

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES IN THE HUMANITARIAN SPACE

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of social protection from minimalist "safety nets" to a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of global development. Examining its historical journey, the paper explores diverse forms of social protection, including assistance, insurance, care services, labour market programmes, and community initiatives. Emphasising its pivotal role in achieving international goals like poverty eradication and gender equality, the study aligns social protection within key human rights frameworks. Despite progress, challenges like limited legal coverage persist, impacting its implementation. This research underscores social protection as a universal human right, offering essential insights into its transformative potential for marginalised communities and inclusive societal development.

Keyword: - *Social protection, safety nets, human capital, marginalized.*

Social protection emerged as a critical response to the "safety nets" discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990, the World Development Report introduced the concept of safety nets as a form of basic social assistance designed for countries facing extreme poverty and administrative challenges (World Bank, 1990). However, as perspectives on livelihoods, risks, vulnerability, and poverty evolved throughout the 1990s, safety nets came under scrutiny for being too limited and paternalistic. This criticism prompted a shift in thinking, leading to the exploration of alternatives that acknowledged the broader scope of social protection. Initially, social protection was often overlooked in mainstream development discussions because it was associated with social security in prosperous nations or contributory insurance programmes for formal workers.

The idea of the International Labour Organization to extend non-contribution-based social security to the non-salaried population was considered expensive. Moreover, it promoted a culture of poverty; as a result, the World Bank rejected social protection programmes for workers terming them harmful and socially unjust and accepting very minimal safety nets reserved for the socially vulnerable populations during the economic liberalisation of the 1980s (Merrien, 2013). However, following the poor performance of economic adjustment programmes in the late 1990s, the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the negative awareness of global poverty, social protection became the preferred instrument of the Millennium Development Goals. This led to a series of high-level deliberations and agreements, and as a result:

- The World Bank strongly promoted social protection as a fundamental element of global strategies aimed at reducing international poverty (World Bank, 2001);
- Governments agreed that social protection systems be anchored in law, strengthened and expanded during the 1995 World Summit for Social Development and
- World leaders agreed to create and review social security systems during the Fourth World Conference on women in 1995 (United Nations, 2018).

Subsequently, this paved the way for different organisations and development partners to develop initiatives and programmes on social protection. The ILO expanded social security to developing countries through the Social Protection Floor Initiative. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasized the crucial role of

social protection in development policy, while the Department of International Development (DfID) made social protection a central focus of its policies. Several major international conferences on social protection and development by or in collaboration with the UN, DfID and World Bank emerged, including Livingstone in 2003, Arusha in 2007 and Dakar in 2008. Social protection programs that proved successful in the Global South, like the social pension schemes in Brazil and South Africa, as well as Conditional Cash Transfers in Mexico and Brazil, were subsequently embraced as exemplary initiatives on a global scale (Merrien, 2013).

The international consensus regarding the crucial role of social protection as a fundamental policy instrument for achieving significant advancements in human well-being was reaffirmed through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Notably, the following goals as outlined in the World Social Protection Report of 2021 (International Labour Organization, 2021):

- i. Goal 1: No poverty – ensure significant mobilisation of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions.
- ii. Goal 2: Zero hunger – end hunger and ensure access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food.
- iii. Goal 3: good health and well-being -achieve universal health coverage.
- iv. Goal 5: Gender equality - acknowledge and value unpaid care and domestic work by implementing public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies. Promote shared responsibility within households and families as deemed appropriate at the national level.
- v. Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth -
- vi. attain comprehensive employment and decent work opportunities for all individuals, encompassing women, men, young people, and persons with disabilities and equal pay for work of equal value.
- vii. Goal 10: Reduced inequality - adopt fiscal, wage, and social protection policies and progressively achieve greater equality.
- viii. Goal 13: Climate action – enhance education, raise awareness, and strengthen both human and institutional capacities in climate change mitigation, adaptation, minimising impacts, and early warning systems.
- ix. Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions - develop effective, accountable, transparent institutions at all levels.

A paradigm shift in developing countries emerged as social protection was no longer viewed as a short-term means of improving economic shocks but as a global policy. However, this shift is not unanimous as it is prone to political alignment, leading to a clash in perspectives on risk management, social needs and social rights (Voipio, 2007). Nevertheless, significant progress has been observed in Africa and Asia since the early 2000s. However, in many countries, legal protection is limited to a few areas where a fraction of the population enjoys social protection schemes anchored in national legislation. Ideally, only civil servants and those in formal employment are covered by contributory schemes. In contrast, tax-based schemes are fragmented and available to a small percentage of the population. (United Nations, 2018).

Social protection is a universal human right, an economic and social necessity for development and progress. It is defined as “a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with emphasis on vulnerable groups.” (UNHCR, 2022). It also focuses on safeguarding and assisting individuals who are impoverished, vulnerable, marginalised, or facing various risks. Vulnerable groups who enjoy social protection include displaced persons, poor children, older people, women, people with disabilities and the sick (Carter, Roelen, Enfield, & Avis, 2019). Social protection has commonly been understood as “all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups” (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Theoretically, social protection is conceived as part of the ‘state–citizen’ contract, wherein both parties have rights and obligations towards one another. Moreover, while there is broad agreement on the desirability of social protection provision in general, there is significant variation in practice in low- and middle-income countries, i.e., in terms of whom it should be provided to, how and in what form (McCord, 2013).

The objectives of social protection are intended to reduce poverty and vulnerability, build human capital, empower women and girls, improve livelihoods, and respond to economic and other shocks. For example, short-term objectives help people meet their basic needs, smooth consumption and mitigate the impact of shocks. In contrast, long-term objectives include improving opportunities for inclusive growth, human capital development and social stability. Some social protection programmes tend to be transformative by supporting equity, supporting basic income levels for people living in poverty or preventing people from falling into poverty when calamities such as

drought or illness strike. The ability of social protection to attain social justice results for marginalised social groups is gaining recognition (Carter, Roelen, Enfield, & Avis, 2019). In addition, social protection systems can potentially contribute to realising other economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education, health and an adequate standard of living (food, clothing and housing) (Sepúlveda & Nyst, 2012).

The following functions can help conceptualise social protection broadly:

- i. Protective: providing relief from deprivation (e.g. income benefits, state pensions).
- ii. Preventative: averting deprivation (e.g. social insurance, savings clubs).
- iii. Promotive: enhancing incomes and capabilities (e.g. inputs, public works).
- iv. Transformative: social equity and inclusion, empowerment and rights (e.g. labour laws).

Internationally, social protection is highlighted within the following international frameworks.

- a) Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - Article 22: ‘Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realisation, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.’
 - Article 23: ‘Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.’
 - Article 25: ‘Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. Regardless of birth status, every child shall enjoy social protection.’
- b) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
 - Article 9: ‘The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance.’
- c) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 1979) (CEDAW)
 - Article 11: 1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:
 - d) The right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatment in respect of work of equal value, as well as equality of treatment in the evaluation of the quality of work;
 - e) The right to social security, particularly in cases of retirement, unemployment, sickness, invalidity and old age and other incapacity to work, as well as the right to paid leave;
 - f) The right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction.
 - Article 14: 2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
 - (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning;
 - (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;
- d) Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 1989) (CRC)
 - Article 27: Acknowledges the right of every child to a suitable standard of living for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.
- e) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted 2006) (CRPD)
 - Article 28: Requires States to recognise the right to social protection without discrimination based on the ability of persons with disabilities.
- f) Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 1951)
 - States are required to provide refugees and nationals with the same treatment to (for example): elementary education (Article 22); rationing where it exists (Article 20); and public relief and assistance (Article 23).

Types of social protection include:-

- a) Social assistance
- b) Social insurance
- c) Social care services
- d) Labour market programmes
- e) Traditional or informal social protection

a) Social assistance

Social assistance refers to programmes targeting the poor and vulnerable through non-contributory interventions (paid by the provider in full) to help individuals and households cope with poverty, destitution, and vulnerability. These programmes are usually provided by the state and financed by national taxes and target low-income households or the vulnerable (Barrientos, 2010). In lower-income contexts, donor support is the primary form of social protection available. These include both unconditional and conditional cash transfers, contributory social pensions, in-kind transfers such as food, school feeding initiatives, public works programmes, and exemptions from fees (World Bank, 2018). The World Bank has used the term ‘social safety nets’ or ‘safety nets’ to refer to social protection (World Bank, 2018).

b) Social insurance

These are contributory schemes where participants make regular payments to a scheme that will cover costs related to life-course events (Barrientos, 2010). These costs are sometimes matched or subsidized by the insurance scheme provider, and they include: - old age, survivor and disability pensions; unemployment, sickness/injury, health insurance; and maternity/paternity benefits (World Bank, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2016). Winkler, Bulmer, & Mote, 2017 argue that a unified social insurance system, which incorporates a contributory system balanced with targeted subsidies for the poor and informal sectors, appears to be financially more viable compared to universal non-contributory systems and less disruptive than fragmented parallel schemes.

c) Social care services

Social care and support are highly complementary to social protection and sometimes classified as social protection. Providing appropriate support requires direct outreach to assess challenges faced and the responses required ranging from psycho-social support and services needed. Such services allow the needs of families to be understood and kept connected to relevant services, including those that may fall out of the social protection sphere, e.g. violent prevention (UNICEF, 2019)

d) Labour market programmes

These programmes protect people who can work and aim to ensure basic standards and rights (Barrientos, 2010). These government-led policies and interventions can be contributory or non-contributory, active or passive (World Bank, 2018). Active labour market policies and interventions help the unemployed and the most vulnerable find jobs. Traditionally they involve interventions such as matching job seekers with current vacancies, upgrading and adapting jobseekers’ skills, providing employment subsidies and job creation through public sector employment or providing subsidies for private sector work (ILO, 2017). Active labour market policies are mostly extended to formal workers in high-income countries, whereas in developing countries, active labour market policies often include anti-poverty measures and blended interventions (Malo, 2018). On the other hand, passive labour market policies include legislation to underpin maternity benefits and broader parental leave rules. Passive interventions also include changes to legislation (e.g. establishing a minimum wage or safe working conditions) primarily aimed at those working in the formal sector.

e) Traditional or informal social protection

Informal social protection relies on traditional coping methods, social capital, and community-driven initiatives. Community-based social protection refers to informal activities safeguarding community members from risks, organised based on cultural beliefs, norms, and values within the local context. For example, they can be in the form of community-based funeral insurance services, village grain banks, rotating services, credit groups, and community-based health insurance (United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

State and donors can also support community approaches to social protection through village savings, loan associations, and community-based health insurance services. In some scenarios, state and donor-supported social protection schemes encourage localised community-based approaches. For instance, the Yemen Social Fund for Development, established in 1997 by the Government and supported by donors, works directly with local communities, encouraging community contributions and participation (Al-Iryani, Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2015).

In summary, this study conceptualizes social protection as all programmes implemented by private and public institutions to protect, prevent, promote and transform livelihoods against poverty, economic shocks, marginalization, exclusion and vulnerability. These programmes are a universal human right, an economic and social necessity for development, primarily focusing on the vulnerable people in society. As such, they can help realize other rights, such as the right to education, health and adequate living standards.

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