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The Making or Breaking of a UN Social Protection Strategy: The Post 2015 Development Agenda

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Background Note for the UNRISD Workshop:
NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL POLICY
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1. Background: The world remains an unfair place

While we may claim progress with respect to the benchmarks set for social development by the Millennium Development Goals, the world as it is, remains an unfair, unequal, insecure and unhealthy place for virtually half its population. About 30 percent of the global population have no access to adequate health care when needed, forty percent of the global population live in abject poverty (under 2 US\$ per day), i.e. the cruellest form of insecurity. Every second child is poor and between five and ten million children die every year of preventable causes, and millions of elderly die too early for the same reason. Inequality is on the rise in many parts of the world. The globally accepted poverty lines of US\$ 1.25 or US\$ 2.00 per capita per day in purchasing power parity remain shamefully low in an ever richer world.

Social progress is uneven, unacceptably modest and slow.

And yet we know a powerful tool to tackle inequality and poverty directly: income transfers. For thousands of years - as long as people are living together - they have shared income in families and communities. But if insecure income is shared in small and poor risk pools the overall effect of income sharing on poverty remains small and unreliable. Social protection systems are a way to formalise income transfers and share income in greater risk pools. After decades of shadow existence in the global debate on development policies, social protection systems emerged during the first decade of the new millennium as tools to invest in people and in inclusive growth.

However, it was the global financial and economic crisis that led policy makers around the world to explicitly acknowledge the role of social protection systems as social and economic stabilisers. The support for social protection as instrument in development policies and crisis management grew dramatically in the UN, the International Financial Institutions, the G20 and many national governments. During the critical window between 2009 and 2012, a remarkable albeit fragile global consensus on social protection policy emerged. The International Labour Organization (ILO) seized the opportunity in 2012 to

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cast that consensus into agreeably “soft stone”, by adopting an international legal standard and hence an instrument of global social governance, i.e. the Recommendation No. 202 concerning National Floors of Social Protection.

Presently, there is only one option to keep social protection on the global and national policy agenda for the next one to two decades: the present negotiations on the post 2015 development goals. The question is, will the UN system - and its owners, i.e. national governments - use that opportunity to put a UN social protection strategy - as part of its vision of development - irrevocably on the international agenda. Unfortunately, the answer is by no means clear.

2. A brief history of major UN social policy initiatives

There were four major defining periods in global social policy and social protection policy making during the last 100 years – each followed tectonic political and economic shocks. The first two defining eras followed two wars. The post WWI period saw new social protection policy initiatives in Europe, the US and Latin America. Truly global social protection policy can be traced back to the founding of the International Labour Organisation in 1919. The ILO remained the dominant locus of global social policy till about the second half of the 1940s.

The post WWII era led to a further extension of national social protection systems and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and notably its social policy articles 22 to 26 leading to the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966. Global social policy extended its scope and its number of institutional protagonists in the new UN system, but until the 1990s very few effective and comprehensive efforts were undertaken to transform agreed upon policies into global social governance pursuing concrete and measurable implementation strategies for global social rights.

The next defining era for global social policy started in the mid-1970s. Following the oil-shocks in the 1970s, the neoclassical orthodoxy during the 1980s led to a contraction or containment of social expenditure. The collapse of the planned economies in Eastern Europe - and with it the end of the competition between two economic and political systems - reinforced the contraction of welfare states during the 1990s. Its rigorous support of the *Pinochet model* of pension reforms marked the entry of the World Bank into social protection policies in the 1980s. The neoclassical paradigm pushed for a privatisation of classical social insurance systems on the one hand and the retreat of state to residual welfare policies. Social protection policies increasingly retreated from wider redistribution, insecurity and inequality concerns to poverty and health issues. The World Bank sought to limit the management of social justice to residual social risk management. Facilitated by the geopolitical changes and perhaps in a reaction to the emerging de facto hegemony of the International Financial Institutions in economic and social policy, the UN at the beginning of the 1990s entered into what Hulme (Hulme 2000) called a period of “summitry”². It consisted of a series of major summits with topics ranging from child welfare,

² The period of summitry saw the following major conferences (list largely based on Hulme (2009)): In 1990, the UN World Conference on Education, The UN World Summit for Children (which set goals for infant, under five and maternal mortality, reduction of malnutrition, universal access to safe water and sanitation and became an early model for goal and target setting, and follow-up monitoring), the UNCTAD Conference on Least Developed Countries; in 1992 the Earth Summit in RIO, the International Conference on Food and Nutrition in Rome (demanding to halve the number of hungry people), the World Conference on Human Rights; in 1995 the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, the World Summit on Social Development (the “Copenhagen summit” formulating commitments, but no binding goals, endorsing the 20/20 Initiative, setting the commitment to reduce poverty to

to social development and financing for development which sought to set the agenda for decades to come. Except for the World Summit on Children in 1990, these summits typically lead to policy “commitments” rather than concrete goals, targets and indicators, i.e. the later “GTI approach” to global social governance.

It was OECD policy managers and bureaucrats who developed the precursors of the MDGs in form of the International Development Goals (IDGs) and hence made a decisive step towards casting global social policy commitment into instruments of global social governance (OECD 1996). These were goals for development policies of the rich people’s club rather than goals for development per se, but they clearly had the ambition to “shape the 21st century”. The UN Millennium declaration in 2000 on the other hand sought to summarise the results of the UN summits into a development strategy for all. In a final act a club of UN, IFI and OECD bureaucrats in 2001 discerned a set of the MDGs from the Millennium Declaration and the OECD goal template which was de facto adopted by the global community and the UN system during the Conference in Financing for Development in Monterrey in 2002 (UN 2002).

Due to their historical roots the Millennium Development Goals turned out to be a largely accidental and incoherent list of 8 objectives, 18 targets and 48 indicators focussing on poverty and specific health, gender and education issues as the central objectives for human development till 2015. An overall vision of human development and environmental development was not visible. But nonetheless, they turned out – perhaps unexpectedly so – as the most powerful instrument of Global Social Governance that the global community has ever seen.

We may just be in the final phase of the latest defining period of global social policy making and global social governance. From 2007 the debate to improve national social protection systems gained some momentum and made it even into the Chair’s conclusions of the G8 summit in 2007³. However, it needed the Global Financial and Economic Crisis to trigger a social policy breakthrough. The Crisis, unfolding against the background of a much bigger, structural and permanent social crisis, clearly shook the certainties and agreed wisdom of economics and economic policies. It was suddenly widely accepted that social and economic development could be at risk without sound social policies and strong social protection systems. Policy makers were aware, that the failure of national and the virtual absence of international supervision of the financial sector had permitted the crisis to happen. The social fallout could not be ignored and hence policy makers hailed social security systems as economic and social stabilizers. International agencies used the opportunity to adjust their development strategies. It is not accidental that the EC, the G20, UNICEF, the World Bank and the ILO, all have developed new social protection strategies seeking to promote more inclusive growth⁴ in 2012. All these strategies are broadly compatible and at least do no longer openly contradict each other although subtle differences remain such as the absence of a rights based justification of social protection in the new World Bank strategy.

100%); in 1996 the UN Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II) and in 2002 the International Conference on Financing for Development Monterrey, Mexico, which de facto endorsed the MDGs

³ See ILO: The new consensus, Geneva 2001 and G8 Summit: CHAIR'S SUMMARY Heiligendamm, 8 June 2007

⁴ See World Bank (2012), UNICEF (2012), EU (2012)

With the support of a coalition of UN agencies, notably WHO and UNICEF, the ILO used the tailwinds of the crisis to move the policy agenda towards global social governance through social security standard setting – a governance tool it had neglected for almost a quarter of a century. The speed of action was triggered by the fears that the fragile political consensual reaction to a particular economic and financial crisis and its social fallout might fade away too quickly without leaving behind a trace in the global governance system. In June 2012 ILO member unanimously accepted the Recommendation R.202 *Concerning National Floors of Social Protection*.

The haste was fully justified. The window of good will to achieve a real improvement of social protection worldwide was soon closing again. As soon as the economic and financial crisis turned – predictably - into a fiscal crisis, austerity measures recommended by macro-economic strategists and strongly resembling the policy recipes that had sprung from the Washington Consensus - believed to be long dead - took the top slot on the political agenda again and social protection spending⁵ came under attack again in many countries. Against this background the global community is presently negotiating a set of new development goals to replace the 2001 MDG list.

3. The ILO, the joint UN crisis initiative and the emergence of the Social Protection Floor concept

During the first decades of global social policy and its own existence, the ILO focussed on social security for workers in the formal economy and their families. The standard setting of the Organization created a unique body of legal social policy instruments albeit focused on people who had the privilege of working under a formal employment contracts and their dependants⁶.

Only in 2001 the ILO, at the International Labour Conference demanded a greater focus on the extension of social security coverage to the uncovered groups of the population. Perhaps inspired by the demonstrable success of the Mexican Oportunidades Programme from the late 1990s onwards and the Bolsa Familia programme in Brazil and its precursor programmes, as well as the bold Thai Universal Health Care scheme that had started in 2002, a series of ILO policy papers and regional conferences⁷ showed after 2004 that with an investment of between 2 to and about 6 % of GDP even low income countries could probably afford some basic form of universal income security and health care as floor of protection.

The political opportunity to put the concept on the political agenda came when the global economic governance failed and the Crisis hit. A new developmental social protection concept – the social

⁵ For evidence on the nature of fiscal austerity measures taken in 2010/11 see Ortiz et al (2011) and Roy and Ramos (2012)

⁶ The failure to reach out to the informal sector remains surprising. Already in 1944 three progressive documents had been adopted by the International Labour Conference, i.e. the Declaration of Philadelphia, which subsequently was incorporated into the Constitution of the ILO and the Social Security Recommendations R. 67 on Income Security and R. 69 on Medical Care. The Declaration of Philadelphia explicitly charged the Organisation with “the extension of social security measures to provide a basic income to all in need of such protection and comprehensive medical care”.

⁷ Figures and calculations can be found in ILO (2008), Pal et al. (2005), Mizunoya, S. et al. (2006).

protection floor - emerged. The term social protection floor was first used as the title of one of nine crisis initiatives of the UN system during a meeting of the UN Chief Executives Board for Programmes in April 2009 that was chaired by the ILO Director General. The ILO and WHO were jointly charged with leading the Social Protection Floor Initiative (UNSPF Initiative). The initiative was joined by 19 UN agencies and a number of major bilateral donors and NGOs. While the other eight Crisis initiative soon turned into routine UN business, the Social Protection Floor Initiative became a player in the global social policy arena. For about three years it was the broadest and most active UN social protection initiative that the UN agencies have ever jointly undertaken.

In summer 2010 the ILO convened a high level advisory board for the SPF initiative that was chaired by the then former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet. The Bachelet Advisory Group issued the first version of its report in summer 2011 (Bachelet 2011). The report made the case for social protection floors stating that they support the realization of human rights and promote social justice, are an effective tool for combating poverty and inequality, help accelerating progress towards achieving the MDGs and beyond, are affordable even in low-income countries, help to address the social and economic impact of crises and global economic imbalances and are an important tool for gender empowerment. The ILO obtained a mandate from the 100th Labour Conference in 2011 to develop a new international social protection standard.

The ILO recommendation *R.202 Concerning National Floors of Social Protection* adopted unanimously by the 101st International Labour Conference less than a year later after intense and constructive debate is an instrument of international law that all 184 member states of the ILO should take into account when drafting national social legislation. This global social policy and governance instrument stipulates that ILO member states should built respectively complete their social protection systems on the basis of a floor of four crucial social security guarantees. These four guarantees consist of a basic level of income security during childhood, adult years and old age, and access to essential health care for all residents and provide core content for the Human Right to social security as expressed in articles 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It leaves the means and methods of implementation, as well as the level of entitlements to national decisions and participative processes.⁸

It is often overlooked that the Recommendation does not just deal with the floor of protection but also requires countries to build higher levels of protection as soon as possible and hence guides the 184 member states how comprehensive overall national social protection systems should be built on the solid basis of a floor. For that process the Recommendation (paragraph 3) lists 18 principles that should govern national social protection systems, ranging from universality of protection, adequacy of protection, the obligation to define benefits by law, non-discrimination, progressivity of implementation, acknowledging the diversity of methods and approaches, and the need for tripartite participation and public consultation on benefit levels and conditions, demanding respect for dignity of people covered, efficient complaints procedures, transparency, financial, fiscal and economic sustainability and the linking to high quality public services.

R. 202 also clearly formulates a protection objective: According to Article 4 of the Recommendation “these guarantees should ensure that all in need have access to essential health care and basic income

⁸ILO 2012: Social Security for all – Building social protection floors and comprehensive social security systems, Geneva, 2012, see text of the recommendation on p. 33

security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level ”.

This formulation defined the SPF as a combination of income and health security provided through cash transfers and transfers in kind including in form of access to essential social services as listed in Article 11 to 13 of the ICESCR. It was clearly drafted as basis for an overall UN social protection strategy incorporating the mandates of a wide range of UN agencies. And yet, the political price to pay for the swift standard setting action of the ILO was that after June 2012 the SPF perceived as an agenda owned by the ILO and not the UN as a whole. The other agencies, perhaps with the exception of UNICEF, lost interest and the Social Protection Inter-agency Co-ordination Board (SPIAC-B), that was initiated by the G-20, took centre stage, officially co-chaired by the ILO and the World Bank, and the SPF Initiative waned away.

4. The Post 2015 agenda: A last chance to create a UN social protection strategy?

With R. 202 the global community hence has defined unanimously a comprehensive set of social protection principles, obligations and objectives for all societies. And it has done so unanimously. R. 202 is not a binding international legal instrument but it remains a recommendation to 184 countries.

There is only one principal conduit by which R.202 can influence national policies. It can help to create or protect national policy space for social protection policies. The global consensus creates moral legitimacy and thus a political shield for national demands. It provides a political platform for national pressure groups that demand more social justice through social protection. They can always remind national governments of the global consensus they have subscribed to in Geneva whenever necessary and when demanding the establishment or safeguarding of social protection floors and national social security extension strategies at the national level.

That is of particular importance when governments turn back towards restrictive social policies. In particular during the present - crisis triggered - policy ambivalence between the consensuses on social protection on the one hand and the perceived need for austerity policies on the other hand, it needs a maximum of political legitimacy to keep the issue of social protection floors on the “front burner” of global social policy debates. In order to ensure that degree of legitimacy the SPF needs to migrate back from the ILO to the UN as a whole. A unique opportunity to make the SPF the core of a truly UN strategy visible, and the efforts to establish the SPF as an accepted element of global social policy “sustainable”, is to ascertain that the SPF plays an important role in the formulation of the post 2015 development goals.

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