

How effective are social protection policies and practices in promoting development?

Over the past three decades, social protection, through necessity, has increased in importance within the agenda for development on a global scale. Its proliferation on the basis of need, however, should not be taken as an indicator of its success (Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs, 2016, p.5). Social protection has the potential to enhance the freedoms that people have access to, and therefore be socially transformative rather than purely targeted towards economic development (Koehler, 2011, p.97). To understand recent steps towards this, it is useful to note historic conceptualisations of social protection based in needs, risk and rights. The rights based approach will provide a platform from which to evaluate successes in long-term transformation, and specifically evaluate conditional cash transfers (CCTs). Done correctly, CCTs can promote development by contributing to an increase in human capital, ensuring agency and choice for recipients and reducing the intergenerational transfer of poverty. There are, however, barriers to their success such as, but not limited to, a lack of state infrastructure, the danger of homogeneity of implementation and the turbulence of the neo-liberal environment. Considering the above, ultimately it will be argued that social protection, if it continues on its current trajectory and can overcome potential pitfalls through careful programmatic design, should be entrenched in the agenda as a key tool for the promotion of development.

Social protection has its roots in times of crisis. The realisation of the need for strong social protection mechanisms first arose in the 1980s due to the stark effects of the debt and economic crises in South America, Africa and Southeast Asia (Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs, 2016, p.7). Subsequent but similar patterns of crisis and resulting innovation happened in the 90s and in the new millennium with the growth of neoliberalism and globalisation (Barrientos et al., 2008, p.6). This suggests that, historically, social protection has been a post-facto response to the failure of existing state mechanisms to adequately support the most vulnerable following a shock or economic turbulence. Significant efforts have been made in the last four decades to ensure social protection is not simply viewed as a 'safety net', but rather a 'springboard' (World, 2001, p.9) in that it can promote development through wealth transfer, assure access to health and education, and that it can be a mechanism for sustainable development through investment in human capital. The term 'social protection' has come to mean a broad variety of mechanisms. Barrientos & Hulme (2008, p.70, emphasis added) define it as:

"All initiatives that transfer income or assets to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objectives of extending the benefits of economic growth and reducing the economic or social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups."

The authors clearly reflect the broad scope of the topic in their definition, yet importantly infer that social protection is inextricably linked with the right to economic and social prosperity. In order to evaluate whether social protection can promote development, we must first understand this aim. Sen (2001, p.3) explains development as the removal of multiple "unfreedoms" spanning the political, social and economic spheres in order to improve human capability and freedom. We can therefore see that with this definition, social protection can be viewed as a direct effort towards promoting development.

Due to the tumultuous background of social protection, diverging perspectives have risen and fallen in favour within the international community over the years. Barrientos & Hulme (2009, p.441, citing Munro, 2008) emphasise that there are varying doctrines of social protection due to competing schools of thought from the economic protection against risk, a moral and practical emphasis on fulfilment of basic needs, or based in human rights. Munro asserts that the rights based approach (RBA) takes the ideas

of basic needs and social risk management further, stating that social protection is not a charitable aim or a moral imperative; it should be a judicable claim (2008, p.31). The RBA gains weight since social protection is enshrined within Article 22 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN 217, 1948) and Articles 9, 11 and 12 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR, 1976). This means that nations are legally obligated to ensure “essential level of economic, social and cultural rights, including an adequate standard of living, equally and without discrimination” (Sepúlveda and Nyst, 2012, p.19).

One social protection programme that has gained international acclaim is the *Programa Bolsa Família* (PBF) in Brazil, a cash transfer programme targeted at the most vulnerable and poor and set against an eventual policy goal of universal basic income (Feitosa de Britto, 2008, p.188). The PBF was passed into national law in January 2004, which means that all have an enforceable claim to it against the state should they meet the necessary requirements (Lindert et al., 2007, p.14). As a programmatic tool, cash transfers have been shown to benefit recipients since it enhances their freedom of choice compared to transfers in kind, and also respects their dignity through protecting agency (Creti, Jaspars and Oxfam, 2006, p.2). The PBF is a CCT, adding conditionality to transfers, stipulating a minimum school attendance rate of 85% and regular health care targets. In 2014, PBF had reached one quarter of Brazil’s population (50 million people or 14 million families) (Saad-Filho, 2015, p.1234) and according to Soares et al. (2010, p.182), prior to this in 2010 was shown to have had a clear positive impact on school attendance. For the children of recipients, absenteeism was 3.6% lower compared to non-recipients and dropout rates were 1.6 % less in comparison. These positive investments in human capital and its sheer reach can directly reduce the potential for intergenerational poverty transmission (Saad-Filho, 2015, p.1235). However, whilst this may be true in theory, due to the amount of the actual transfer (an average of R\$ 150 per household, representing an average of 40% of household income according to Saad-Filho (2015, p.1234)), PBF is unlikely to support families to reduce their level of poverty on its own. It can, however, increase their ability to participate in the labour market more freely, or invest in livelihoods (Slater, McCord and Mathers, 2014, p.1).

Whilst it is clear that the PBF has seen some success, its model is specific to Brazil’s context. Ghosh (2011, p.68) argues that CCTs, whilst desirable as means of redistribution of wealth, should always be contextualised and fit for purpose. This supports the notion that whilst programmes can be revered as successful for development, they cannot be carbon copied. Barrientos et al. (2008, p.316) caution that we should not strive to “homogenize social protection around the developing world but to promote and support learning from fully contextualised and carefully monitored experiments.” The danger in homogenised implementation is noted by the Special Rapporteur for the OHCHR, Sepúlveda (2012, p.45), stating that the PBF was used a template for Timor Leste’s *Bolsa da Mae*, but in doing so has neglected to acknowledge the differences in their target population, the level of access to social services and the country’s rurality which would make the programme conditions impossible to comply to.

In the same vein, Ghosh (2011, p.68, emphasis in original) argues that “cash transfers are desirable and can play a positive redistributive role if they are *additional* to other - and essential - public expenditure on essential goods and services that are required by all citizens, including the poor”. This means that social protection mechanisms cannot exist in a vacuum, and they should be supported by investment in state infrastructure. This is supported by evidence that in PBF, although attendance increased and dropout rates decreased, unfortunately underachievement increased (Soares, 2010, p.186). This suggests that an increase in human capacity can only happen with continued monitoring and investment in relevant institutions. Another criticism of conditionality focussing on education is put forward by Handa and Davis

(2006, p.518), who argue that it will be years before the results are fully known, and in the meantime is little to no focus on adults or capital which could mean better sustainability for the family unit as a whole.

Furthermore, all social protection programs can be susceptible to shocks themselves, and are often in the firing line at times of economic turbulence. Since late 2015, Brazil has been in a deep recession and the gains in poverty reduction that have been seen since 2004 (which were down from 22.54% to 7.4% in 2014) have begun to reverse, and PBF is in danger of downscaling due to lack of state resource (Skoufias, 2017). Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs (2016, p.40) state that any type of shock, natural, economic or political, will undermine the expansion and improvement of social protection mechanisms, or will continue the trend of innovation around these times – but either are possible. Whilst social protection programs are a response to the market exposure neoliberalism brings, we can also go further to say that they are its mercy.

Due to the magnitude of the approaches and programmatic variances of social protection, it is not possible to explore the vastness of the topic through engagement with specific programs, however the case of PBF gives a small insight into some of the issues currently in debate. Arguably, a programme can advance towards the promotion of development if it is protected in national law and does not simply focus on short-term goals. CCTs are one way in which socially positive behaviour changes can be encouraged, leading to an increase in human capital and subsequent decrease in intergenerational poverty transmission, however these must be contextually conceived rather than emulated. Additionally, such programmes should take into account existing infrastructure to ensure any conditions possible to achieve, or that structural reforms are planned concurrently to ensure this. Finally, legal recourse for recipients is required and thus a rights based approach is preferable to ensure rights holders can assert their right to development.

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