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United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

New Directions in Social Policy
ALTERNATIVES FROM AND FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

This project examines the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in emerging economies and developing countries. The purpose is to understand whether these are fundamentally new approaches to social policy or welfare systems which could offer alternative solutions to the critical development challenges facing low- and middle-income countries in the 21st century. This research will 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.

Research Issue in Context

Social policy regimes around the world are undergoing significant change in response to contemporary risks and opportunities associated with economic and political liberalization, as well as socioeconomic and demographic trends such as ageing, migration and informalization. Two seemingly contradictory dynamics are at play. On the one hand, social policy institutions are adjusting to market imperatives and the pressures of fiscal discipline, privatization, austerity and retrenchment. On the other hand, democratization, active citizenship and the growing recognition of the human costs of economic liberalization have given rise to pressures for expanding welfare provisions, and to a "social turn" in the policy orientation of numerous emerging/developing countries.

The policy choices, particularly of emerging economies (including the BRICs) but also of some other lower income countries, demonstrate a range of strategies designed to meet the economic and social development challenges of the contemporary globalized world. Many social policy and programme innovations of the South have received close attention from the international development community, and some (such as conditional cash transfers) are being widely studied, evaluated and replicated. However, some critical aspects of these initiatives remain poorly understood. In particular, the relationship between specific social programmes and other policy choices (including macroeconomic, employment and labour market policies), the political economy of sustainability in both fiscal and political terms, and whether these new approaches can lead to a stable "social contract", remain under-researched. Answering these questions will be important for understanding whether these new directions in social policy offer viable approaches for tackling poverty, inequality and other economic and social development challenges facing low-income countries today.

This project continues UNRISD's pioneering work, Social Policy in a Development Context, which sought to bring together the largely separate literatures on social policy and the developmental state to draw lessons for how social policies can support the broader development goals of lower income countries. (See www.unrisd.org/research/socialpolicy).

Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to contribute evidence and analysis that will improve understanding of alternative policies for social development in low- and middle-income contexts. Research will include cross-country comparative work alongside in-depth studies of selected programmes and policy initiatives. Findings will contribute to the evidence of which alternative policies and institutional arrangements can deliver improved social development outcomes in low- and middle-income contexts in the contemporary global context.

The project aims to:

- assess whether we are seeing the development of alternative approaches, systems or even welfare "regimes" in selected emerging/developing countries;
- provide improved methodological frameworks and analytical tools for understanding the development of social policies and welfare systems in emerging/developing countries, and for assessing the impacts of policies and programmes;
- contribute evidence and analysis regarding development and social policy priorities that can be taken into account in the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda; and

Can recent approaches to social policy in emerging economies and some developing countries offer alternative solutions to the critical development challenges of the 21st century?

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- assess the scope for policy transfer, including the mechanisms for sharing ideas and experiences, and the economic, political and institutional conditions that facilitate the adaptation or replication of programmes.

Research Questions

1. **Nature of social policies and programmes**— What new social policies and programmes are being pursued by emerging/developing countries, with what results? What are the key values and principles underpinning the "new" developmental welfare states or welfare regimes?

2. **Links between economic and social policies**— What economic policies are being pursued to enable and support social policies in the context of globalization? To what extent are social policies used strategically to support economic transformation and inclusive development?

3. **Politics and political economy of policy choice**—What political or political economy factors influence or determine economic and social policy choices? Which domestic interests and alliances shape social policies?

4. **Implementation and institutionalization of policies**—How are key programmes financed and administered; how do they evolve over time; and (how) do they become embedded in policy and institutionalized?

5. **Social and economic development outcomes**— What are the impacts of different social policies within countries and across different contexts? What explains success, failure or variation?

Further Information

Duration
October 2013–December 2016

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Research Team
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Information Updates
www.unrisd.org/ndsp

Methodology/Approach

The project involves comparative analysis of policies and programmes, as well as their wider institutional and political arrangements, in selected emerging/developing countries. It will include thematic studies, cross-country comparative work and in-depth research on selected countries and programmes. Through dialogues with policy makers and other actors, the project will explore the relevance of the findings for national and international policy making.

Comparative research will be carried out in selected countries where significant changes have occurred in recent years in social policy, and which are potentially an important conduit of shared ideas and experiences in the global South in terms of policy learning and resource mobilization.

Beneficiaries

By contributing evidence and analysis to improve the understanding of recent developments in social policy in emerging/developing countries, 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 will be undertaken by UNRISD in partnership with researchers and institutions in selected countries. Regional partners in the South will lead national level research components, and engage in and support regional and national policy dialogues. UNRISD would work with other organizations within the UN system, including the Regional Commissions, to share findings and facilitate policy dialogue.

Outputs/Activities

The first project workshop, Rethinking Social Policy in Development Contexts: New Risks, Challenges and Directions, will be held in April 2014 in Geneva. Other events will include policy dialogues and an international conference. Communications outputs, including briefs on key issues and interim findings, as well as working papers, will be produced at different stages of the project. Publication and dissemination activities will include research papers; country studies; research and policy briefs; edited volumes of country and thematic studies and a synthesis volume; and journal articles.

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About Project Briefs

UNRISD Project Briefs pose questions, flag ideas and contribute knowledge that can improve the quality of development debates, policy and practice. They provide a concise summary of an UNRISD research project, situating it within wider social development debates; outlining its focus, objectives and methodology; and highlighting interim findings.

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