

Promoting Inclusive Social Protection in the Post-2015 Framework

Social protection is at risk of becoming a victim of its own success. As the evidence accumulates of a range of positive impacts, from poverty reduction to gender equality, expectations are rising and there is a danger of a backlash once policymakers realise that social protection cannot fully live up to its ever-expanding remit. A healthy dose of realism needs to be injected into the evolving debate about the appropriate role for social protection in the post-2015 agenda. Social protection faces several challenges, including its excessive focus on the individual as both the problem and the solution in tackling problems of poverty and vulnerability. The post 2015 development framework should promote 'Inclusive Social Protection', both to guarantee universal access to social protection and also to ensure that social protection and complementary programmes address the structural causes of poverty and vulnerability, rather than merely responding to the symptoms.

The rise and rise of social protection

Social protection continues to be one of the great success stories of development policy in the early 21st century. At national level, the numbers and coverage of social protection programmes are constantly expanding – though large gaps and unmet needs remain – and more countries are adopting National Social Protection Strategies or Policies every year. At international level, in 2012 alone three major agencies – the European Union, UNICEF and the World Bank – released new or revised social protection strategy statements. The International Labour Organisation's recommendation concerning National Floors of Social Protection was also adopted by the International Labour Conference in June.

Policy-makers' interest in social protection has been driven by the persistence of chronic poverty and food insecurity, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the recent global economic crises. A rapidly growing evidence base confirms the positive impacts of social protection programmes on a range of wellbeing outcomes, from increased income and consumption to improved access to education and health care.

Social protection

Social protection denotes the combination of formal and informal initiatives that provide income or in-kind transfers in combination with other forms of support to poor and vulnerable households to:

- i) act as a safety net for extremely poor people;
- ii) protect people against risks and consequences of livelihood shocks;
- iii) promote people out of poverty; and
- iv) support social justice for more equitable outcomes for all.

'**Graduation**' refers to the process whereby social protection helps people to move out of poverty and to remain out of poverty without the continuous receipt of transfers.

The growing momentum and confidence around social protection has been accompanied by rising expectations. Initially, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the objectives of social protection were limited to alleviating poverty and providing a safety net during hard times. ➔

More recently, social protection has increasingly been co-opted by efforts to achieve multiple development goals – including many of the Millennium Development Goals – even macroeconomic stabilisation and the promotion of social justice. This explains its success: the perception that social protection can be introduced across a diverse range of contexts to achieve a range of policy objectives, and that it is almost always evaluated positively in terms of impacts.

Social protection and the post-2015 agenda

Social protection will inevitably play an important role in the post-2015 agenda, for several reasons.

1. Poverty reduction will remain the overwhelming challenge facing development policy for many years to come, and social protection has demonstrated its effectiveness in tackling multiple dimensions of poverty.
2. Because social protection is redistributive by definition and in practice, it can and does contribute significantly to reducing income inequality, which is another post-2015 concern.
3. Issues that feature highly on the post-2015 agenda, such as finding mechanisms for managing volatility and uncertainty, also fall squarely within the mandate of social protection policies.
4. The recent evolution of the social protection discourse is fully aligned with emerging principles that are guiding the post-2015 discussions, notably rights, equity, sustainability and national ownership.
5. More broadly, social protection must surely be recognised as an essential component of efforts to achieve inclusive social and economic development, which is fundamental to the post-2015 vision.

Yet, there is a real danger of loading too many expectations onto social protection, then labelling it a failure if, say, it succeeds in protecting against shocks in a volatile livelihood context but does not ‘graduate’ programme participants out of poverty and food insecurity. This backlash is already being observed in some countries, but it is based on unrealistic and misguided expectations about what social protection is for and what it can achieve, especially when it is introduced as a stand-alone programme rather than as part of an integrated system of anti-poverty interventions. With ‘2020 hindsight’, the

danger is that social protection could be filed away as just another development fashion that rose rapidly up the development policy agenda pre-2015, but disappeared just as rapidly down the agenda post-2015. Social protection needs to be safeguarded against the risks generated by its precocious success.

Inclusive Social Protection

In line with the principles of inclusive social and economic development, an inclusive approach to social protection would not target a ‘fortunate few’ for a fixed period of time, but would ensure subsistence to all people who need it, whenever they need it. In addition, an inclusive approach to social protection would recognise that some drivers of poverty and vulnerability are structural rather than individual in origin, and therefore require innovative interventions, and/or linkages to other policies and sectors that can address these deeply rooted economic and social inequities. Social protection cannot be inclusive in contexts of economic and social exclusion.

It follows that Inclusive Social Protection:

- (a) would reach everyone that needs to be reached;
- (b) would not place unrealistic expectations and responsibilities on individuals to overcome barriers or constraints over which they have little or no control;
- (c) would be better integrated with other policies that work on poverty and vulnerability at the structural or institutional level.

Inclusive Social Protection ensures that future social protection programmes are grounded in the post-2015 principles of rights, equity and sustainability. It also guards social protection against an ever-expanding remit and unrealistically rising expectations.

Challenges for Inclusive Social Protection

Social protection is best placed to continue its success and to meet the expectations of the post-2015 agenda if it becomes truly ‘inclusive’. This requires addressing some key challenges.

1 Basing social protection on a rights-based and demand-driven agenda

If social protection is to contribute to inclusive social and economic development, it must be grounded in principles of human rights, equality and universality. Ultimately, social protection must be nationally owned and claims-based rights to social protection should be embedded

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in a social contract between governments and citizens or residents. This social contract should be enforced by a legal framework that allows citizens to demand their entitlements and hold the state to account for delivery of their economic and social rights. To ensure that social protection becomes rights-based and demand-driven, projects and programmes need to move from discretionary time-bound ‘windfalls’ to legally-defined entitlements that can be claimed when needed by all eligible citizens and residents.

There are pragmatic challenges to achieving this vision. Many developing country governments are resistant to making social protection rights-based, arguing that low administrative capacity and fiscal constraints make the extension of comprehensive and universal social protection coverage unfeasible and unaffordable, at least for the foreseeable future. Most governments are also wary of conferring justiciable rights that will allow citizens to take them to court. For this reason, civil society mobilisation and campaigns are often required, which in themselves are positive indicators of inclusive development. Conversely, in political contexts where this is not feasible (e.g. where civil society is weak or suppressed), a more gradual approach will be appropriate. Social protection coverage might need to follow the principle of ‘progressive universalism’ whereby interventions are gradually expanded to include larger parts of the population.

2 Bringing ‘protection’ back into social protection

The growing evidence that social protection is an effective weapon against poverty has resulted in a shift in emphasis away from its origins in ‘social safety nets’, and its initial function of providing protection against livelihood risks (e.g. unemployment) and life-cycle vulnerabilities (e.g. retirement). This is regrettable. Social protection complements and supports poverty reduction efforts, but ensuring that vulnerable people are adequately protected against risks and shocks is the specific mandate of social protection, and this should not be lost.

Issues of increasing uncertainty, such as volatility of food prices, and climate change, feature high on the post-2015 agenda. Future policy efforts should not only protect people against the adverse consequences of such uncertainty, but should also make people more resilient against future shocks. Refocusing social protection on vulnerability will not only provide a more effective response to new or intensifying forms of economic, social and environmental volatility,

it will allow social protection to link more effectively with related policy areas such as Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Adaptive Social Protection (ASP).

It should also be recognised that there are certain groups in society for whom social protection can never be something other than a safety net. It is vital not to lose sight of this basic ‘protection’ function. Poor and vulnerable children, older persons, persons with disability and socially excluded groups need social protection to do what it originally set out to do; to alleviate their economic deprivation and social marginalisation. One danger of the increasing emphasis on livelihood promotion and exit out of social protection programmes is that the most vulnerable and marginalised are becoming relatively ignored, because they are not regarded as having ‘graduation’ potential. Social protection cannot be promotive and transformative for everyone.

3 Supporting social protection to tackle the causes of poverty

Theories of change for social protection programmes are predicated on the assumption that action taken at the individual and household levels will lead to movements out of poverty. But sometimes these objectives are compromised by constraints that require a broader package of interventions in order to tackle the underlying causes and drivers of poverty. For example, the Oportunidades conditional cash transfer in Mexico has demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of education enrolment and attendance. However, for indigenous people, this improvement in human capital does not automatically translate into improved livelihoods and sustainable poverty reduction. This is because of continuing structural barriers such as labour market discrimination in terms of access to jobs and wage differentials.

A social protection programme is not a system, and a social protection system is not a poverty reduction strategy. Social protection programmes are unlikely (and should not be expected) to solve development challenges by themselves; they need to support and be supported by complementary social policies as well as appropriate macro-economic, labour market and other policies. The danger of not doing this is that social protection will simply alleviate the immediate symptoms or consequences of poverty and vulnerability, rather than identifying and addressing these problems at their source.

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Policy recommendations

A post-2015 development framework needs to promote Inclusive Social Protection, and articulate the ways in which it can be achieved as follows:

- **All countries should be supported to build social protection systems that are rights-based and demand-driven.** Social protection should be underpinned by legislation that recognises the right of every poor and vulnerable citizen or resident to protection from the state against the consequences of their poverty and vulnerability. If governments are nervous about rights and face severe fiscal and capacity constraints, a gradual approach towards universal, rights-based coverage should be adopted.
- **Sub-national social protection interventions should be scaled up and institutionalised within national systems.** Cases where social protection is delivered as small-scale, stand-alone, time-bound projects should become the exception rather than the rule. To ensure equitable access for all, comprehensive, permanent national programmes should be implemented that are located within government structures and provide effective social protection to everyone who needs it – wherever, whenever and for however long they need it.
- **Social protection should prioritise the management of vulnerability and strengthening resilience against risk, rather than the reduction of poverty.** Originally, social protection was designed as a set of ‘social safety nets’ against shocks, or as a complement to contributory social security schemes, but it has recently been co-opted by the poverty reduction agenda. In a global context of ongoing financial crises and unpredictable price shocks, social protection needs to ensure that all people are better protected and become more resilient against uncertain futures.
- **Social protection needs to become better integrated into national social and economic policies and to build stronger linkages with other social and economic sectors.** The effectiveness of social protection is multiplied when it is designed and delivered as part of a package of support to poor and vulnerable people. The educational impact of school feeding programmes, for example, will be limited unless the Ministry of Education ensures that schools are accessible and have enough well-trained teachers.
- **New thinking is needed to ensure that social protection contributes to addressing the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability, not just their consequences.** Although social protection is dominated by transfers targeted at individuals and households, innovative interventions are needed to remove the structural and institutional constraints that generate poverty and vulnerability for entire groups of people.



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Further reading

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Credits

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