Transformative social protection: reflections on South Asian policy experiences

Gabriele Koehler

International Conference:
“Social Protection for Social Justice”
Institute of Development Studies, UK
13–15 April 2011
Transformative social protection: reflections on South Asian policy experiences

Gabriele Koehler
Visiting Fellow, Vulnerability and Poverty Reduction Team, IDS

I.) Introduction

Across the global South, social protection policy is increasingly taking centre-stage - with social protection transfers consolidated, scaled up, or even introduced as new policy measures, to address poverty and vulnerability. Some authors have therefore spoken of a “global challenge” in terms of policy making (Leisering et al 2006: 24), a “quiet revolution” (Barrientos and Hulme 2009: 452) or a “startling” process (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007:1).

The increased attention to social protection has been associated with the global economic crisis of 1998, when several countries in East and Southeast Asia, badly affected by unemployment and heightened poverty, began introducing schemes to alleviate the economic situations of the “new poor” (Cook and Kwon 2007), or the experience in Latin America, where structural adjustment and neoliberal structural adjustment intensified poverty during the 1980s, leading governments to introduce large social transfer schemes, such as Progresa/Opportunidades in Mexico and Bolsa Familia in Brazil. Interestingly, the most visible of the social protection programmes are based in the newly-industrialising countries that can afford larger social protection expenditures – China, India, Brazil and Mexico and South Africa are cases in point.

Most recently, social protection measures have become associated with the momentum and pressure on governments around the MDG agenda. Viewed against the promises made by national governments and the international community in the year 2000 for specific economic and social outcomes by 2015, the uneven and inequitable outcomes of development efforts are increasingly obvious, and have been ascribed to intersecting inequalities and a – neoliberal - growth trajectory that has resulted in increasing income inequality, despite advances made on poverty numbers or superficially defined gender equality. There is sufficient evidence illustrating that performance on the various MDG targets is highly uneven by gender, ethnicity, location, ability and other vectors of exclusion (United Nations General Assembly 2010; UN DESA 2009; Kabeer 2010). Even in countries that appear on track for the MDGs at the aggregate level, disadvantaged groups are not benefiting from the – already minimalist – MDG achievements. The 2010 review meeting of the MDGs at the UN General Assembly, in its outcome document, introduced concepts of social exclusion and for the first time spelt out policy recommendations for social protection (UN General Assembly 2010; also on this Koehler and Voipio 2010).

A related set of factors encouraging greater attention to social protection include the accelerating incidences of natural disasters and the escalating violent conflicts in many countries (UN DESA 2008). A third element pushing policy makers attention to social protection is the impact of the global financial, economic and fiscal crises of 2008 and following years, and the recidivist food price crises (Davies and McGregor 2009; Ortiz et al 2011).

This interest in social protection policies and the introduction or expansion of social protection transfers as such are a good thing. Regardless of their specific format, social transfers can alleviate the immediate economic impact of poverty and vulnerability, by providing a supplementary source of income, or offering a transfer in kind, and prevent pernicious individual and household coping strategies such as reducing meals, foregoing health or education services, or the sale of productive assets. Social transfers can help create a sense of socio-economic security. Provided tax-funded social assistance transfers are sufficiently generous and broad in coverage, they can ideally even constitute steps towards income redistribution. Examples of poverty-alleviating social transfers include universal or targeted social assistance, conditional or unconditional cash transfers, social pensions, subsidised food distribution, school meals, food or cash for work, birthing grants, or wedding or funeral grants. They can make a difference in the immediate and

---

1 Insightful comments by Isabel Ortiz on an earlier version of this draft are gratefully acknowledged.
medium term situation of individuals, households and communities and as such are a much welcome policy innovation.

In ideal cases, social protection efforts can also contribute to improving chances for social inclusion or political voice. Examples include child benefits or school scholarships available to disadvantaged groups, such as girl children, so-called low-caste groups, ethnic minorities, people living with HIV/AIDS, orphans, or people with disabilities. Employment guarantee schemes can have a more far-reaching impact, if they are introduced as a right to decent work, at minimum wage conditions and with associated workers’ rights. The enforcing of labour standards; affirmative action such as quotas and reservations for disadvantaged groups; or the right to information can be classified as complementary forms of social protection if they contribute to the delivery of transfers by ensuring information, efficiency, transparency and accountability. They can contribute to a social transformation and constitute steps on the road towards social justice.

However, social protection transfers may at the same time be a “bad” thing: they may merely be a palliative that diverts attention from the real obstacles to equitable, inclusive development and social justice, and postpones actions which would initiate the structural change necessary to sustainably eradicate poverty and vulnerability. This is because social protection policies as such do not challenge the basic economic and political power relations, neither at the local nor at the economy-wide level, and do not address the asset inequality and the absence of decently remunerated, dignified, long-term productive employment which are the core causes of persistent vulnerabilities, poverty and socio-economic insecurity. Social protection typically alleviates – rather than eliminates – poverty situations, because it touches only at the margin on the processes and constellations creating poverty. This is because benefit levels are generally modest and do not, in the majority of cases, enable a household to acquire, or even just “lease”, productive assets; nor do social protection employment schemes create decent, sustained, long-term employment. A development policy question is therefore whether and how social protection policy and instruments can be conceptualised in a transformative fashion that would tackle, and ultimately overcome, the root causes of poverty and vulnerability.

Looking at a particular region’s social protection experience, that of South Asia, this paper examines to what extent, by design or by default, the social protection schemes in that region have a transformative dimension. The countries reviewed are Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

II) Social protection policy in South Asia

Social protection policy in South Asia had precursors in colonial programmes for famine relief and assistance for the destitute (Stewart 2010). This was then replaced by the welfare state mechanisms which these countries introduced upon independence, as laid out in their constitutions and in the five year development plans, which declared welfare of the citizens as the ultimate objective of government policy.

The perception of a quiet revolution in social protection policy is appropriate with respect to the South Asia of the past six years. While performing poorly on most social indicators and most visibly on food and nutrition security, the South Asian region has nevertheless been home to a broad range of policy innovations. Even if political and social resistance undermines their delivery and implementation in the immediate, these policy innovations need to be recognised, valorised and examined. They have transformative elements and they have their origins in the South, challenging the prejudice that welfare and social justice aspirations are exclusively conceptualised, and addressed, in developed countries. Some have argued that they represent a new, “southern” cash transfer paradigm (Hanlon et al. 2010: 20), originating as they do in developing countries, and displaying four common principles:

---

2 South Asia in its own definition, that of the SAARC, and in external definitions, such as the geographical regions used by UN agencies or the development banks, comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are omitted here because of the current or recent civil strife, and Maldives and Bhutan because of their distinct approaches to social policy deriving from their small populations and country size.

3 “… historically the political elites of South Asia have been ideologically inclined to pursue social welfare through public policy ...”. (Barrientos and Hulme 2009: 444)
• They are rights-based, with the transfer funded by the government, reasserting the role of the state;
• They are longer-term transfers, with recipients confident of receiving them;
• They cover a significant proportion of the population; and
• They are seen as part of a development strategy (Hanlon et al. 2010: 20 f).

Political change in several countries – new governments in India (2005), Pakistan (2008) and Bangladesh (2009) and the end of civil conflict in Nepal (2006) – created political pressure, political will, as well as policy space for such social policy innovations. In India, the 2005 coalition government made a strong case for addressing hunger and hunger-related deaths, unemployment, poverty and income inequality, pushed by the protest movement which had contributed to their electoral success. A broad coalition of the Congress Party, left-wing parties supporting the coalition government, trade unions, civil society, activist academics, parliamentarians, and the media drew on the ideas and policy design of the Maharashtra Employment Scheme which had been in place since the 1965. Simultaneously, state- and country-wide movements for the right to food, right to work and the right to information pushed the new coalition government to adopt the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005 (Chopra 2009: 130 and passim). Some analysts have also seen this act as a response to the “Shining India” urban bias of the BJP Party, as a response to the drought and hunger of the early 2000s, and as an outcome of the broad mobilisation protesting the conditions facing many rural poor as a result of the economic liberalisation policies introduced since the early 1990s (Chopra 2009; Drèze in Stewart 2010).

In Nepal, the post-conflict interim government felt that “poverty and social exclusion” as the root causes of the conflict needed to be tackled and hence introduced a series of improvements in existing social policy measures and also new added new measures (Koehler 2011 forthcoming). This was very much driven by a spirit of “the new Nepal” at the end of the conflict, the election and sitting of the new, democratically elected government and the re-definition of Nepal as a secular republic, replacing – peacefully – the Hindu monarchy.

In Pakistan, the election of a civilian government in 2008, led by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), which was “critical of economic management under the previous government”, and particularly of the increases in income inequality, was the trigger for policy innovations. There was strong political will to combine stabilisation with measures for protecting consumption levels of the poor and the vulnerable.” (Gazdar 2011: 7). This political pressure for pro-poor measures was increased by the competition between the federal government and the government of Punjab, led by the Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N). The new government allocated 34 billion rupees to the newly created Benazir Income Support Programme, and the Punjab provincial government announced its FSP and a subsidised bread scheme, with a total outlay of 22 billion rupees and ultimately a three-fold increase in social protection expenditures (Gazdar 2011: 6).

In Bangladesh, a new government led by the Awami League was elected in 2008, which in its election manifesto referred to the global economic and financial crisis and proffered a welfare state “where every citizen is assured of social justice, environmental protection, human rights and equal opportunities; and where the rule of law and good governance flourish” (Awami League Manifesto). Regarding poverty, it states that the main strategy of poverty reduction would centre on agriculture and the rural economy, extending social safety nets for the ultra-poor, and by 2013 reducing poverty level and proportion of ultra-poor to 25% and 15% respectively, or from 65 million poor people to 45 million. This would be achieved by a range of social protection policies as well as “Employment Banks” for young entrepreneurs, comprehensive employment guidelines, including creating employment opportunities for wage-labour in industries and providing training arrangements for “facilitating export of labour” (Awami League

Interestingly, an in-depth analysis of the genesis of the NREGA shows the role of personal influence of policy leaders, including the decisive interventions of the head of the Congress Party, at crucial junctures in the design and adoption process – see Chopra 2009.
The commitments can be read as a jostling for public favour in the competition with the other major political power in the country.

These are some of the – stated or received – political contexts leading countries in South Asia to scale up their existing, largely fragmented schemes for social assistance and poverty alleviation, suggesting that in the instances described in this paper, the trigger for social protection policy reform was a combination of political power transitions, political competition amongst rival factions, and the impact of the financial crisis. In some countries, the social protection initiatives became part of a deeper reform with additional rights-based legislation coming on stream.

The South Asian social protection policy innovations include measures such as employment guarantees (in all four countries); citizenship-based social pensions (India, Bangladesh, Nepal); the right to cooked school meals and the right to food (India); targeted food subsidy systems (India, Bangladesh); as well as broader social policies adopted recently in India such as a right to education, a right to health services; and universal access to crèches for early childhood development. As a third component, the innovations include affirmative action measures such as identity-based child benefits or school scholarships (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal) and gender, caste and/or ethnicity quotas for public office (India, Nepal). Moreover, and extremely important for any of these policy measures to be delivered in a transparent and equitable fashion: right to information acts have been adopted in India, Bangladesh and Nepal.

India’s recent suite of rights-based social projection policies – the right to school meals and to food; the right to education; the right to social protection for the informal sector; the employment guarantee; and the right to information (Koehler 2010), has prompted Barrientos and Hulme to ascribe a “regional leadership role” to this country (2009: 445). Indeed, several of India’s social protection policies have seen policy diffusion across South Asia – the MGNREGA has been replicated in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, and a right to information act adopted in Nepal. Earlier measures, such as the social pensions in Nepal and Bangladesh, and the girl child grants in Bangladesh and India, too can be seen as intrinsically rights-based approaches with a transformational intent.

The object of the paper it to examine a selection of the immediate social protection schemes and the complementary affirmative action, concentrating on the policy design level. The policy intent is of primary interest here, since outcomes and shortcomings may be due to any of a range of factors, from poor policy formulation and design, to inefficient implementation, sabotage, lack of funds or of a monitoring process, or political economy dynamics and high-jacking by other interest groups. Methodologically, a proper assessment of their outcomes would need to isolate all factors and policies, so as to focus exclusively on the impact of the particular social protection measure; in any event, evaluations of impact and implementation effectiveness are sketchy or at a very macro-aggregated level (Barrientos and Hulme 2009: 447; Grosh et al 2008; ADB 2006)). Since these factors cannot be disentangled, this paper limits itself to the stated policy purpose or vision.

III.) Selected examples of South Asian social protection policies

The measures reviewed in this paper can be considered as rights based and include affirmative action. They can thus be understood as oriented to social justice, even if this is not explicitly spelt out. Three types of social policy measures have been selected:

- Social protection in the form of social transfers, such as the citizenship based social pension scheme in Nepal and the Benazir Income Support Programme in Pakistan;

---

5 The momentum for policy reform can also come from natural disasters or donor interventions (Barrientos and Hulme 2009: 451).
7 The following information builds on and updates Köhler, Cali, Stirbu 2009.
• The employment guarantees: the Mahatma Ghandi Rural Employment Scheme in India, the 100-days Employment Scheme in Bangladesh, the Karnali Employment Programme in Nepal and the employment generation scheme for rural unskilled workers in Pakistan;

• Social protection as affirmative action: The Bangladesh girls’ secondary education grant and girl child grants offered by some states in India.

III.1) Social protection policy in the form of social transfers

One of the oldest universal social protection schemes in South Asia is the citizenship based social pension scheme in Nepal, introduced as early as 1995. It is universal by category – at inception all Nepali citizens over the age of 75 were eligible for a small monthly benefit, disbursed by district development councils on a quarterly basis. The pension has seen several increases in the benefit amount. The post-conflict coalition government in its first fiscal budget in 2008/9 brought the age threshold down to 70 years, and doubled the benefit amount to 500 rupees per month (Koehler, Cali, Stirbu 2009: 60 f). The original objective of this social transfer remains to be explored; the improvements introduced in 2008 were part of a larger package of social policy transfers, driven by the momentum – and competition among parties – in the post-conflict situation and the slogans of a “new Nepal”, and the acute awareness of the country’s poverty and exclusion. The transformative element stems from the fact that the pension gives an autonomous – albeit tiny – income flow to elderly family members who, in low income rural households, tend to be entirely dependent on their adult children. The pension can be perceived as an acknowledgement of earlier economic contributions or as a recognition of their status and dignity as citizens.

In Pakistan, elections in 2008 brought in the Pakistan People’s Party that needed to garner legitimacy by offering pro-poor policies. Designed as a scheme to promote “equal opportunities and social justice”, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) was introduced as a pro-poor initiative by the current government, “for the poverty alleviation and women empowerment among the underprivileged section of Pakistani society” (www.BISP.gov.pk). In its original design, it was a grant for social assistance devoted to each parliamentarian to disburse grants to up to 8000 families in her/his constituency selected based on subjective e - needs assessments; in 2009 this directly populist and in-transparent modality was replaced by eligibility screening in the form of a poverty score card system – proxy means testing. Cash transfers, of 100 rupees ($12) per month are reportedly made to roughly 430,000 beneficiaries. Similarly, BISP has added victims of the 2010 flood disaster which would raise the number of registered BISP families to seven million, suggesting as many as 35 million individual recipients. It has a target of 20 percent decrease in poverty by 2014. As complementary measures which can be seen to move in the direction of asset building there is the Waseela-e-Haq programme designed to promote small entrepreneurship, and over 700 families each month have received Rs. 300,000 through a computerized draw. The Waseela-e-Rozgar is a free skill development /vocational training plan for one member of each beneficiary family. There is also a life insurance scheme for the breadwinner of beneficiary families (BISP websites).

There are several potentially transformative elements in the BISP. The modality of disbursing to the family unit and in usual circumstances to the married senior woman of the family means that where there are joint households, each family carries its own entitlement. The women as the entitlement holders are required to register for a citizenship card – the Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) - provided by the National Database Registration Agency (NADRA) - as well as a bank account in their own name. This gives women in low income households an unprecedented degree of visibility and conceivably some status in the family conferred by the fact that she is the person holding the entitlement. “The decision to identify women as primary beneficiaries represented a break from past practice and institutional habit of constructing the relationship between the state and individuals through the male heads of family. The fact that women are eligible in their own right for other interventions such as a land grant programme were also targeted at women for the first time signalled that the initiative had been taken or supported at the highest level of top political leadership.” (Gazdar 2011: 8).

---

8The BISP’s Poverty Scorecard survey has reportedly been undertaken in 40 districts and is to be completed by the end of June 2011. www.bisp.gov.pk.
III.2) Social protection policy in the form of employment guarantees

In the social protection literature, the “revolution” in the South is most frequently associated with the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGA) introduced in India in 2005. Its precursors include the Maharashta Employment Guarantee in place since the 1960s and other cash for work and food for work schemes. The rights-orientation lies in the fact that employment is guaranteed and notionally must be made available on request, that every household is entitled to apply for work. Critics stress the tough working conditions - the fact that the social transfer is conditional on - hard – manual labour with few amenities, whereas supporters emphasise the rights orientation, the adherence to state-level minimum wage laws, and the process whereby, if a worksite is not created, the state government must provide a social transfer of the same value as the foregone wage bill. They also cite the affirmative action introduced to ensure participation of women and socially excluded castes.

The MGNREGA offers up to 100 days of employment on a public works site for one member per household, with reservations for women workers. In 2008-09, according to the Ministry of Rural Development, 45 million households were provided employment and 2.2 trillion persondays of employment were generated (Annual Report 2008/9). It is thus the largest employment scheme globally. The wages are at the daily minimum wage rate of each state, and there are some provisions for on-site, rudimentary child crèches if more than five children need care while their mother works. Rosters of the people employed and their wages received are published to ensure transparency and accountability. The scheme costs 0.5 % of the fiscal budget (Hanlon et al 2010).

The MGNREGA model has been replicated in at least three other South Asian countries. It was introduced in 2008/9 in Bangladesh as the Employment Generation Programme for Hard-Core Poor, initially called the Employment Generation Programme. It applies to rural areas of the country, with priority given to 81 highly poverty-prone upazillas. The government allocated Taka 200 000 000 in 2008/9 and Taka 117 600 000 in 2009-2010. The stated objective of the programme is to create employment for “extreme rural poor unemployed people”; to increase the purchasing power of the extreme poor affected by price hikes, notably food price inflation; to create wealth for the people and the nation; and develop and maintain small scale rural infrastructure and communication systems (GoB). The scheme was introduced because of seasonal poverty which prevails for roughly 3 months per year, and is meant to benefit 2 million “hard core poor families” or roughly 10 million beneficiaries in a total of 64 districts, one person from one family, regardless of male or female, who are not receiving benefits from other on going social safety nets. The government recorded a total of 2 million labourers with almost 90 million workdays created, with employment roughly 80% men and 20% women. The wage rate is 100 Taka per day, paid on a daily basis (GoB). An innovation is the introduction of an unemployment allowance, modelled on the Indian example – if a applicant fails to receive a job within 15 days of registration, she or he will receive Tk. 40/per day for first 30 days and Tk.50/per day payable after that (GoB). This again is an interesting combination of an employment scheme linked to social protection.

Similarly in Pakistan, an employment generation scheme for rural unskilled workers is to guarantee employment, again for one hundred days a year. The scheme is devoted to small local level works with a guaranteed daily wage equal to the minimum wage. A pilot scheme was to be launched in 120 in twelve least developed districts and districts that have suffered from the security situation. Five billion rupees were to be allocated for this programme, covering 200 000 households in its first year (budget speech, Minister for Finance).

In Nepal, the Karnali Employment Programme (KEP), adopted as a policy in 2010, is designed to arrange for 100 days of employment for persons out of employment in the poorest region of Nepal – the five Northwestern districts of Dolpa, Humla, Jumla, Kalikot and Mugu - with a population of circa 350,000 people (Koehler 2011). The government budget allocation is Rs. 250 million. It was first piloted in fiscal Year 2006/07. It was reported that over 60,000 of the 64,000 households in these districts of the Karnali Zone had had employment equivalent to 15 days in the programme's first year (National News Agency (Nepal)). Contrary to the other three South Asian countries, however, the government of Nepal has not cast the KEP as an employment guarantee.
III.3) Social transfers as affirmative action

Social exclusion based on gender, caste, ethnicity, language, religious affiliation, age, and other vectors of identities, is pervasive across South Asia and one of the main obstacles to social justice (Koehler and Namala 2011). Several schemes have been designed to address and overcome exclusion, especially with respect to gender and caste.

The Bangladesh government introduced a secondary school stipend as early as 1994 for all girl children, regardless of the economic situation of the family. It is conditional on school attendance, school performance and remaining single. Its purpose was to address the gender gap in education, and in that respect the stipend has been successful – girls’ secondary school enrolment stands at 42%; in fact, the gender gap has been reversed (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2009: 1372), and the scheme may now be extended to all secondary school children to ensure that boys, too, continue schooling. This outcome may be related to the stipend directly, or it may also be benefiting from an economic pull factor - the fact that secondary schooling is a prerequisite for employment in the garments sector, a rapidly expanding formal sector industry with a segmented, female labour market.

In Nepal, education incentives have been in place for many years, but were scaled up in connection with the Education for All Programme adopted by the Government in 2004. School stipends are available for girls and for children from disadvantaged castes, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sport, and each school has a School Management Committee which selects the eligible children, and distributes and monitors the scheme (Koehler, Cali, Stirbu 2009: 64 f). The intent is clear: to overcome the family and community level entrenched resistance to the education of girl children and children from the dalit caste.

Several states in India have developed girl child grants, a measure to halt the rampant female foeticide, by offering an economic incentive to raise girl children offered by some states in India. In one of these programmes, introduced in 2006 in Madhya Pradesh, the income-poorest state in India, girl children registered at birth are to receive an accumulated fund of approximately Rs 1.2 million (1.18 lakh) rupees from the state government at the time of marriage. The objective of the scheme is to improve health and educational facilities for girl children “by providing a bright future” and to stop female feticide (Government of India). A scheme in Tamil Nadu deposits 22 200 rupees for each girl child at birth, which she is to receive at age 20, while the interest is available to her family for educational expenses (Government of India; Srinivasan and Bedi 2009).

It is of course debatable to what extent monetary incentives are an appropriate policy instrument to address socio-political exclusion, and if so, whether they can be classified as transformative. One could argue that campaigns for public awareness and behaviour change combined with affirmative action together the genuine realisation of compulsory universal inclusive education, would be the more progressive approach. Nevertheless, the outcomes in girls’ school completion that can be attributed to the Bangladesh secondary school stipend are one example of a transformative impact.

IV.) Outlook – transformative social protection policies

The three sets of social protection policies described above can be seen as a big step forward: they acknowledge the severity of poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion and do attempt to address these situations. They are also a big step forward since they are far more transparent and oriented to citizen scrutiny, if not design, than the earlier paternalistic anti-poverty programmes. Most importantly, they are a big step forward since they are cast as rights which citizens can claim. But: are they transformative?

That depends on how “transformativity” is understood. One influential definition of transformation has been developed by Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux stressing that “… social protection interventions should extend well beyond social transfers ... to include redistribution of assets that will reduce dependence on handouts and enable at least some poor people to achieve sustainable livelihoods.” (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2007:24). This would encompass strategies to integrate individuals equally into society and
enable excluded and marginalised groups to claim their rights, and measures to transform public attitudes and change regulatory frameworks (ibid.).

Another criterion is sensitivity to structures, systems and behaviours that create processes of social exclusion. Thus, Kabeer (2010) recommends policies for social inclusion as integral to social protection and Gazdar (2011) sees a paradigm shift in the BISP, for example, in its explicit orientation to women as the key beneficiaries. Koehler (2009) proposes specific social inclusion policies in addition to inclusiveness in macroeconomic and sectoral policies.

Building on these ideas, and reflecting the South Asian conceptual policy developments, a tentative “layout” of criteria for “transformativity” might include:

- Universal coverage or clearly delineated categorical entitlements but incorporating special measures to ensure that women, children and socially excluded groups can claim their rights;
- Longevity and predictability of the scheme, anchored in government fiscal budgets;
- Policies triggered by citizens and programme design that builds in the preferences and priorities of the participants; gender empowerment and voices of the excluded and those living in poverty need to be central to the conceptualisation and realisation of policy;
- A rights based approach that is justiciable, with transparency and uniformity in eligibility criteria, entitlements, and programme delivery and an established process through which citizens can claim their rights;
- Approaches that create productive assets or continuous income streams for the individual, household and community concerned and which thereby constitute a process of graduation, moving social protection from a dependency mode into a modality enabling a transition into productive livelihoods, decent work and security of productive assets.

In terms of the broader socio-political context, the degree of transformation that might result from social protection policy measures depends on a set of factors reaching beyond socioeconomic security. The first is the extent to which rights can be claimed and realised. This is determined by legislation proper, as the first step, and then by transparency and accessibility of information. Factors contributing to transparency and public pressure include freedom of the press and investigative journalism, access to an independent and vibrant civil society, and space and mechanics for genuine citizens’ voice and influence in party politics, parliaments and other political institutions. These require domestic legislation on rights, but they also necessitate access to inclusive and effective legal aid, so that citizens know and can claim their rights. In most low income countries, especially in rural contexts, processes of silent or open violence, and the dependence of households and communities subsisting on daily wage labour and casual jobs on village landowners, elites and powerbrokers, moreover require that the vulnerable are confident that claiming their rights, or participating in social protection schemes such as public works, will not jeopardise their employment or livelihood prospects in the future.

International rights instruments can be supportive in this respect. The ratification and implementation of international human rights norms such as the CRC, CEDAW, CERD, the Covenants, and of labour standards such as the ILO core conventions, and progress reports monitored in the public domain can be helpful. Affirmative action, processes for public interest litigation, and the right to information acts in India, Bangladesh and Nepal, combined with democratic institutions such as the media, trade unions and civil society movements, have been driving elements in the context of transformative social protection. The first four of the criteria for transformativity refer to this.

At the level of legislation, the countries under review have ratified the core human rights instruments on women (CEDAW), children (CRC) and racial discrimination (CERD) and the two Human Rights Covenants, but not all have not ratified or even signed some of the major conventions dealing with labour rights (see Table 1). The ratification of the right to freedom of association and protection of the right to organise (ILO Convention 87), the right to collective bargaining (ILO Convention 98); on minimum age and minimum wage is patchy in the four countries. This is a major impediment to a transformative impact of social
protection policies since decent and remunerative work conditions are a prerequisite for individuals, households and communities to move out of poverty (DAC Network on Poverty Reduction, 2009a and b).

**Table 1. Ratification of selected human rights instruments in South Asian countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/instrument</th>
<th>CEDAW</th>
<th>CERD</th>
<th>CRC</th>
<th>ILO Freedom of association (C87)</th>
<th>ILO Organise and Collective Bargaining (C98)</th>
<th>ILO Minimum Wage (C131)</th>
<th>ILO Minimum Age (C 138)</th>
<th>Covenant on civil and political rights (CCPR)</th>
<th>Covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (CESCR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ILOLEX and OHCHR websites

The second domain of “transformativity” lies in the realm of macro and sectoral economic policies. Here too, across South Asia, there are major gaps in these adjacent policy areas. With respect to the skewed distribution of assets, progressive taxation is absent, and the small size of the social transfer benefits and their fragmented nature (and the minimalism of microcredit schemes – not discussed here) are insufficient to alter income and wealth distribution patterns.

In rural areas, dependence on landowners remains pivotal for survival of low-income families and those living in absolute poverty, so that affirmative action in the political sphere, such as quotas for representation, will have limited impact. It is long overdue to look into land reform and into recalibrating power relations in the rural economy, if social protection is to take root and provide steps out of poverty and vulnerability.

A complement of additional policies would therefore be necessary to render social protection policies transformative. In terms of domestic policies, these include an “industrial strategy” in the sense of creating productive employment and decent work conditions. Trade policies need to redress the exploitative nature of employment in global value chains and unskilled labour migration. Other policy domains necessary for transformativity include housing policy; land reform; progressive fiscal policy; and dedicated policies for social inclusion. At the international level, policies – and actions – ensuring equitable international trade, investment and private finance as well as ODA are also indispensable.

In light of the policy gaps, the epithet of a “revolution” in social protection policies appears overoptimistic. Social protection measures are welcome, necessary and very useful. They provide much needed alleviation to dire situations, and can serve as a vital support towards improving socio-economic security and addressing social exclusion. They are an enormous step forward in that they have been established as key poverty-directed strategies.

However, social protection policies and measures do not change the situation of individuals, households and communities who are poor and vulnerable. This is not what they are designed to do. To be genuinely transformative, social protection would need to be embedded in a much broader policy architecture. Firstly it would need to look at domestic and regional policies towards generating sustained decent, remunerative work and fundamentally revamping the rural economy and the informal sector. Secondly, it would need to look into globally reorganising the inequitable paradigms and logics of international trade, finance, and investment. Otherwise one may be caught up supporting a false revolution – better than reactive safety nets – but certainly not genuinely transformative for inclusive social justice.
References


Frontier Star 2010. BISP offers Rs.1,000 per month cash assistance to its beneficiaries and (May 13, 2010 ). http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Benazir+Income+Support+Program+making+women+self-sufficient%A


