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New Social Policy Directions? Some Reflections on South Asia

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New social policy directions? Some reflections on South Asia

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This paper attempts to respond to some of the questions (Q) addressed in the conference call, with respect to new directions in social policy from the South Asian experience.¹ Before doing so, it offers a sketch of the region.

1) Starting point: understanding the region

Q: What constitutes South Asia as a region - what are the uniting factors?

South Asia is a self-defined region, with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka organised in a – weak and divided - regional body, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Beyond this formality, there is a common history for most of the area – in earlier centuries of Mogul and other empires, and the trauma of British colonialism. Over the past decade, the region has been enjoying high GDP growth rates, and a “shining” international image.

However, the majority of the population has not benefited much from economic growth. Income poverty, inequality in incomes and wealth, and social exclusion predominate. With the exception of Maldives and Sri Lanka, income poverty, adult malnutrition and under-5 underweight conditions are high; 60 to 80% of the population are under the \$2 per day poverty line, and 40% on a regional average have to persist with less than \$1.25 per day. The HDI ranking is low for most countries in the region (see table 1 and figure 1). South Asia is the region with the largest number of internally displaced populations - 2 million people - and distress migration. These displacements are a reaction to political conflict, recurrent natural disasters, climate change, as well as demographic shifts, accelerating urbanisation, and of course structural poverty. Many analysts therefore speak of a common regional deprivation challenge (Bonnerjee 2014b: 192).

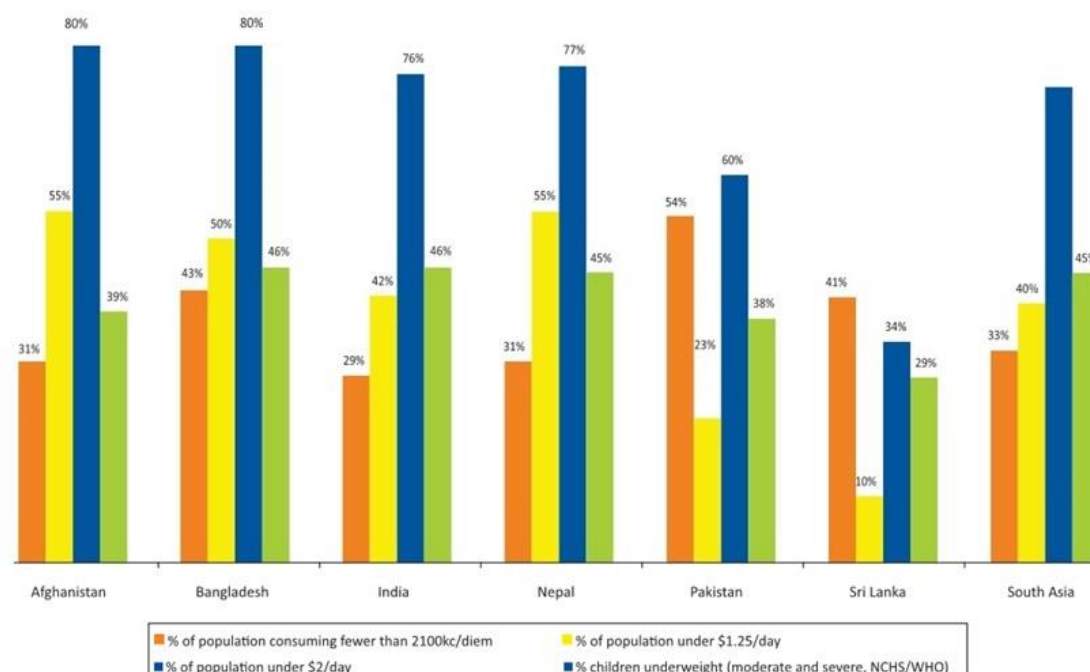
Table 1. Human Development Index (HDI) in South Asia (ranked from highest to lowest)

Country	HDI* (2012)	Inequality- adjusted HDI** (2012)	Gender Inequality Index*** (2012)
Sri Lanka	0.715	0.607	0.402
Maldives	0.688	0.515	0.357
India	0.554	0.392	0.610
Bhutan	0.538	0.430	0.464
Pakistan	0.515	0.374	0.518
Bangladesh	0.515	0.356	0.567
Nepal	0.463	0.304	0.485
Afghanistan	0.374	-	0.712

Source: UNDP 2013. Human Development Report

Fig. 1. Measures of deprivation in South Asia

¹ This short paper is a response to Ilcheong Yi, Esuna Dugarova Liz Koechlin 2013, New directions in social policy (UNRISD 2014), and draws extensively on the findings in Koehler and Chopra 2014. The author thanks the participants of the UNRISD workshop for helpful comments. Sonja Keller and Milda Aleknonyte provided research support to this paper.



Source UNICEF ROSA 2009. A matter of magnitude.
http://www.unicef.org/rosa/Latest_Matter_of_magnitude.pdf

On a more positive note, the region is also characterised by emerging or re-emerging democratic processes, and a vibrant CSO (Civil Society Organisation) community. This is for a variety of reasons. GDP growth, while not reaching the three lower quintiles, has created a growing middle class who demand better access to social services, are socially concerned about social divides, and/or personally worried about their security (Bonnerjee 2014b: 192). As a result, political situations across the region are transforming (Koehler and Chopra 2014: 6). CSOs are influential because of their long-standing engagement, their ability to professionally formulate viable policy recommendations, and also because of their capacity to convene street protests and marches to give force to their proposals. Some CSOs benefit from their association with subsets of the elites and the middle classes, others from the political pressure of identity politics, and the ability to mobilise funding nationally and internationally.² In addition, critical media - radio, print - and social media have played a supportive role in democracy processes across much of South Asia.

These factors – persistent economic and social deprivations alongside new political dynamics - form the backdrop for a surge in social policy changes observed in all the South Asian countries, beginning visibly in India in 2004, and continuing into the early 2010s.

2) New forms of social policy in South Asia: the good news

Q: New forms. What are the key features of these new forms of social policy? What, if anything, is ‘new’ in the forms of social policy in the countries and the region? What specific risks and challenges do the policies address? What are the key institutions behind such social policies? How do they relate to other policy domains, such as economic and environmental policies?

There are many elements of “newness” in social policy in South Asia, which deserve highlighting as a change of direction at the level of policy intent. They include:

- A concerted set of policy reforms:

Since the early 2000-noughts, there has been a surge in social sector policies in South Asia. Governments have introduced social policy reforms to address at least six challenges: hunger, income poverty, lack of

² Examples include a range of issues-based CSOs: in India, for example, SEWA – the Self Employed Women’s Movement - initiated policies on social security for the informal economy; Anna Hazare led a movement for more efficient anti-corruption legislation: In Bangladesh, the Grameen movement has been leading the microfinance movement for access to finance for the lowest income and women’s groups for three decades. In Nepal, identity-based NGOs have placed gay rights on the political agenda.

employment, inadequate housing, social exclusion, and lack of citizenship rights (see table 2). Policies include the universalisation of health services and primary education; new forms of social assistance; in several countries: employment generation programmes; and in a few countries: low-cost housing programmes. The right to information is a key factor in this set of policy innovations. There is a regional coinciding of the social policy surge, and that appears new as well.

Table 2. Social policy panorama South Asia- selected examples

Social policy issue		
Hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooked school meals (India) • National Food Security Bill (India) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidised grain prices and open market sales (Bangladesh) • Means tested food subsidy (Sri Lanka)
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Rural Health Mission (India) • Free basic health services and medication (India, Nepal, Bhutan.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health insurance (India, Maldives)
Income insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benazir Income Support Programme (Pakistan) • Child benefit (Nepal) • Social security bill for unorganised sector workers (India) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samurdhi (Sri Lanka) • Universal old age pension (Nepal); • Social pension (Maldives)
Un-/underemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Scheme (India) • Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (Bangladesh) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Karnali employment Programme (Nepal)
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Million houses Development Programme (Sri Lanka) • Housing reconstruction (Maldives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • J Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (India)
Social exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary school stipend for girls (Bangladesh) • Education for all and Dalit education grants (Nepal) • Child grants for girls (India) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural development and community based interventions (India) • Recognition of forest commons rights (India)
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Food Security Act (India) • Mid-day meal (India) • Right to education (all) • Right to free health services (Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to work (India) • Right to information (India, Bangladesh, Nepal)

Sources: based on Koehler 2014a; Chopra 2014b

▪ Acknowledgement of income poverty and of social exclusion

What is also new is the more proactive acknowledgement of income poverty and of social exclusion as major issues. Links are made between minority/identity politics and social policy programmes, by adopting (or reinforcing existing) categorical targeting or affirmative action for gender, caste, or ethnicity. In India, “tribal groups” can draw on new commons rights. In Pakistan, the income support programme secularised social protection away from the Zakat system, and introduced a positive gender bias, with women as the entitlement holders for the grant (Gazdar 2014).

▪ Rights language and intent

Different from earlier phases of social policy reform in South Asia, many of the policies refer to citizenship as a notion, and even to the rights of citizens as a normative framework. Progressive positions are preferred, notably a commitment to scale up and gradually universalise access to education and health. In Nepal, there is the universalisation of basic health and education services in the Interim Constitution. In India, these social rights have become justiciable, and rights are cast in a collective as opposed to an individualising mode, calling for collective mobilisation, accountability and transparency, as well as justiciability (Chopra 2014a: 96).

▪ Continuous programme enhancement

Over the past 10 years, successive government coalitions have pronounced improvements in social services, and increased coverage or benefit levels of social transfers, at least nominally.³ Thus, these have been rising or improving – even if from low initial levels.

- Public funding

The majority of the new social policies and programmes is financed from government revenues. While the health and education sectors in some of the lower income countries continue to receive ODA from sector-wide approaches or earmarked education and health services funding, it is government budgets in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives that fund most of the new social protection transfers.

- Relative funding increase

The pattern of fiscal expenditure is also interesting: in South Asia, 20% of the fiscal budget is allocated to economic sectors, and 35% to the social sectors - education, health, social protection/social security, and community funding. This exceeds commitments made in the 1990s to allocate at least 20% of the fiscal budget to the social sector. Also, overall and per capita expenditures in the social sector components of the fiscal budgets increased significantly between 2002 and 2010. In per capita terms, averaged for South Asia, there is a tripling from US\$30 to US\$ 90 per person (Bonnerjee 2014a and b).

- Countercyclical social policy initiatives

Several countries in South Asia adopted counter-cyclical measures in response to the 2008-2009 fiscal-financial and food price crisis, by topping up existing social protection programmes, or introducing temporary measures (see table 3). The range of measures adopted is quite wide. This too is a characteristic of the policy innovation surge in South Asia.

Table 3. Countercyclical measures in South Asia

		Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Stimulate demand / improve social protection	Individual Tax (cuts, deferred, exemptions)		√		√				
	Social transfers augmented		√		√	√ *	√	√ *	
	Child related transfers						√		
	In-kind transfers (incl. food for work)		√						
	Subsidies on food prices		√						
	Direct job creation /youth employment		√				√		
	Price stabilisation				√				
Stimulate production	Subsidised inputs (e.g. fuel, fertilizer)		√						√
	Corporate income tax / import duties reductions,		√						
	Promotion of tourism and private businesses		√	√	√				
	Export promotion		√		√				√
	Support to remitters		√						
Long-term investment	Agricultural/rural sector development		√		√				
	Energy and Environment								
	Infrastructure development/r rehabilitation				√				
	Health/ education infrastructure				√				
	Technological innovation				√				

Source: UNICEF ROSA 2009 (manuscript)

3) Systemic social policy failures: the bad news

³ Not all grant benefits are indexed, so in real terms some have been eroded by inflation.

The social policy innovations and trends outlined above are noteworthy, and deserve acknowledgement. However, they must not be idolised. They include a number of inherent structural faults and failures, including the following:

- **Intent versus implementation and delivery**

There is an enormous tension between intent and delivery. The language of universalism and the rights terminology contrasts with the low performance in terms of coverage, levels of benefits and quality and reliability of delivery. Despite – or in some cases perhaps because of – the surge in social policy, many social services remain poor and patchy. Social protection schemes are disjointed and have very low benefit levels, because they are spread so thinly. Social exclusion of women, girl children, disadvantaged castes, and ethnic and religious minorities continues despite the programmes to redress these malfunctions. Implementation often falls below the promises; for example, early evaluations of the MGNREGA in India show that – at the national level – only 40 days - instead of 100 days – of paid employment have materialised; the programme in Nepal’s Karnali region which also stipulates 100 days of paid work, has averaged only 15 days. There are many mixed messages, such as the increasing private sector role – contrary to the rights-based discourse, which would suggest a reliance on public goods delivered by public entities. In India, the state acknowledges its role as the duty bearer, but outsources social services (Chopra 2014: 97). In Bangladesh, policies are in a safety net and residual mode, and often piecemeal, with the state veering away from its responsibilities (Mahmud and Mahmud 2014). Poor governance and corruption undermine performance.

Some of these shortcomings and weaknesses could be dismissed as the respective programmes’ teething problems, but they do signal a gap between the social policy innovations and the actual effectiveness.

- **Social policy versus rights legislation**

A puzzling contradiction is that between the resumption of or turn towards rights-based language and universalist policy design on the one hand, and the landscape of human rights legislation in South Asia on the other. A quick survey of ILO and UN rights conventions reveals that, while the core UN human rights conventions – the CERD, CEDAW, and CRC, have been ratified (see table 4) in many countries, the more workplace-oriented fundamental labour conventions remain to be adopted. In the case of India, for example, despite its strong rights language in the policy decisions of recent years, core trade union rights or child labour legislation are not in place (see table 5 annexed).

Table 4: Ratification of selected UN Conventions / Declarations

Convention/ Declaration	C2. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)	C8. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	C11. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	C15. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (September 2007)
Country					
Afghanistan	1983 a	2003	1994	2012 a	Yes
Bangladesh	1979 a	1984 a	1990	2007	Abstention
Bhutan	-	1981	1990	-	Abstention
India	1968	1993	1992 a	2007	Yes
Maldives	1984 a	1993 a	1991	2010	Yes
Nepal	1971 a	1991	1990	2010	Yes
Pakistan	1966	1996 a	1990	2011	Yes
Sri Lanka	1982 a	1981	1991	-	Yes

a: Accession. Sources: treaties.un.org, unbisnet.un.org

ventions in South Asia

	C100 Equal Remuneration Convention	C102 Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention	C107 Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention	C138 Minimum Age Convention	C168 Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Convention	C169 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention	C177 Home Work Convention	C182 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention	C189 Domestic Workers Convention
	1969	-	-	2010	-	-	-	2010	-
	1998	-	1972	-	-	-	-	2001	-
	1958	-	1958	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2013	-	-	2013	-	-	-	2013	-
	1976	-	-	1997	-	2007	-	2002	-
	2001	-	1960	2006	-	-	-	2001	-
	1993	-	-	2000	-	-	-	2001	-

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