

# Democratic Governance for Social Justice: The Politics of Social Protection

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**Abstract** This overview introduces three articles that examine some of the varying forms and dimensions of the politics of social protection policies and programmes, to give us an insight into their transformative potential. The analysis highlights the importance of the multitude of actors and their interactions that mediate the processes and outcomes of social protection programming, in both the policymaking and implementing arenas. This demands attention to institutional features of polity and policy design, interests, attitudes and beliefs, public opinion and personalised decision-making. The articles further show the importance of reflecting on how programmes and policies relate to existing forms of citizenship and rights. Rights-based social protection can distinctly identify citizens as claimants, not only to assume, foster and achieve active forms of citizenship and strengthen social contracts, to assist the successful functioning of policies, but also to empower the claimant, challenge iniquities and social injustice, and to encourage transformative outcomes.

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Social protection policies and programmes are increasingly coming under scrutiny for their objectives and the extent to which these objectives are actually realised. These assessments are still largely technocratic, based on evaluating aspects such as design, outreach and impact. While the ‘3P’ terminology – ‘Protection, Prevention, Promotion’ – has gained considerable traction in development discourse, the fourth aspect – ‘Transformation’ – is often left behind. This section of the *IDS Bulletin* examines some of the varying forms and dimensions of the politics of social protection to highlight their transformative potential. Politics, understood as the practice of power, permeates all manifest and latent aspects of social protection programming and policymaking. The following three articles highlight this from two angles: first, the politics of designing or setting up social protection programmes, and second, the politics of implementing these interventions. In both these aspects, a discussion of social contracts becomes pertinent.

A social contract can be understood as a relationship between the state and its citizens in

a way that holds the state accountable to its citizens, who are both rights-bearers and claimants of these rights. Hickey (2008: 259–60) observes that a ‘focus on social contracts... offers a normative policy framework through which to promote social protection’. It may be argued that all social protection programmes express an underlying social contract, albeit of varying strengths, generosity and levels of inclusiveness. Yet it is important to understand that the operational characteristics of programmes can further strengthen the social contract. Tessitore (this *IDS Bulletin*) highlights that social protection initiatives need not always be empowering or linked to rights-based policies. When they are linked, however, social protection interventions can not only lead to transformative outcomes, but can also move towards a realisation of citizenship. Rights-based social protection can thus distinctly identify citizens as claimants, rather than as mere recipients or beneficiaries. As such, Tessitore posits that rights should not just be bestowed, but that the very process of claiming these empowers the claimant to assist the successful functioning of rights-based social protection policies.

Another important theme that Tessitore points towards is that social contracts are both a prerequisite for and a consequence of rights-based social protection. This twin-faceted nature of social contracts is exemplified in the case of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India. It is well documented that the MGNREGA was put in place through negotiations between the state and actors from civil society, who were able to draw on existing notions of citizenship and state responsibility for doing this (Chopra 2011; see also Ehmke, this *IDS Bulletin*). In turn, the MGNREGA further led to poor families being able to lay claims on the state for the fulfilment of their rights, thereby setting in motion a new set of social contracts between themselves and the state (Vij, this *IDS Bulletin*). Vij argues for a collaborative governance approach in the execution of social contracts, where social audit mechanisms can play a critical role for empowering ordinary citizens by providing a recognised platform for engagement, to hold the state to account and to foster an active form of citizenship.

Conversely, Schüring and Lawson-McDowall (this *IDS Bulletin*) note that the presence of a variety of social protection measures does not mean that an inclusive and strong social contract has emerged in Zambia. The latter would require first, recognition of the need and appropriateness of such by both duty-bearers and rights claimants; second, legal enforceability, and third, a relationship of accountability between state and citizens. Their analysis also highlights that some of the features that mediate the further development of a social contract are highly political; notably a patrimonialist political economy with highly personalised decision-making in informal policy spaces; and weakly developed accountability mechanisms. At the same time, a lack of rights that are enforceable and justiciable prevents the emergence of a social contract in the country.

This case of the MGNREGA also demonstrates how politics operate in both setting up social protection programmes and policies (as discussed above), and in their implementation. It is the operation of politics that explains the varying degree of success that the same programme has had in different states in India. This point is also emphasised by Schüring and Lawson-McDowall

for Zambia, where in addition to institutional features there are personal interests, public opinion and personalised decision-making that affect the design, outreach as well as implementation and therefore impact of social protection programmes. Tessitore and Vij further highlight the importance of active citizenship, where institutions have to enable, but citizens themselves act and engage in policy processes.

Vij proposes that decentralised collaborative governance holds the key to more effective implementation of these policies, thereby leading to a change in existing power relations. This is then the first step towards achieving social justice through social protection interventions. In other words, in order for the transformative function of social protection interventions to be put into place as well as realised, the contextual and institutional factors need to be conducive to a process of collaborative governance and decision-making. Although such structures are currently absent in Zambia, and various political economic obstacles stand in the way of their immediate realisation, Schüring and Lawson-McDowall nevertheless are quietly optimistic, noting a gradual shift in political interest, development discourses and public support for and attitudes towards social protection. It is thus only in the event of a change in existing power relations and the operationalisation of decentralised governance, that the poor can influence the government and have access to decision-making structures. As highlighted by Tessitore and also touched on by Vij, this process is fraught with tension and power struggle, and needs to be examined to identify the extent to which even civil society and social movement representatives are truly representative of the needs of the marginalised.

These three articles accordingly point out that a multitude of actors is involved in the realisation of the transformative potential of social protection. These actors need to be interconnected in various ways. As Vij demonstrates, decentralised governance can only be successful if the state and other organisations such as civil society work synergistically rather than as adversaries. She lays out a role for civil society to complement and support the government in the monitoring and implementation of the MGNREGA, at the same time as the state administration supports these organisations. In the Zambian case, Schüring and

Lawson-McDowall note the importance of strengthening a currently weakened civil society to argue that in their absence, donor agencies may temporarily, though cautiously, support the design of transformative social protection policies. On the other hand, Tessitore's analysis of the Kenyan Hunger Safety Net Programme highlights that strong donor involvement may fail to strengthen the social contract that is needed to underpin enduring social protection programmes.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. First, as noted above, an analysis of the politics of social protection policies and programmes allows us an insight into their transformative potential. It also points to the importance of recognising the multitude of actors and their interactions that mediate the processes and outcomes of social protection programming, in both the policymaking and implementing arenas.

#### References

- Chopra, D. (2011) 'Policy Making in India: A Dynamic Process of Statecraft', *Pacific Affairs* 84.1: 89–108
- Hickey, S. (2008) 'Conceptualising the Politics of Social Protection in Africa', in A. Barrientos

The second set of conclusions pertains to the rights-based nature of social protection programmes, which can allow the fulfilment of social justice objectives. However, as these articles point out, the realisation of rights depends on their official framing and recognition (through appropriate policy and supported by institutions), as well as on the ability of citizens to assert and claim these rights. The substantive realisation of rights can enhance dignity and lead to a reduction in the vulnerability and poverty of people living in the margins of society. Procedurally, the very process of claiming rights involves engaging with the state and holding it accountable, which empowers citizens and challenges prevailing – often iniquitous – power relations.

and D. Hulme (eds), *Social Protection for the Poor and Poorest: Concepts, Policies and Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan