

# Return to a Wider Vision of Social Development: Social Policy in Reframing a New Agenda

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## Introduction

As we mark the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development and the social development commitments entered into at the historic summit, we are confronted with two contradictory realities. On the one hand, we have perhaps never been further away from realising the commitments made in Copenhagen. On the other hand, we are at a historical moment for returning to a wider vision of social development.

## Copenhagen+15: an assessment

We can address the lessons of the global experience on social development since Copenhagen at two levels: one existential, and the other ideational.

### *Existential Challenges:*

The 1995 Copenhagen summit was held under conditions of widespread entitlement failure and growing inequality, even after a decade of neoliberal orthodox economic reforms. While the Copenhagen commitments represent the triumph of hope over adversity it, nonetheless, reflected the ideational constraints of a vision of human existence that was in retreat. Such concessions are reflected in the plea for the inclusion of 'social development goals' in Structural Adjustment Programmes (Copenhagen Declaration # 6).

The Copenhagen +5 Copenhagen +10 reflections also painted grim pictures of the state of the social world (cf. Deacon *et al* 2005, Mkandawire and Rodriguez 2000). While poverty was declining in East Asia at significant rate, in Sub-Saharan Africa, an additional 182 million people sank into severe poverty between 1981 and 2005, 80 million new poor were created.

In 2010, however, we are confronted with two additional challenges. The current economic crisis, triggered by the sub-prime mortgage, is generating another round of social and economic crisis and acute vulnerability in the world's poorest regions. The recent estimate by the World Bank (2009) suggests that an additional 46 million people will fall into severe poverty; an additional 53 million will become poor. It is also estimated that between 200 000 and 400 000 children will die annually if the crisis continues; that is anything between 1.4 million to 2.8 million new cases of child mortality between 2009 and 2015 (World Bank 2009: 11).

The fragility of the average growth rate of 6% that sub-Saharan Africa experienced in 2006 and 2007 (largely due to commodity boom) is being exposed by the decline in demand for the primary commodities on which much of the growth was based (Cf. Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Even before the financial crisis, aggregate current account balance of low and middle income countries as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product was in the negative throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. Figure 2). The improvement in 2002 and 2003 has been reversed, and will worsen; which raises the question of the financing of public expenditure, broadly.

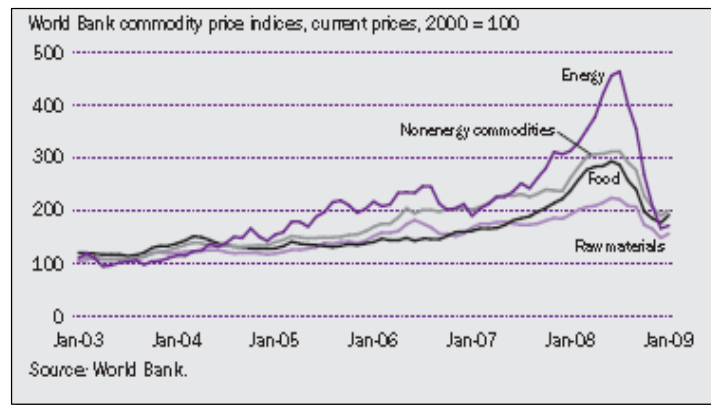


Figure 1: Commodity prices movement (2003-2009)

For many developing countries the challenge is also at an institutional level, and we see these more acutely in Sub-Saharan Africa. Successive cycle of neo-liberal reforms have left many countries in a state of acute institutional crisis and undermined the little capacity for endogenous policy learning that many of these countries built in the period between 1960 and 1980.

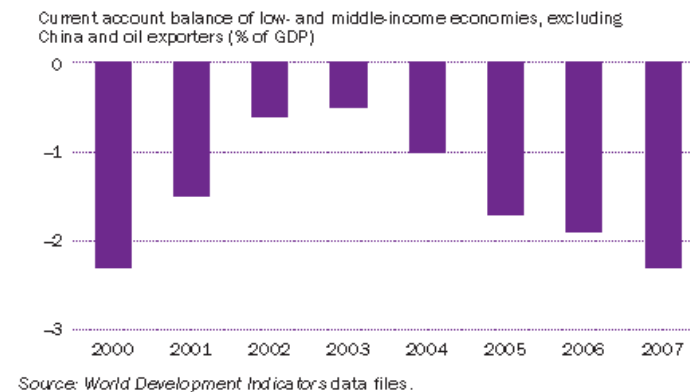


Figure 2: Current Account Balances (Low and Middle Income Countries)

For many of our societies, the consequence of obsessive anti-statism was to fundamentally damage the nation-building project. The institutions and policy instruments for building social cohesion were severely undermined in the process of 'reform'. Often, for the poorest countries there are no substitutes for the collective, public provisioning of these services. In the sub-Saharan African context people did not simply fall through the cracks; they died (Adesina 2007).

Ten years of severe retrenchment of public education has produced not just a lost decade of books in libraries and chalks in classrooms; it subverted the culture of scholarship and destroyed (in several cases) the conveyor belt of intergenerational transmission of knowledge, essential to scholarship, when those able to do so emigrated. Reversing the trend is turning out to be much more complicated than simply finding new money to finance education. I will return to this diminution of vision in a moment.

More troubling is the impact of climate change and the paradox of such impact: the most vulnerable regions and peoples are those who have contributed the least to greenhouse gas

<sup>1</sup> Source for Figure 1-3: *World Development Indicators 2009*, World Bank, 2009.

emission or the culture of conspicuous consumption that has put our planet at great risk. For most communities, the threat is existential.

***Ideational Challenges: narrowing of vision, lowering of gaze***

Equally important in assessing the social development landscape of the last fifteen years is the crises of ideas and imagination; a narrowing of vision and a lowering of gaze. The focus on “absolute poverty” and the broad appeal to accommodate social development objectives in the design of structural adjustment programmes in the Copenhagen commitments, for instance, reflected a retreat from the wider vision of social policy and development outcomes, broadly, not just those of social development.

Even so, the Copenhagen Commitments #2 and #9 aimed for higher ideals: those of full employment and universal access to education. By contrast the Millennium Development Goals five years later marked a particularly low ebb in the diminution of vision and the triumph of ‘realism’. It has been argued that the MDGs built on the Copenhagen commitments by giving specific timelines for achieving the goals (Deacon *et al* 2005). Perhaps. But it did so at the cost of a fundamental retreat from the higher ideals of the two commitments or even the agenda set out in the *Millennium Declaration* of September 2000. Not only did the idea of full employment not feature, the objective of universal access to education was reduced to universal basic education as an objective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

Detached from the wider set of policy instruments that produced major advancements in access to education, we have ended up with the goal of universal primary education being ‘financed’ by over-crowding (Adesina 2007). In most cases, policy interventions became stranded at the level of ‘helping’ the most vulnerable. It might not be as bad as the late 1970s and the 1980s when the poorest were deployed as ideological weapons against the poor and the ‘precarious non-poor’ but it is a severe diminution of vision nonetheless. As Deacon *et al* (2005:4) reminded us “services for the poor also tend to become poor services.” The lesson of history, Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme (1998) reminded us is this: the more we focus on the “poor” the least likely we are to succeed in *reducing* poverty. The most successful cases of poverty reduction were concerned with enhancing social equality not poverty, *per se*.

Equally important is the retreat, among many scholars in the field, from the wider vision and the multi-tasking of social policy. In its place emerged the mono-cropping of Social Policy. Social policy was reduced to protecting against destitution. In an apparent attempt to delineate what separates social policy experts from the “neoliberal” economists, we have retreated from addressing the production functions of social policy; much the same way that progressive economists think that to speak of “macroeconomic stability” is to betray a higher ideal. A problematic distinction has been drawn between the ‘normative’ ends of social policy and its ‘instrumental’ uses, as if these are mutually exclusive objectives. The terms of the distinction (‘instrumental’ versus ‘normative’) put false labels on something that is much more complex.

In much of the international development circle, the poor have become a demographic category: largely unproductive, unable to help themselves, and in need of handouts. Yet as we see in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Figure 3), the proportion of the working poor within the total employment remains quite high. While in this instance it reflects precarious labour market conditions, we are nonetheless reminded that those impoverished by socio-economic policies (by acts of commission or omission) and social relations are not without agency or productive capacity.



Figure 3: Share of the working poor in total employment

Whatever the shifts in the language of international policy discourse—from HIPC to PRSP and ‘pro-poor’ policies—the normative framework (even at an ontological level) remains wedded to the economic paradigm that defined much of our collective existence in the last three decades. In this seemingly gloomy landscape, the works of the International Labour Organisation, on ‘decent work’ reminds us of what is possible when we lift our gaze to a higher horizon.

Finally, I will argue that we have not had a more auspicious opportunity, in the last three decades, than now to fundamentally rethink the social development agenda. The recent economic crisis—not simply a ‘financial crisis’—finally drew the line under the neoliberal profligacy of the last thirty years.

A starting point, I will argue, is the return to the wider vision of society and lifting of our collective gaze to a longer term horizon. Here, I will refer to the works done under the auspices of the UNRISD (Geneva), and the work we are doing at Rhodes University (South Africa) on *Transformative Social Policy*. We use this as the basis for rethinking and widening our vision of social development and the social policy instruments for achieving these.

## Wider Vision; Raised Gaze: social policy and social development

A starting point is the recognition that: successful efforts at building socially inclusive developmental agenda have always depended on **visionary agenda setting**; second, that social policy has multiple functions.

Successful economic and social development efforts derive from visionary agenda setting that embrace a wide vision of society and a gaze planted on a long-term horizon. While it is true that successful cases depend on the use of ‘evidence’ (scholarly studies, impact assessment, etc.), this is often in the service of the visionary agenda, not the reverse. Indeed, for many of these cases, what the “evidence” suggested was that they should not and could not do what we now hail them for doing.

In the most successful cases of social development, economic growth and the transformation of gender relations, the visionary agenda derived from the norms of equality and social

solidarity. They embrace the idea, in Richard Titmus phrase, of a 'Good Society' or "Better Life for All" in language of African anti-colonial movements and leaders. The shared vision combines the agency of those previously disadvantaged with the buy-in of other segments of society. The initial coalescing of social forces is sustained by the norms of Encompassing Social Policy (Korpi & Palme 1998), which rest on universal access, supplemented by targeted instruments to protect the vulnerable, *inter alia*. The universal coverage not only enhanced social and political commitment; it made reforming the system and recovery from crisis easier and faster (Kangas and Palme 2005).

It is useful to reiterate that social policy instruments are not about 'public goods', at least not in the Samuelson (1954: 387) sense of the "collective consumption of goods": "each individual's consumption of such goods leads to no subtraction from any other individual's consumption of that good." Rather they are *Social and Economic Commons* because they involve the idea of a collective, common good (not 'goods'). Equity, rather than "non-excludability" or "non-rivalry," is the determinate condition for access, and access may be structured on the basis of gravity of need rather than presentation of demand.

In all these cases, expansive social policy agenda were not things that countries did at high levels of 'development' but at a much earlier stage. For many of these cases, expansive social spending was fundamental to stimulating and sustaining economic development and the transformation of social relations, and social funds were sources of development financing: electrification, industrialization, etc.

Related to this is the need to move beyond the mono-cropping of Social Policy. In this regard, we refer to the multiple functions of social policy (UNRISD 2006, Mkandawire 2007, Adesina 2007), which include:

- Production;
- Protection;
- Reproduction (social and demographic);
- Redistribution;
- Social Cohesion and Nation-Building.

The links between production, protection, reproduction, and social cohesion functions undergirded the *Bismarckian model* as it did the *Beveridgean model*. The 1942 Beveridge Report (1942) sets out as the second of its three principles, the idea that "social insurance should be treated as one part only of a comprehensive policy of social progress." Beveridge's second report in 1945 was concerned with "full employment." These are two sides of the same coin in vanquishing what Lord Beveridge referred to as the "five giants on the road to reconstruction: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness" (Beveridge 1942). The Bismarckian model was more directly driven by the imperatives of industrialisation, nation-building, and weaning the working class off revolutionary ideas. Similarly, the 'Nationalist model' (Adesina 2009) was driven by the assumption that independence was the initial step on the long road to post-colonial reconstruction, with the objectives of rapid economic development and defeating "the trinity of ignorance, poverty and disease" (Mkandawire 2006). The Nordic model addressed similarly multiple functions.

Combining production with dignity ('decent work') was possible because the labour market functioning was rooted in same normative framework that bound economic and social policies: equality and solidarity. The outcomes were low levels of inequality, low poverty rates,

and better social development outcomes in health, education and international competitiveness; much better outcomes than the alternative social policy model that is rooted market transactional logic. As Mkandawire (2007) reminded us, *transformative social policy* enhances labour market efficiency and innovation.

Transformative social policy relates not only to the transformation of an economy or protection from destitution but to the *transformation* of social relations, as well. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of gender relations and equality. Social policy regimes grounded in solidarity and norms of equality are much better in producing social cohesion and inclusivity.

Finally, social policy for a wider vision of social and economic development agenda setting is not simply something that “the state does.” It is more useful to see it as multifaceted, with diverse delivery mechanisms—within and outside the state. State-Community partnership in setting social policy agenda, delivery, monitoring, and fine-tuning is not only about fiscal sustainability in low-income countries but ensuring community buy-in and ownership. In building inclusive societies they also facilitate what Amartya Sen (2009) refers to as “Public Reasoning.”

What these call for a *fundamental* rethink in how we defined and shape the social development agenda. This has several implications. I end by highlighting two such implications:

1. First is an acknowledgment of the importance of policy space. Successful social policy regimes are grounded in local histories and available socio-cultural resources. That applies to Finland as it does Rwanda. It requires coherent national level efforts in building institutional capacity for policy learning. It requires local policymakers to take seriously the wider vision of inter-sectoral synergies that makes for success in any one area. To illustrate the a very simple case: you cannot have effective and universal primary education system without good teachers and authors of text-books, the infrastructure for book production, etc. These require viable higher education and research and development infrastructures.<sup>2</sup> You cannot pursue the objective of universal basic education at the expense of the higher levels of education or a coherent national system of innovation.
2. Successful financing mechanisms are first local. They derive from an acknowledgment of the agency of local peoples. These are not simply about the state’s capacity to tax but the collective capacity for resource pooling and build social funds. International development assistance works when it complements rather than supplant local efforts and initiatives (national or sub-regional).

## Final Salutation

Again, I thank the UN Division of Social Policy and Development and the organising Bureau for the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission for the invitation to present this keynote address. I thank you for your attention and patience.

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<sup>2</sup> My appreciation to Thandika Mkandawire for this insight.

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