

Introduction: Confronting global poverty and inequality

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We live in a world of vast inequalities, where almost half the world's population subsist on less than \$2.50 a day. Yet discussions of these issues in international organizations and policy recommendations or conditions attached to international aid have conspicuously failed to provide solutions. Too often these issues have been viewed through the lens of orthodox economic theory with assumption that economic growth will cure all ills, even if the benefits sometimes trickle down to the poorest only slowly.

In this context, the publication of the UNRISD flagship report, *Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics* (2010), provides a welcome contribution, approaching issues of poverty and inequality from a developmental and social policy perspective. The report surveys contemporary approaches to poverty reduction and, finding them inadequate in a number of respects, focuses instead on important institutional, policy and political issues that tend to be ignored by current poverty reduction strategies.

This issue of the *Global Social Policy* Forum features the responses of a number of scholars to the report's findings and recommendations. The commentaries range over the role of households, private sector actors and multilateral organizations, including UNRISD. The result is a sympathetic but not uncritical review of the report's contribution.

Focusing on the role of social policy as a policy framework, two of the authors address this issue in relation to specific chapters on 'Care and well-being in a development context' and 'Financing social policy'. Jelin emphasizes the continued need – despite the progress of the 1960s and 1970s in making visible the 'invisible' domestic work of women – to take care work out of the private sphere and make it a more visible part of societal collective responsibility. The obstacles to this endeavour, she notes, exist 'at the world policy level'. Based on the report's discussion on financing social policy, Asher identifies issues that are likely to elude consensus despite the existence of sound analysis; the difficulty of moving beyond critique or demonstration of inefficiencies to showing what will work better; and the challenges for translating analysis into concrete policy options.

Picking up on one of the central debates throughout the report, universal vs targeted approaches to social protection, Chan extends the critique of targeting as the face of privatization in the context of theories of capital over-accumulation – illustrating his argument with reference to the health sector in Malaysia. He emphasizes the need to analyse

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changing public–private interactions in terms of their implications for universalism or targeting.

Deacon and McNeill both raise questions from a global perspective – in terms of the politics of poverty reduction. Noting a lack of reflection from UNRISD on its position in this constellation of actors, Deacon draws attention to implications beyond the nation-state – the focus of most social policies – to the issue of global contestation over such policies and the need for global public goods and financing mechanisms. McNeill provides a slightly contrasting stance on UNRISD’s position within this global politics of social policy, observing its relative freedom from political constraint, which enables the more direct engagement of the report with inequalities, the exercise of power and the structure of exclusion.

Global Social Policy hopes UNRISD’s *Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics* and these and other responses to it will help stimulate further discussions and eventually lead to a higher priority being placed on dealing concretely with these issues that blight the existence of so many citizens of our planet.