

Leading a Transformation? New Trends in Social Policy from the Global South

AN UNRISD GLOBAL RESEARCH WORKSHOP

Realizing the ambitious transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires an equally transformative means of implementation. Innovative social policies that promote social and economic inclusion can provide such a means, and some of the most interesting developments in these areas today are coming out of the Global South. But innovative social policies do not always lead to transformation. Only when political structures and institutions are aligned with the goals of inclusive social policy can these reforms be sustainable in the long term.

The UNRISD research project *New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South* examines the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in emerging economies and developing countries (see Box 1). In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this project explores the extent to which these developments represent a transformative approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In May 2017, UNRISD partnered with the Centre for Social Development in Africa (Johannesburg, South Africa) to host a three-day Global Research Workshop that brought together the researchers and experts working on this project to present their research findings and discuss the themes that crosscut the case studies (see Box 2).

The workshop highlighted a number of new directions and trends in social policy, such as the increasing role of civil society and the emergence of new actors, as well as some of the major challenges affecting the transformative potential of these policies. This Brief provides an overview of some of the key messages that emerged from this workshop which will feed into the project as it progresses.

Transformation through a human rights-based approach is only possible when skewed power relations are rebalanced

Guaranteeing economic and social rights, especially in the areas of education, health and employment, has been a prominent trend in many developing countries over the last two decades.

The institutions that seek to form and consolidate these rights can vary across contexts, including constitutional protections in Brazil and South Africa, newly established democratic institutions in Indonesia, and the Supreme Court in India. What they have in common is the shared view that social welfare is the human right of all people—not charity passed down to the poor, or the exclusive privilege of workers in formal employment. New institutions for human rights-based social welfare have created spaces where people, if well organized, can push back against social and economic patterns that perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, advancing the frontier of rights-based social welfare even further.

However, research presented at the workshop demonstrates that an institutional commitment to a human rights-based approach to social protection is not sufficient to guarantee that people are able to exercise their economic and social rights in a meaningful way. Constitutional guarantees of health care or education often mean that benefits are thinly spread across the population and available services are of poor quality, providing only the bare minimum. People, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable, may lack the information and means necessary to claim their rights, while policies based on unequal power relations continue to prioritize economic growth over redistribution. Transformation through the realization of a rights-based approach to social welfare is possible in practice only when skewed power relations are rebalanced in favour of the poor and the marginalized, and all people are empowered to claim these rights effectively.



Innovative social policies need to be backed by consensus-based political structures that seek to disrupt patterns of social and economic exclusion. Otherwise these policies may prove unsustainable, no matter how transformative their intended impacts.

Box 1. New Directions in Social Policy

By examining the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in selected emerging economies and low-income countries, this research project aims to contribute evidence and analysis that will improve understanding of alternative policies for social development in the 21st century.

RESEARCH

This research aims to shed light on the policy options and choices of emerging/developing countries; how economic, social, political and institutional arrangements can be designed to achieve better social outcomes given the challenges of the contemporary development context; how the values and norms of human rights, equity, sustainability and social justice can be operationalized through “new” social policies; and how experiences, knowledge and learning about innovative approaches can be shared among countries in the South.

BENEFICIARIES

Evidence and analysis of recent developments in social policy in emerging/developing countries produced by this research will inform policy debates at national and global levels. Beneficiaries will include governments, in particular those in low-income countries defining and pursuing alternative development paths, bilateral donors, multilateral institutions, civil society advocacy groups, and researchers. The project is being undertaken by UNRISD in partnership with researchers and institutions in selected countries (see below). Regional partners in the South are leading national level research components, and engaging in and supporting regional and national policy dialogues. UNRISD will work with other organizations within the UN system, including the Regional Commissions, to share findings and facilitate policy dialogue.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

China; Brazil; India; Indonesia; Russia; Rwanda; South Africa; Middle East and North Africa Cluster: Morocco, Egypt, Oman, Jordan, Tunisia

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Funding for this project is provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

For more information about this project, and to access publications, visit www.unrisd.org/ndsp

MULTIMEDIA

Watch a video following the inception of the project to learn more about its ideas and participants.



Engaging new actors in social policy governance and provision requires adapting existing bureaucracies to new ways of working

Changes from state-centered to multi-level, multi-actor social welfare governance are among the prominent new trends in social policy in many developing and emerging countries, where civil society organizations (CSOs) play an increasingly important role in social welfare systems. In South Africa and India, for example, CSOs are involved in public employment schemes, while in China and Russia, civil society is engaged in health care and other social services. While the participation of CSOs in the delivery of social services is not new in development discourse and practice, emerging multi-level, multi-actor governance models are including CSOs at the design stage. This marks a departure from the straight dichotomy of either a conventional state-centric welfare approach or a neo-liberal private sector centred model.

The success of CSOs in improving coverage and quality of social services varies across contexts. According to the research reviewed at the workshop, it is critically important that the existing bureaucracy accepts reforms for them to succeed. When governments proactively seek to partner with CSOs and create institutional environments to support genuine partnerships, as has been the case in parts of India, they are more likely to reach their reform objectives than when CSOs are simply included as implementing agencies without a voice in decision-making processes. In both Russia and China, efforts on the part of the central government to address inflexible, bureaucratic systems of social provision at the subnational level have met with resistance from local-level administrators, who can act as gatekeepers and prevent CSOs from entering into social provision contracts. In order to secure transformative governance structures where people play a meaningful role in design and implementation of social policy, and to enhance the capacity of CSOs in this process, it is essential to create incentives for existing bureaucracies to adapt to a new model of multi-level, multi-actor governance.

A new partnership model is emerging that can strengthen policy ownership and capacity of countries receiving development assistance

International actors, and international financial institutions in particular, have a checkered history of imposing policy prescriptions on developing countries without consultation or consideration for local contexts and institutional capacity. This has

been especially true of aid-dependent countries, where structural adjustment and fiscal austerity have been advanced by international institutions with limited concern for their impacts on social development. Reaffirming the importance of policy ownership by aid-receiving countries, the research presented at this workshop introduced a new form of partnership that has been successful in strengthening policy ownership and capacity in some contexts, while also explaining the factors hindering such partnerships in others.

In the case of Indonesia, official development assistance from Australia has been approached as a partnership between the two countries, with Indonesia steering the development of its social protection systems. Both countries have collaborated to establish a wide range of institutional mechanisms to strengthen the capacity of Indonesian civil servants in designing social policy, which has been essential in facilitating Indonesian ownership of the policy process.

In countries in the Middle East and North Africa, on the other hand, and particularly in Tunisia and Morocco, the events of the Arab Spring, which reflected popular discontent with the state of social development, have done little to reshape policy priorities in favour of inclusionary social objectives. Research presented at the workshop points to the continued preoccupation of international financial institutions with policy prescriptions that prioritize macroeconomic stability over productive investment in industries to address high levels of youth unemployment as a key factor hindering the policy ownership of these recipient countries.

Transformative politics are necessary for the sustainability of transformative social policies

The implementation of any policy, and of social policy in particular, is a fundamentally political process where diverse political ideologies and actors compete with each other over the distribution of resources and outputs. Fragmentation and lack of coordination both vertically, among sub-national, national and global actors, and horizontally, among competing sectoral policies and agencies, as well as bureaucratic rigidity and competition over limited resources abound in welfare politics. In this context, one of the key issues discussed at the workshop was the political sustainability of even the most promising policy initiatives. The case of Brazil provides an illustrative example: transformative social policy programmes have proved unsustainable in the wake of shifts in political power, despite improvements in social outcomes. In India as well, social gains failed

to translate into political gains for the political parties that instituted potentially transformative social policies, placing the policies themselves in jeopardy.

The research presented shows that, in order to safeguard the institutions and policies needed for transformative social development, transformative politics are necessary alongside transformative policies. Strong, stable inter-class coalitions and participatory institutions for political negotiation are central elements in this process. When and where innovative social policies are not sufficiently backed by consensus-based political structures that also seek to disrupt patterns of social and economic exclusion, the policies themselves may prove unsustainable, no matter how transformative their intended impacts.



New directions in social policy for the Sustainable Development Goals

Since the 1990s, a combination of shifts in ideas and policies have reasserted social issues in development agendas. The ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a continuation of this process, which has brought about various changes and reforms in a wide range of social policy institutions and instruments. Achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda will require transformative policies that break down silos to link economic, social and environmental objectives and that seek to address the root causes of economic and social exclusion.

The UNRISD Global Research Workshop for *New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South* shed light on some of the innovative approaches under way, across emerging and developing countries, to address persistent challenges stemming from exclusion and inequality. Developing institutions for human rights-based approaches to social welfare and ensuring their longevity; opening space to new actors to ameliorate rigid, top-down systems of social provisioning and make them more responsive to local needs; and developing new ways of partnering for international development cooperation all reflect positive new directions in social policy. But challenges remain. The discussions at the workshop clearly reflected the political nature of social policy, and even those policies with large social gains are not immune from politically motivated retrenchment. Social policy for the Sustainable Development Goals must, therefore, be transformative across the policy process—from design to implementation—to rebalance skewed power relations.

Social policy is unavoidably political in nature. Even policies which produce significant social improvements are not immune from politically motivated retrenchment.



Box 2. Global Research Workshop and Policy Dialogue with Local Development Actors

The NDSP Global Research Workshop took place on 23-25 May 2017 in Johannesburg, co-hosted by UNRISD and the Centre for Social Development in Africa. The three-day event brought together representatives from all research teams and individual researchers working on the NDSP project, as well as invited experts and policy makers.

The workshop concluded with a Policy Dialogue titled *Social Protection for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*, in which South African policy makers and scholars were invited to engage in a discussion with the researchers. At the event, a panel of researchers from the UNRISD NDSP project shared findings on innovations in social policy from case study countries. Local development actors representing national government, civil society and the research community had the opportunity to exchange with international researchers on experiences and challenges related to how changing social policy and practice in the global South can contribute to implementing the SDGs. Discussions touched on themes including public-private partnerships and the roles of the private sector in social service delivery; inclusive and participatory approaches to social service provision; integrated social policy approaches to foster complementarity across social, economic and environmental dimensions; the impact of international actors and ODA on domestic social policy; and social policy and peaceful inclusive societies.

RESEARCH TEAM REPRESENTATIVES

Lena Lavinas
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

Bingqin Li
University of New South Wales

Sanjay Ruparelia
The New School for Social Research

John Hariss
Simon Fraser University

Brooke Wilmsen
La Trobe University

Anna Tarasenko
National Research University Higher
School of Economics (St. Petersburg)

Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova
National Research University Higher
School of Economics (Moscow)

Linda Cook
Brown University

Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu
University of Rwanda

Sophie Plagerson
Centre for Social Development in Africa

Tessa Hochfeld
Centre for Social Development in Africa

Leila Patel
Centre for Social Development in Africa

Rana Jawad
University of Bath

Heath Prince
Ray Marshall Center, University of Texas

Amna Khan
Independent Researcher

POLICY EXPERTS

Rina Agarwala
Johns Hopkins University

Lauren Graham
Centre for Social Development in Africa

Dele Olowu
Independent Consultant

Smita Srinivas
Indian Institute for Human Settlements

Nicola Yeates
Open University

Ilcheong Yi
UNRISD

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues.

Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

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www.unrisd.org

Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland
info@unrisd.org



UNRISD
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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This brief was prepared by Kelly Stetter and Ilcheong Yi. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of UNRISD.

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