

Beyond the Nation State

HOW CAN REGIONAL SOCIAL POLICY CONTRIBUTE TO ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

Effective regional mechanisms are no longer confined to trade, finance and labour policy, but have increasingly been able to initiate regional social policies across a wide range of sectors. Building on this success, can they play an enhanced role in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, with its focus on cross-border challenges intertwined across the social, environmental and economic spheres? This Issue Brief discusses the potential and opportunities for regional organizations to contribute to the SDGs and identifies priorities for action.

What is regional social policy—and why is it important?

Over the last 15 years, international momentum has grown around the possibilities afforded by a stronger regional approach to social policy and development. Regional social policy is broadly defined as cross-border public interventions on a regional scale that directly affect social welfare, social institutions and social relations. It involves overarching concerns with redistribution, regulation, production and reproduction, protection and social rights within and among participating countries. Regional social policy as a set of political (usually governmental) practices takes many different forms around the world. We see different combinations of the elements of redistribution, regulation and rights, and different ways in which regional social policies are put into practice, and how these lead to different effects and outcomes. Some kinds of regional social policies are more aligned than others to the 2030 Agenda and to the ambitious goal of social transformation. The key challenge is to leverage the most successful ones in support of the SDGs.

Regional social policy is an essential mechanism by which key public policy goals can be realized and development outcomes achieved. Regional social policy can enable a more effective set of responses to pressing social policy issues than governments acting alone. The cross-border nature of social, environmental and economic challenges arising from international connectivity and interdependence means that collective action on a regional scale is increasingly compelling as a way of tackling these challenges.

Regional social policy has gone beyond its traditional purview of trade and economic integration. Regional action on health and disease control has become a significant area for international cooperation as public health threats from communicable diseases, pollution and antibiotic resistance, for example, cannot be addressed by countries working alone in an increasingly interconnected world. Regional

International regional organizations and what they do

International regional organizations can be intergovernmental coalitions of member states. Examples include ASEAN, CARICOM, EU, ECOWAS, SAARC, SADC and UNASUR (see the table legend for acronyms).

In addition, the UN system has its own distinct regional structure, in the form of UN Regional Commissions (such as ECLAC and UNECA), and regional offices of UN agencies (for example WHO regional health organizations like PAHO, or the ILO regional offices). The diverse nature of such organizations is reflected in their varied social policy mandates and objectives.

Country membership of regional organizations may differ. For example, membership of the West African Health Organization is not co-terminous with that of the Economic Community of West African States.

Regional organizations are knowledge brokers, advocacy actors, training hubs and industrial coordinators within their respective regions. The multitude of regional institutions and actors means that different regional social policies are likely to be proposed. This diversity can compound complexity in policy making, but it can also generate welcome policy debate. For example, different policy models promulgated through regional fora and by regional organizations can stimulate discussion about what kind of development is desirable, the basis on which it is built, and how it can be realized through context-specific responses.

initiatives are also increasingly embracing diverse other areas from professional qualifications and food security to child trafficking, expanding to regional “road maps” for social development more generally. Regional social policy, then, is no longer confined to international action to create regional economic development and labour markets. A variety of instruments are used to develop and realize regional social policy mandates and objectives (Table 1).



Table 1.
Regional social policy instruments and examples from five continents

Instrument	Functions	Examples
Regional forum	Share information for mutual education, analysis and debate; promote shared analyses and create epistemic communities and networks that can inform policy debate and provide a platform for collaboration.	Capacity building on communicable diseases: CARICOM
		Regional Compact (for example, peer review mechanisms for country development plans): PIF
Social standard setting	Define international social standards and common frameworks for social policy (for example human rights charters, labour, social protection and health conventions).	Regional health think tank: UNASUR
		Social Charter: SAARC, EU
Resource mobilization and allocation	Provide resources supporting policy development and provision (for example, stimulus finance, technical assistance, policy advice and expertise).	Constitutional Treaty enshrining common normative framework: UNASUR
		Regional Road Map for the SDGs: ASEAN
Regulation	Regulate in the interests of health and social protection. Regulatory instruments and reform affecting entitlements and access to social provision.	Regional framework on people trafficking: ASEAN
		Regional Social Humanitarian Fund: CAN
		Anti-poverty projects, social and solidarity economy trading schemes: ALBA
		Food security schemes: ASEAN, SAARC
		Regional think tank facilitating institutional reform, professionalization and capacity building in health services: UNASUR
		Regional Court of Justice adjudicating on labour rights: ECOWAS, EU
		Removal of work visa requirements for migrant workers from other member states: CARICOM, ECOWAS, EU, SAARC, SADC
		Mutual recognition agreements (of professional and educational qualifications and educational institutions): ASEAN, CAN, EU, MERCOSUR
		Social security portability entitlements: EU, GCC, Mercosur, CARICOM, SADC.

Key to acronyms in Table 1

ASEAN - Association of South-East Asian Nations

ALBA - Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas

CAN - Andean Community

CARICOM - Caribbean Community

ECOWAS - Economic Community of West African States

EU - European Union

GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council

MERCOSUR - Southern Cone Common Market

PIF - Pacific Islands Forum

SAARC - South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

SADC - Southern African Development Community

UNASUR - Union of South American Nations

Source: Yeates, N. 2017. *Southern Regionalisms, Global Agendas: Innovating Inclusive Access to Health, Medicines and Social Protection in a Context of Social Inequity*. PRARI Policy Brief No. 8. The Open University, Milton Keynes. http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/files/policy_brief_8_en.pdf

The value of declarations of intent

Regional social policy in the form of declarations of aims and principles has often facilitated the development of social policies as binding regulatory or redistributive mechanisms. The symbolic and practical uses of Social Charters and other declarations of intent should therefore not be underestimated. These policy instruments can create greater awareness of a range of common

issues and possible responses on a wide front. They can be an important precursor to the development of more substantial regional social policies backed by dedicated resourcing, legal “teeth” and stronger political authority and legitimacy.

This has been the case in Europe and Asia. From a customs union with limited labour mobility rights through exhortative modes of policy development, EU regional social policy emerged, including substantial

regional mechanisms of social provision, redistribution, regulation and legally enforceable rights of citizenship. In South-East Asia, sustained civil society participation and activism expanded the horizons of what is possible and laid the ground for a stronger ASEAN social policy even in the absence of binding mechanisms for redistribution, regulation and rights.

Achieving inclusive and sustainable development through stronger regional action

The case for an enhanced social policy dimension to regional integration has become stronger and louder over the last 15 years. Aspirations for strengthened regional governance of social policy and development have found concrete expression in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal 17 identifies regional integration frameworks as key to the implementation of the Agenda, which attaches great importance to “the regional and sub-regional dimensions, regional economic integration and interconnectivity in sustainable development”. It states that “Regional and sub-regional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level.” The Addis Ababa Action Agenda has similar provisions relating to financing for sustainable development.

The consensus that stronger regional leadership to translate the SDGs into better and more focused programmes of action, to ensure rising social (and environmental) standards, and to support regional programmes of long-term investment now needs to be matched by clear and effective institutional responses.

Mobilizing regional social governance and policy for the SDGs

There are a number of key functions that regional social policy can and does fulfil. If these are leveraged, they could make vital contributions to integrated and coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda:

- Enable a more effective response to cross-border social, environmental and economic challenges arising from greater regional and global connectivity and interdependence.
- Provide a regional platform and fora for participating members to discuss key priorities for action and to work out context-specific responses.
- Galvanize support for regionally defined rules and standards, and foster ownership of them by other actors in the region.

- Enable resources and risks to be regionally pooled in order to extend social protection coverage, health and education provision; improve social standards; and improve responsiveness to urgent calls on humanitarian and development aid.
- Stimulate the development of innovative and inclusive responses to pressing social and economic issues associated with underdevelopment, inequality and poverty.
- Harness the economic, fiscal and social benefits of greater intraregional trade in support of regional social policy priorities.
- Amplify the voices of smaller and developing countries in social and economic policy in spheres of global policy making, global-level negotiations and in countries outside the region concerned.
- Monitor the closing of gaps in access to social provision using region-wide data and indicators.

Regional road maps towards the SDGs

Regional action plans were a feature of some regional organizations’ responses to the Millennium Development Goals, and this approach is being adopted once again. The UN Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) SDG road map is a case in point of an institutional response developed on a regional scale. In 2017, the 10 ESCAP Member States from South and South-West Asia, together with other Asia-Pacific countries, adopted a regional road map for strengthening regional cooperation on implementing the SDGs. The road map highlights the importance of strong and effective leadership for a regional social policy that is attuned to major development challenges. It is the outcome of a multistakeholder process cognisant of the risks and impacts of interconnected social, economic and environmental issues and the urgent need to address them on a regional scale.

The road map sets out priority thematic areas—strengthening social protection systems, social development, disaster risk reduction, climate change, management of natural resources, connectivity and energy—identified in a participatory process organized by a regional forum (Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development) involving governments and other regional stakeholders. This definition of priority areas is context-specific, in that it takes account of different national and regional realities, capacities and levels of development. Importantly, the road map contains a strong practical element, in its inclusion of financing and resourcing commitments, implementation arrangements and a process for tracking progress on Goals through regional monitoring mechanisms. Moving beyond abstract principles to concrete action

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Priorities for action

What are the priorities for those wishing to develop a strengthened regional approach to the Sustainable Development Goals? Here are four areas that need wider debate, and changes in institutions and policies.

Raising the profile of regional stakeholders and perspectives

Regional associations of nations need to come fully into the focus of national and international development agencies as partners in the development process. They are a neglected international development partner yet share in the global responsibility for attaining the SDGs. One way of achieving this is for member states to confer on their regional association speaking rights at the UN General Assembly, to enhance democratic “voice” of nations in global forums. This would improve the accountability of global policy makers for their decisions that impact upon national social policy and development. It would raise the visibility and awareness of regional perspectives in global social policy making and consolidate multistakeholder support and partner buy-in for key global initiatives. In this way it could (re)invigorate efforts over time to achieve long-term success.

Encouraging participatory policy making and governance

Regional associations of governments need to stimulate and actively support inclusive participation in national and regional policy making. Unless they can promote multistakeholder engagement, the achievement of inclusive development will be stalled. Strengthening common regional platforms and mechanisms that give greater emphasis to the benefits of cooperation in the social sector and building robust means to access social participation

without discrimination or exception would be a start. Participatory regional social policy making would strengthen regional mandates and facilitate SDG-focused inclusive social development strategies.

Strengthening institutional capacity and powers

While declarations of intent are vital to the development of a more coherent regional social policy, as described above, more needs to be done to address the implementation gap. Implementation is a major challenge for all development partners. It is, after all, one thing to collectively agree strategic goals and objectives, but another thing entirely to identify innovative, coherent and scalable initiatives that actually lead to genuinely transformative and sustained change. A key priority is to strengthen institutional capabilities of regional organizations and agencies so that they can become effective agents of social transformation. Moving beyond a “talking shop” to being able to implement social programmes and having powers of enforcement requires stronger institutional capacity than many regional organizations currently possess. Creating the political and legal “teeth”, such as compliance management and enforcement mechanisms, is necessary for a more effective, robust regional social policy capable of providing social guarantees.

Regionalizing social policy research and advocacy

All stakeholders need more information about the regional dimensions of social policy, what regional institutions and policy actors are doing to address sustainable development priorities, and what more can be done to further support them. To answer this, social policy research focusing on the regional institutions and dimensions of social policy development, change and success is needed. How extant regional social policy mandates, objectives and programmes are being implemented in practice is one element. Context-specific case studies using comparative social policy methods (cross-national, cross-sectoral) are also needed, to build up a strong evidence base to inform policy analysis and policy making.

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