice being addressed in global poverty reduction and social protection agendas? **Wouter van Ginneken** built a case for a human rights approach to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are relevant not only because social protection can contribute towards achieving these goals but because they represent a 'claim' by the poor on the global community to meet humanity's basic needs – in effect, the first step towards a global social contract. The challenge for the MDGs beyond 2015 is to formulate core human rights indicators, that would form a basis for national and international contracts that can hold states accountable.

**Michael Cichon** presented the Social Protection Floor, a UN-led initiative that aims to extend access to a core set of essential services (health, education, water, sanitation) and social transfers, to ensure minimum income and livelihood security for all. The Social Protection Floor would cost about 1 per cent of global GDP and could eradicate extreme poverty, but countries need support to close crucial gaps in current levels of provision. Finally, **Philippe Marcadent** argued that the four strategic objectives of the Decent Work Agenda – creating jobs, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue – are key elements of a social justice approach to social security. Social protection is not only about social assistance to 'vulnerable groups', it also covers social security for people in employment, where the challenge is to extend social insurance to informal, self-employed and migrant workers.

These discussions highlighted the need for social protection to strengthen its linkages to the evolving institutions of global governance. The MDGs, Social Protection Floor and Decent Work Agenda are all important components in the progressive development of international law, but judicial and political frameworks are needed to interpret these rights and give them legal content.

### 3 Conclusion

Social protection is not only about installing safety nets and alleviating poverty – important though these are – it also has profound implications for social relations and for local, national and global governance. The articles in this collection address the perception that insufficient attention has been paid to the politics of social protection, to addressing not just poverty and shocks but structural vulnerabilities and socioeconomic inequalities, and to social protection's relationship with social justice outcomes. 'Social protection plus' is needed to upgrade projects and programmes from discretionary social assistance to claims-

based entitlements. This 'social protection for social justice' agenda demands an explicitly political approach, as seen in countries like India and South Africa, driven both from the top and by civil society activism from below.

We end on an optimistic note. Social protection has been the development success story of the past decade. Not only are social protection programmes extending their coverage to poor and vulnerable people across the world, they are increasingly becoming claims-based and justiciable, empowering individuals and communities, and building social contracts between states and citizens. But it is important going forward to protect the gains made: to extend coverage further and to remain focused on the primary objective – guaranteeing subsistence when private sources of subsistence are inadequate – while striving to upgrade pilot projects and institutionalise programmes, so that they become permanent and irreversible entitlements. This is a vital next step towards ensuring that social protection becomes an effective instrument for achieving social justice for all.

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