



TOWARDS A GLOBAL SOCIAL POLICY?

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Introduction

Before embarking on an analysis of whether there is a trend towards a “global social policy”, it will be necessary to define the two elements that are responsible for the coining of this notion of a global social policy - “globalization” and “social policy”.

In terms of an Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Briefing Paper (2000), authors seeking to define either globalization or social policy face difficulties. Both terms tend towards shifting meanings when discussed in different contexts and by different groups of professionals. The common thread in most definitions of globalization is the idea that the world is facing a qualitatively new level of integration in a variety of economic and non-economic spheres, and that this is driven by communications and transport innovations.¹

In her work, Yeates (2001) defines globalization as:

At its most basic, globalization refers to an extensive network of economic, social and political interconnections and processes which routinely transcend national boundaries.²

However, in a later work, Yeates (2002) discusses a “strong” globalization theory which defines globalization in economic terms. A major claim of this “strong” globalization thesis is that globalization amounts not merely to the extension of

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capitalism on a global scale but to the emergence of an integrated or unified world economy which has a separate dynamic to that of national economies and which is not fully under the control of political institutions. Further, she proposes in terms of this "strong" globalization thesis, that there has been a dramatic shift in structural power and authority away from national political systems towards global economic systems.³

Turning to social policy, some definitions interpret social policy as relating primarily to particular sectors – notably health, education and social protection – while other views seek to define the term cross-sectorally, in relation to areas of policy outcomes e.g. poverty reduction, equity, redistribution, social cohesion. Generally a set of values are taken to accompany the field of social policy – of promoting certain minimum standards of social justice and equity.⁴

Reconciling the above definitions of globalization (particularly the broader definition as stated by Yeates (2001)) and social policy, it would appear, that globalization having transcended national boundaries, and shifting structural power and authority toward global systems, social issues would also have to be tackled at an international level.

So therefore, can we envisage a "global social policy"?

Defining "Global Social Policy"

Deacon (1997) states that

... global social policy as a practice of supranational actors embodies global social redistribution, global social regulation, and global social provision and/or empowerment, and includes the ways in which supranational organizations shape national social policy.⁵

He argues that in the present phase of world economic development, social policy activities take on a supranational and transnational character for several reasons. Economic competition between countries may lead them to lower costs of social protection in order to be more competitive unless there are supranational or global regulations in place that discourage this. International migratory pressures generate the political logic that there could be income transfers between countries to stave off the political consequences of mass migration. Similarly, common markets in capital and labour between countries give rise to the possibility of a supranational authority providing at a supranational level the social citizenship rights denied or threatened at a national level.

The necessity for social policy concerns to be addressed at a supra-national level was previously identified by the ODI Briefing paper (2000). Among the reasons for the framing of such “global social policy” were free movement of capital between economies leading to a “race to the bottom” in terms of standards of labour rights and protection, increasing liberalization of economic movement meant reduction in taxes and therefore less funds available to the governments to fund social expenditure, increasing flow of labour migrants from poorer to richer countries requiring poverty to be addressed at an international level and concern of global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with poverty reduction and social protection.⁶

Global principles for social policy were also identified in the World Bank Paper “Principles and Good Practice in Social Policy” (1999) as policies that have as their goal the promotion of social development of all the world’s people – to increase their capacity to improve their lives and influence the decisions that affect them. While this definition seems somewhat vague and all encompassing, the Bank went on to specifically identify these principles to mean the following:

- Achieving universal access to basic social services, including access to quality basic education, health care, reproductive health, sanitation and safe drinking water;
- Enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods, and decent working conditions;
- Promoting systems of social protection; and
- Fostering social integration by meeting key objectives cited in international declarations: ‘to foster societies that are safe, stable and just; promote respect for diversity; achieve equity between women and men; foster tolerance and protect human rights; and enhance the participation of all groups of people in their economies, societies and natural environments—including the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged.’⁷

The common thread of these definitions of a “global social policy” is that they are all economic arguments and economic solutions. Whilst the Bank recommendations may appear to take into account social welfare issues, it must be noted that these recommendations came in the wake of the East Asian economic crisis of the 1990s (more elaborately dealt with later in this paper), and sought to identify methods in which developing and transitional countries could deal with such crises.

Is it accurate however, to suggest that global social policy is and should be limited only to economic issues or should such a broad term also involve formulation of policies at the supranational level that address the myriad of social problems that affect nations, particularly developing nations? If one agrees with the latter proposition, would a common social policy at the international level be effective in all countries regardless of diverse cultural, historical, economic and political factors influencing specific countries? And most importantly, would it really be feasible to have a "global social policy"? This paper makes an attempt at trying to analyse and answer these questions.

Setting the Stage for a "Global Social Policy"

International Treaties and International Law

The idea of producing internationally agreed texts and guidance in the field of social policy is not new. As Ferguson (1999) argues, the processes of globalization have led, in the last years of the twentieth century, to the demand for the development of a universal set of principles to guide social policy. The various United Nations (UN) conventions, covenants and conference documents relating to economic and social rights, and core labour standards, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) onwards,⁸ already provide a legitimate and substantial platform for addressing the global dimensions of social policy, by creating a legally binding obligation on the member nations.⁹

These UN conventions draw on the central theme of human rights, or the rights that every human being is entitled to claim from his/her government. However, the UN framework is more a set of internationally agreed to standards that member-states are obliged to meet. Take for instance Article 8 of the UDHR that states:

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

The UDHR merely prescribes that every person is entitled to certain fundamental rights, and it is left upto the implementing states to identify what constitutes these "fundamental rights". Therefore, for instance, while the Pakistan Constitution prescribes a right to property as a fundamental right, the Indian Constitution does not. Hence, much is left to the national government albeit within the prescribed set of standards. Further, nations that have not signed and ratified international treaties are not obliged to adhere to their provisions. Therefore, while treaties such as the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

and the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (ICECSR) are widely signed and ratified,¹⁰ covenants like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC)¹¹ are not and consequently, most nations are not obliged to adhere to the provisions of such human rights conventions.

It may, at this juncture, be useful to briefly examine certain elements of international judicial systems such as the International Court of Justice or the European Court of Justice. While the decisions of these courts are binding on the parties involved, they do not have an impact on all member-states.¹²

However, there is no doubt that globalization has infiltrated into decision-making at the national level. According to Bahdi (2002), national courts are now beginning to cite foreign judgements as a source of persuasive authority. Take for instance, in one case, the Botswana court found that the citizenship laws that permitted male citizens but not female citizens to pass on their citizenship to their children, were contrary to its obligations under the ICCPR. Other countries such as New Zealand, South Africa and India have also demonstrated turning to international obligations to decide national issues.¹³

Supranational Institutions

Ramia (2003) believes that partial globalization of social policy is evident by the growing role played by multilateral and supranational institutions in both policy formulation and programme delivery processes.¹⁴ Global social political, she says, stems from what are by now well-established trends towards the empowerment of supranational and global institutions in the formulation and delivery of policy programmes.¹⁵ Deacon (1997) identifies organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as well as a host of non-governmental international organizations as being involved in (1) influencing the shaping of national social policy, (2) engaging in transnational redistribution and regulation, and (3) occasionally providing for citizens or at least empowering citizens when states fail them.¹⁶ In this light, Cox (1993) raises a pertinent question:

Can we conclude that we are witnessing.... the emergence of a new humanizing and civilizing world hegemony countering fundamentalist liberalism that is "expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states and those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries"?¹⁷

To this we must add a second question-whether such rule-making institutions are autonomous and not merely puppets in the hands of the power states that fund them?

international financial and development institutions play a central role in facilitating developing countries' access to financial resources for public purposes. To quote the World Development Report 1999/2000, "international institutions have a role to play in helping developing countries promote financial stability and investment."¹⁸

Financial assistance by the World Bank and IMF in the form of loans and aid, in conjunction with transnational development banks and institutes and bilateral aid agencies, have sustained the major economic and social inequalities that characterize contemporary globalization; they have overseen the accumulation of unprecedented levels of wealth in the advanced industrialized countries, and mass impoverishment in, and indebtedness of, developing countries.¹⁹ Let us examine the truth in this statement by taking into account the effects of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the World Bank.

SAPs were the World Bank's general prescription to the economic problems faced by the developing world. According to statistics stated by Owoh (1996), by the mid-1990s, over 70 debtor countries, 30 of which were in Africa, had implemented SAPs.

...after more than 10 years of structural adjustment in Africa, living standards in sub-Saharan Africa have fallen 2% annually in the last 10 years and are now lower than in 1970; unemployment has quadrupled to more than 100 million and Africa's potential productive capacity now averages only about 30% across the continent. Real wages have also fallen by a third and investment is now lower than in the 'lost decade' of the 1980s.²⁰

In fact, Lopes (1999) states that in Africa, structural adjustment has come to be widely regarded as the root cause of economic stagnation.²¹ Yeates (2001) further states that Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe have also suffered destabilizing economic and social effects of debt, loans and SAPs, and many of these countries are now categorized by the World Bank and OECD as developing countries. It's not surprising therefore, that in terms of a World Bank Study, the compliance rate of SAPs, was a mere 60%.²²

The Asian financial crisis of 1997/1998 was another and rather large black mark in the track record of the Bretton Woods organizations. The crisis was a direct result of adherence to the demands of the OECD, World Bank and IMF to adhere to market principles, which led to a flood of foreign investment in the area, which was diverted to speculative real estate and stock market trading. It is interesting to note how Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea, the countries in which the IMF

implemented its stabilization and recovery programme, were the worst hit. China, Taiwan and India, countries with protected economies and strong controls over foreign investment and ownership of local companies were the least affected, and Malaysia, survived the crisis by introducing capital controls along the Chinese lines.²³

So where exactly does the fault lie? A good starting point would be to examine whether these autonomous institutions are really so. Experts seem to think not. For instance, Deacon candidly states:

One curious trend has been to demonstrate how major government actors particularly the USA have politicized organizations like the World Bank. The non-political technical role of the World Bank has been subverted by the USA when it has explicitly attempted to intervene in the Bank's business in relation to regimes that the USA is unhappy with.²⁴

He goes on to say that more international conventions are ratified by developed rather than developing countries.

For instance, the ILO's most concrete contributions to policy are seen in the welfare states of the industrialised world. Here where welfare is politically viable but contested, international standards most usefully amplify, legitimate and depoliticize policy options. In such cases, reform elites use external standard setting to further labour and social reform. The ILO then, celebrates the enlightened social and labour policy of Western Europe.²⁵

Thus, these supranational organizations do not really pay much attention to social, cultural, economic and historical factors that all influence the way a nation would react to generalized global principles, particularly developing nations.

Factors Peculiar to States.

The fundamental flaw with the global social policy analysis as it exists today, is that it is embedded in the philosophy of the rich industrialised western world. Thus, it has been able to rely upon 2 key assumptions-on the one hand a legitimated state, and on the other a pervasive labour market, as the basis of many people's livelihood. Another unspoken assumption has been the existence of sophisticated, comprehensive and regulated financial markets providing insurance and enabling savings.²⁶

These assumptions do not hold good in a developing country context, which not only views social policy in a development context,²⁷ but is also conditioned by a number of other social, cultural, political and historical factors that have to be tackled whilst framing their social policies.²⁸

Take for instance the agrarian and pastoral nature of South Asian and African countries. Urbanisation is not likely to lead to modernization and development of welfare regimes as they exist in Europe. Rather, it will only lead to further impoverishment of poor farmers, who do not have the requisite skills or training to cope with urbanization. Or take southern Sudan or Afghanistan where colonial boundaries have trapped ethnic minorities, leaving them vulnerable to long-term oppression by dominant national groups who have captured that state. These legacies have left whole regions within these "nation" states highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as crop failure.²⁹

Moreover, social policy really takes on different interpretations in developing countries. In India for instance, a country faced with a myriad of social problems such as dowry deaths, sati, female foeticide and child labour, social policy consists of identifying these issues and forming suitable legislation for their eradication. The government or "states" cannot be limited to economic issues alone. In these countries moreover, the government does not have the funds for social expenditure. Gough (2004) points out that welfare in poor countries is perceived in contrast to development as a combination of relief and charitable transfers occurring within kin and other social relationships where the culture sustains such morality. As accurately identified in the World Development Report 1999, another factor in the context of such countries is that while these countries have operating nation states, their problems of governance and effectiveness remain.

Finally, it is also important to remember that while it is impossible to compare apples and oranges, it is, in the case of developing countries sometimes also difficult to compare red and green apples! Let us take the example of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, three countries sharing the same history, governed by similar Constitutions and sharing many cultural similarities. The tradition of an expected set of rights defined by the state, realized and maintained through civil pressure is much stronger in contemporary India than in its neighbours Pakistan and Bangladesh.³⁰

Thus, in policy terms, it is necessary to identify for different contexts which set of resources (material, human, social, cultural etc.) is key, in the sense of altering the status and functioning of the others. It might be individual self-development via education and vocational training in some circumstances e.g. parts of East and South Asia. It might be overcoming adult male morbidity in others e.g. urban Bangladesh. It might be social action around common property management in north Pakistan. And it might be struggle-based social action on wages, rent and family law in rural India. Not everyone's basic needs are the same because the jugular problem for them is not the same.

Conclusion – How Feasible is a Global Social Policy?

What is discussed so far, are only a few issues involved in determination of a global social policy. Indeed, global governance and global politics involve a multitude of actors operating at a number of levels and in a range of spheres. Transnational corporations (TNCs), new international division of labour non-governmental organizations and a host of other factors also play a significant role. But this is not to say that the autonomy or importance of a national government be undermined in a macro viewing of the issue. If TNCs are responsible for development of a global social policy in light of their transborder activities, then states are equally responsible for regulating the activities of the TNCs to ensure against monopoly or tax frauds and so on.

In short, framing of social policy has to occur at various levels—local, state, international—influenced by NGOs and international organizations, and in depth studies of the differences in economies, culture and politics.

In this light, what may be more effective would be international co-ordination and co-operation rather than a global social policy. The “open method of co-ordination” or OMC, first coined in 2000 essentially envisages a set of common guidelines, national plans, peer reviews, joint evaluation reports and recommendations. Therefore, while providing policy actors with a relatively clear agenda, the mix of these ingredients leaves ample room for national contextualisations.³¹

This is not to say that internationalization of social policy is bad altogether. Indeed, prescription of an international set of standards to be adhered to by states has also had some positive outcomes as described elsewhere in this paper. Another such instance is the following observation made in a UNICEF paper (1995):

In 1990, the World Summit for Children set goals for reducing deaths, malnutrition, disease and disability among children of the developing world. Four years later a majority of nations are on a track to achieve a majority of these goals.³²

In developing countries particularly, unless there is some external pressure, issues of human rights and development may not be addressed for many more decades.

However, one must bear in mind that the needs of all countries may not be, and in fact are not the same and global actors must take into account the peculiar factors that face individual nations. Further, it would also be accurate to say that different countries, faced with the same pressures or situations may react differently as in the comparative analysis of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Therefore there is a tendency

to agree with Gough's (2004) recommendation that social policy needs to be based on a 'horses for courses' approach rather than assuming a universal agenda for everyone, albeit, I must add within a reasonable and internationally agreeable set of guidelines that will leave enough room for states to manoeuvre policies to suit their state-specific issues. Finally, it must be mentioned that such policy must be equally binding on all nations regardless of whether they are developing countries or developed super-powers that fund the decision making bodies. There has to be international accountability for all countries, in the absence of which, there can never be a truly "global" social policy.

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