Transformative Social Protection

Social protection has been conceptualised in various ways since it emerged from the safety nets agenda of the 1980s and 1990s. Although the safety net function remains a key component of what social protection is and what it tries to do, opinion on social protection has progressed and continues to evolve.

Two directions can be identified in this change of thinking. The first elaborates on the ‘economic’ needs that social protection addresses, specifically around risk management and the potential for social protection to contribute to economic growth. The second expands on the ‘social’ aspects of social protection, and makes connections with participation, empowerment and rights based approaches to development – this is the ‘transformative’ agenda.

Social protection for economic security

Much recent thinking on social protection has focused on vulnerability to livelihood shocks, and to strengthening interventions to protect people against the consequences of these shocks, through a range of social assistance and social insurance mechanisms. The dominant paradigm is the World Bank’s Social Risk Management (SRM) framework, which has four broad analytical components: (1) sources of risk and their impacts on livelihood assets; (2) strategies to address livelihood shocks (risk reduction, mitigation, and coping); (3) instruments to address risk (informal, market-based, or public provision); (4) institutions and actors (the state, market, donors, NGOs, communities). In practice, the SRM concentrates on public measures to reduce livelihood vulnerability, and this approach has informed many national Social Protection Strategies in recent years.

Despite the apparent breadth and comprehensiveness of its analytical framework, the Social Risk Management approach can be criticised for the narrowness of its focus.

- It reflects a limited conceptualisation of vulnerability, by concentrating on proximate or contingent risks (e.g., illness, drought) and neglecting structural risks or underlying vulnerabilities (e.g., social exclusion, political marginalisation).
- It does not explicitly address the chronically poor, instead focusing on restoring the economic viability of people who are temporarily impoverished by a livelihood shock, and therefore again overlooks the causes and consequences of structural poverty.
- SRM favours public (state, donor, NGO) and market-based social protection, thereby understating the important role played by informal providers, especially where formal provisioning is inadequate.

Many policymakers still hold the view that social protection is a waste of scarce public resources but there are several positive ways in which resources allocated to social protection can have direct or indirect economic impacts, as well as social welfarist benefits. Redistributive cash transfers raise the incomes of the poor directly, and can prevent poverty increasing after a shock by smoothing consumption and protecting household assets.

Towards a holistic approach to social protection

Our argument is not that the ‘safety net’ and ‘risk management’ functions of social protection are unimportant – they are crucial – but that these functions are not enough without a complementary focus on structural causes of vulnerability and attention to the social and political dimensions. The following definition attempts to capture both the ‘economic’ and ‘social’ components.

Social protection describes 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.
Transformative Social Protection

By challenging power hierarchies and inequitable social relations, social protection can contribute to social transformation, which in turn will reduce economic vulnerabilities.

Some social protection mechanisms contribute to economic growth through asset creation (e.g. public works programmes build infrastructure, school feeding schemes invest in human capital). Indirectly, transfers to the poor can generate significant income and employment multipliers, especially when transfers are made in the form of cash that is spent on buying goods and services.

Putting the ‘social’ into social protection

A neglected aspect of social protection is equity and rights. Vulnerable people need protection not only against obvious livelihood shocks such as illness or drought, but also against exploitation, discrimination and abuse. These practices are not just social ills, they have economic consequences. By challenging power hierarchies and inequitable social relations, social protection can contribute to social transformation, which in turn will reduce economic vulnerabilities.

One attraction of this approach is that social change is fiscally affordable. The measures that could enhance social equity and empowerment for socially excluded and marginalised groups do not imply sizeable resource transfers to large numbers of people. Instead, much can be achieved by legislative change, monitoring and enforcing regulations to protect minority rights, education to raise workers’ awareness of their entitlements, or social action (e.g. anti-discrimination campaigns).

A broader approach to social protection is presented in the following diagram. The four main elements of this framework are:

- **Protective measures** that provide relief from deprivation, such as narrowly targeted safety nets for people facing livelihood shocks (e.g. food aid as emergency relief) and social assistance for the chronically poor (e.g. disability benefit, social pensions).

- **Preventive measures** that seek to avert deprivation, including formal social insurance schemes (e.g. health insurance, unemployment benefits); informal risk-pooling mechanisms (e.g. savings clubs, burial societies); and diversification strategies to spread risk.

- **Promotive measures** that aim to enhance incomes and capabilities, while remaining grounded in social protection objectives (e.g. school feeding or public works, which transfer food or cash to smooth short-term consumption and also promote long-term asset formation).

- **Transformative measures** that seek to address vulnerabilities arising from social inequity and exclusion (e.g. collective action for workers’ rights, protecting minority ethnic groups against discrimination, or sensitisation campaigns on HIV and AIDS).

There are, of course, overlaps and synergies between these categories. The ‘economic’ and the ‘social’ strands are also often interconnected. Further work is needed on how policies can effectively address both economic and social vulnerabilities in specific contexts, so that the next generation of social protection programmes contributes to risk management as well as to social equity.

Further reading


Credits

This In Focus was written by Stephen Devereux and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and edited by Clare Gorman. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the other institutions involved.

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from issues of In Focus in their own publications. In return, IDS requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.