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Dynamics of social protection in fragile contexts: Nepal and Myanmar

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Abstract

This article explores some of the shared dimensions of fragility experienced by Myanmar and Nepal to illuminate the challenging contexts in which social protection policies and programmes have taken shape. Both countries have adopted a universalist, rights-based vision in their approaches to social protection, with social pensions and child benefits at the forefront of social protection programming. At the same time, both countries are employing incremental strategies to overcome political, social, and administrative obstacles, while demonstrating that fiscal space is available. The *politics* of social protection policy making are obvious, and consistent engagement by progressive social policy advocates in these countries will be necessary to seize opportunities, and to ensure continued investment in building inclusive, effective, and accountable social protection systems.

Keywords

Fragility, incremental social policy, universalist social protection, special provisions, nation building, Myanmar, Nepal

In recent years, social protection has become a privileged area within social policy with a big surge in policy making as well as implementation of social transfer programmes.¹ Looking at specific cases can inform policy in other countries, in terms of conceptualisation and design, implementation, and most importantly regarding outcomes and impact. Nepal and Myanmar stand out as particularly informative which is why this Forum is dedicated to discussing recent social policy developments in these two countries.

Both countries face various intersecting dimensions of fragility. In terms of their geography, difficulties include the topography and vulnerability to natural disasters. Myanmar was devastated by a massive cyclone in 2008, and Nepal was hit by a double earthquake in 2015. Therefore, disaster resilience needs to be factored into social protection design from inception. In both countries, delivering benefits to remote places is a physical challenge due to the terrain, and a lack of even basic reliable infrastructure in remoter regions.

Structurally, both countries are caught in conditions of high levels of income poverty. They belong to the 'least-developed countries' grouping, and rank very low on the Human

Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2016). There are palpable manifestations of social exclusion around gender, caste, and faith in Nepal and around ethnicity and faith in Myanmar. Both countries have a long history and reality of political conflict and divisions. It is only recently that more democratic forms of governance have emerged. Administrative systems remain weak.

This geographical, ecological, social, and political fragility constitutes multi-layered challenges to delivering social protection transfers equitably, efficiently, and transparently. At the same time, and of particular relevance to international normative discourses on social protection, both Nepal and Myanmar are opting for forms of social protection that move in the direction of universal coverage and a notion of social protection as a right.

Social protection politics and programming

In Nepal, social protection transfers were scaled up considerably after the peace agreement of 2007, starting with the fiscal budget of 2009 (Khatiwada and Koehler, 2014). One stated objective was to react to some of the root causes of the 1996–2006 civil conflict by addressing income poverty and social exclusion (Nepal National Planning Commission, 2007). Most of the social protection transfers are identity-based. The Karnali Zone – one of the lowest income areas in the country – was given ‘priority’ attention, because of its persistent food insecurity and related high rates of malnutrition, and possibly because it is where the insurgency began. Social protection interventions in Nepal are financed from the government budget to ensure continuity and control. As such, Nepal’s social protection programmes can also be interpreted as a policy tool for *nation building and political healing*. And indeed, interviews suggest that citizens in remote areas appreciate that the central government is ‘doing something’ for them, even though it has little economic impact on their lives (Garde, Mathers & Dhakal in this Forum).

In Myanmar, too, social protection policy can be interpreted as constituting a nation building effort. The first democratically elected, but military-led, government (2012) adopted a national social protection strategic framework (Government of Myanmar, 2014), which – despite their stark political differences – the successor government has recently begun implementing without significant changes to the strategy document (see Bonnerjee; and Rabi and Koehler in this Forum).²

Several of the schemes adopted in the two countries suggest a *universalist policy* orientation. Both countries began with a universal social pension, Nepal in 1995 and Myanmar in 2016. In both countries, the transfers are unconditional, reflecting the underlying notion of social protection as a right rather than as a privilege to be earned through good behaviour.

At the same time, there are built-in *special provisions* to tackle geographic and social exclusion. As an interim step towards a universalist approach, policy makers in both countries have chosen geographical selection for new schemes, using child malnutrition

rates or the human poverty index as the criterion, focusing on those who live in the worst-off districts. The programmes in Nepal also apply some aspects of categorical targeting by identity as an effort to address historic and contemporary disadvantage. Examples from Nepal include a lower eligibility age for Dalits³ in the social pension scheme, there is a particular allowance for the 'endangered ethnic groups',⁴ and the child grant programme, while providing universal coverage for children under-5 in the Karnali Zone, has, until recently, been reserved for Dalit families in the other districts. This approach has proved to be less divisive than poverty targeting, but does not come without problems (Mathers in this Forum). In Myanmar, the pilot scheme for a universal maternal and child grant began in the second-poorest state of the country, Chin state (Bonnerjee in this Forum).⁵

In terms of *design innovations*, Nepal's and Myanmar's approaches are of interest to social protection discussions as well. A significant innovation to be gleaned from the Nepal experience is the role of social protection in disaster response. In the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes, Nepal built on the existing social protection system to scale up vertically (a temporary increase in benefit levels) as well as horizontally (an extension of benefits to new beneficiary groups) in the affected districts, rather than creating a new parallel system (see Garde, Mathers & Dhakal in this Forum).

In Myanmar, the government's social protection strategic framework uses the '1000 days model', to cover pregnant women from the beginning of pregnancy through to the child's second birthday, so as to counter low birth weight and malnutrition from the start of a child's life (see Bonnerjee; and Rabi and Koehler; both in this Forum). The strategy also plans a social worker programme, with the aim for social work professionals to accompany the roll out of cash transfer schemes. This direct nexus between income-based support and social work does not commonly feature in other countries/regions.

From a *monitoring point* of view, the Nepal experience is invaluable because the programme operated from base lines on nutrition and birth registration, and undertook a series of evaluations after introducing the programmes. For example, studies of the child grant were critical in identifying weaknesses and opportunities in design and implementation, and getting wider support for reforms introduced in 2016 (see Garde, Mathers and Dhakal in this Forum). This continuous improvement approach could be relevant to countries that have hesitated to introduce social protection transfers because they feel the need for preliminary pilot schemes to avoid design and delivery mistakes; the Nepal experience suggests, instead, that continuous adaptations and corrections – as well as scaling up – can be undertaken quite rapidly once a programme is up and running. A similar intention can be inferred from the cash transfer pilot in Chin State, Myanmar.

Fiscal space is an issue confronting social protection across all countries. Interestingly, in both countries, technical calculations as well as actual budgeting and expenditure experiences demonstrate that – modest – systems of social protection can be implemented for less than 1% of GDP (Mathers; Rabi and Koehler; both in this Forum).

Design and policy predicaments

Politically, however, there is a risk that principles of universalism and social justice may be instrumentalised. In Nepal, some policy makers have opined that social protection provision risks creating dependency but that ‘doing something is better than nothing’. To date, the small size of the benefits has not substantially changed income distribution, let alone upset the balance of power. The universalist approach then risks sliding off into rhetoric and not unleashing any transformative processes. The impact of the social protection programmes may be a contribution to nation building, but power relations within that nation state remain unchallenged.

At the local level, the delivery of cash grants is a key issue. In Myanmar, in a (post-) autocratic situation, the Ministry of Home Affairs is the only ministry with local-level offices in the form of the Government Administrative Department (GAD). Therefore, it may be chosen as the institution to disburse the cash transfers, conferring new power on an institution that was responsible for political control and persecution of dissidents in the past. This could have a destructive impact if the Ministry of Social Welfare cannot rapidly set up offices at the township level. In Nepal, registration, payment, and accountability for the schemes are also concentrated in the hands of local officials, giving them more power. While there are moves towards disbursing more payments through banks, this will take years, and itself comes with risks of further exclusion due to poor outreach and immature banking systems.

Regarding the categorical targeting approach, there are indications that this kind of positive discrimination may – inadvertently – deepen divisions and social exclusion. In Nepal, some communities are not happy with the additional benefits accorded to their Dalit co-citizens. In the case of the ‘endangered groups’ allowance, there is some concern over a potential dependency trap due to the high-level of benefits per household⁶ in locations where employment prospects are limited. A similar concern arises in Myanmar, with regard to the maternal and child grant currently piloted in Chin State, where the region’s remoteness hinders any kind of remunerative employment, and the cash transfer may become the sole source of income.

Such political capture and inadvertent policy misadaptations need to be made visible and discussed by progressive social policy experts, practitioners, and beneficiaries.

Outlook

This Forum explores some of the shared dimensions of fragility experienced by Myanmar and Nepal to illuminate the challenging contexts in which social protection policies and programmes have taken shape. Both countries have adopted a universalist, rights-based vision in their approaches to social protection, with social pensions and child benefits at the forefront of social protection programming. At the same time, both countries are employing incremental strategies to overcome political, social, and administrative obstacles, while

demonstrating that fiscal space is available. The *politics* of social protection policy making are obvious, and consistent engagement by progressive social policy advocates in these countries will be necessary to seize opportunities, and to ensure continued investment in building inclusive, effective, and accountable social protection systems.

The experiences in Nepal and Myanmar are presented here to demonstrate that social protection is feasible and meaningful even in difficult circumstances. The programmes discussed in this Forum point to a willingness on the part of governments to address poverty, social exclusion, and the economic and social displacement resulting from natural disasters, using social protection transfers as a tool. Even where the commitment is initially half-hearted or primarily rhetorical, the adoption of social protection policy statements and the roll-out of schemes are processes to capitalise on. However meagre the programmes are at their inception, with a long view, they can be built upon as political opportunity opens up, and as fiscal space increases with economic growth.

There is thus a case for ‘incremental social policy’ (Garde, Mathers & Dhakal in this Forum), and investing in the population’s human capital through meaningful policies with demonstrable impacts. Based on evidence, policy makers can choose approaches that are likely to have better outcomes, and adapt them over time. The trick is to avoid perfectionism at the pilot stage, as pilots are rarely scalable, and their dynamics may differ from national-level processes and capacity.

The universal approach, regardless of the politics that led to its introduction, has made it easier to argue for expansion and enhancement of social protection schemes. And, ideally, as citizens become increasingly aware of their rights and entitlements, over time universal social protection coverage can become a reality.

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Notes

1. At the global level, the adoption of the ILO Recommendation 202 on Social Protection Floors can be understood as a reaction to the heightened attention to social protection since the early 2000s (Deacon, 2013). As a global policy ‘directive’, it gave an advocacy push. At the country level, the Recommendation had an effect of accelerating social assistance initiatives in many countries, and of potentially framing social protection in the social protection floors narrative. In terms of international advisory support, several UN agencies stand out; they include the ILO (see GESS platform http://www.ilo.org/secsoc/information-resources/publications-and-tools/Toolsandmodels/WCMS_SECSOC_17232/lang-en/index.htm), and UNICEF. Coming from the Convention of the Rights of the Child, UNICEF globally has been a proponent of child benefits designed as universal, since all children have the same rights, and are entitled to the same types of support. The joint ILO/WB initiative

also supports a rights-based approach

(<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/07/27/wbg-and-ilo-co-launch-a-joint-plan-of-action-on-universal-social-protection>).

2. However, for political reasons, the government has chosen to implement the mother and child benefit with donor funding.

3. In the Hindu caste system, the Dalits – ‘oppressed’, or ‘broken people’ in their own designation – are excluded from access to economic and social resources, frequently subjected to violence, and culturally excluded.

4. Communities who speak a language that may soon disappear and with populations of less than 10,000.

5. The poorest state, in per capita GDP terms, is Rakhine. However, policy makers and advisors did not want to roll out the scheme here due to the faith-based conflict against the Rohingya population.

6. The ‘endangered groups’ allowance is paid on a per person basis and has recently been raised to Rs 2,000 per month. A family of five would receive Rs 10,000 per month, roughly US\$100 or 125% of the total minimum consumption basket for the entire household as defined by the national poverty line.

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