



Social Protection Policies in South Asia

Recommendations from the Researchers

Based on the research papers presented and deliberations made at the
UNESCO-ICSSR Research Meeting
held on 18-19 March 2010

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Introduction

1. The two day research meeting on Social Protection Policies in South Asia, facilitated by UNESCO-ICSSR, and supported by CSRD-JNU and SPA research network, brought together over 30 scholars from across South Asia during 18-19th March 2010 in New Delhi.
2. The purpose of the meeting was to enhance understanding and country perspectives on linkages between social protection and human development at the conceptual level; how current social protection programmes work in order to identify gaps in terms of design, implementation, coverage and quality, institutional capacities, governance, fiscal possibilities? And what coherent social policy alternatives could be subsequently recommended nationally or regionally?
3. The key questions addressed at the meeting included: a) What are the social policies that work under what conditions and what lessons can such experiences offer to other countries? b) How can such policies be further strengthened to enhance the transformative potential? c) And how can a regional perspective be built on issues of social development?
4. The research meeting was structured around a) an overview of social protection policies in the countries of South Asia (SAARC member countries), b) country-papers on social protection policies and initiatives, c) opportunities for concrete horizontal projects and bilateral cooperation, d) identification of best practices on social protection policies, and e) recommendations to policy makers, which will hopefully feed into the Ministerial Policy Statement of UNESCO Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development scheduled to take place in South Asia in 2011. Scholars from the region have discussed over 15 research papers on social protection in different countries of the region and have identified a set of recommendations for the consideration of the Ministers' Conference.
5. It is to be highlighted that the context for the research meeting is the global economic crisis and the policy response from countries of the region, as well as from multi-lateral bodies including agencies of UN family, who advocated the Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPFI) and the global jobs pact for rejuvenating the economies and employment.
6. Scholars discussed the overall development context of the region, shared perspectives and experiences of implementation of social protection policies in the region, and identified barriers for extension of social protection to the poor and vulnerable in the region.
7. While it is acknowledged that there are structural inequalities in the societies of the countries of the region, there is a growing vulnerability and deprivation owing to the globalization and concomitant economic policies followed by the countries across the region. In spite of relatively high economic growth over the

past decade, countries of South Asia account for largest concentration of economic and social deprivations.

8. Scholars from the region have drawn attention to the need to pursue an employment led development path to ensure fair and inclusive growth processes in the region. It is also acknowledged that social protection will remain a mere 'band-aid' unless the countries of the region pursue policies that are redistributive in content.

Frameworks for promotion of social protection

9. There is a need for broader frameworks and operational initiatives on social protection across the countries in order to fulfill the international covenants and commitments that the countries have made so far on social development. By invoking rights based frameworks (Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)) for social protection, it is hoped that a long term and common framework and principles for the promotion of social protection would be available for the countries of the region. A shared understanding of operational principles for social protection is also necessary to fulfill shared perspectives and needs of the communities of the region.

Social protection, citizenship and universalism

10. In the context of rapid mobility of people within the countries, social protection and rights of migrants assume importance. As countries of the region are rapidly moving towards rapid urbanization, mechanisms for universal social protection are *sine qua non* for promoting social harmony and reducing conflict over resource access, control and use, in both rural and urban areas.
11. While citizenship-based social protection is a starting point, there is a need to address issues of social protection for the more vulnerable populations who cross borders in search of livelihood and better living. Social protection mechanisms should incorporate migrant's rights and entitlements, and due legal processes and procedures for incorporating cross-border migrants into the local economies. Even within countries, creating quality delivery of and access to basic services for all populations, in both rural and urban areas, is important in this context for the promotion of citizenship and social harmony.

Policy Coordination and cooperation

12. Macroeconomic policies of the countries of the region need to include employment as a key objective. Employment led growth strategies need to be adopted to enhance livelihood opportunities and decent work for all. Employment needs to be seen as a stepping stone for social protection. Fiscal policies also need to be synchronized with this objective.

13. Governments must play an important role within their respective countries for the promotion and coordination of social protection measures. As well, coordination and involvement of the private sector, the civil society and the local communities becomes necessary. More policy coordination among ministries implementing social development programmes would also become important.

Addressing Resource based vulnerabilities

14. There is consensus that increasing resources at the household level as well as at the community level is an important pre-requisite for livelihood security and reduction in vulnerability. In this respect, there is a need to develop mechanisms for sharing common resources across country borders, and within countries. Risks associated with natural resources (as it is the case for water) are cross-border issues which require developing common mechanisms of mitigation. Similarly, the use of resources by the private sector needs to be considered with proper mechanisms of equity and inclusiveness for sharing among all stakeholders.
15. In light of the financial crisis and the global economic slow down (though it has not severely affected South Asia), response mechanisms articulated by the UN family have gained importance in the region. While it is acknowledged that social protection mechanisms are not institutionalized, there is a need to identify schemes that can mitigate the vulnerabilities and risks induced by the crisis.
16. Countries may engage in debates and discussions on how to best apply the Chief Executives Board (CEB) initiatives at the country-specific level, examples being social insurance, food security, social assistance, unconditional and conditional cash transfers, social safety nets, complimentary credit programs, etc.

Social Protection Floor

17. Given the vast population in the region subjected to vulnerabilities and marginalization induced by the various structural inequalities and endowment deprivations, a 'social protection floor' is envisaged that could accommodate and enhance basic capabilities. This would include education, health care, accessibility of and affordability to food and shelter; and empowerment and protection of the poor and vulnerable.

Financing social protection

18. It is recommended that the levels of funding for social protection must be enhanced to match the levels appropriate to the needs. Financing of social protection should come from tax revenues and external aid, and support for social protection should be seen as only complimentary to the efforts of the government.

19. Appropriate fiscal and taxation policies should be set in place for resource mobilization, and spending on social protection should be commensurate with legislative entitlements to social protection (for example right to employment, right to health, and right to education)
20. Additional funding for social protection for the most vulnerable, especially in the context of rising food and fuel inflation and the financial crisis, need to be supported by the national governments, donors and international financial institutions.

Institutions and Governance

21. A recurring constraint *vis a vis* social protection in most countries of the region is the limited capacities for effective delivery of social services. While several programmes are implemented, their effectiveness is limited due to the poor delivery mechanisms and capacities of the institutions. Weak governance structures are also contributing to leakages and inefficiencies.
22. Increased investments to build, strengthen and capacitate institutions for the delivery of social protection is essential. Governance reforms and democratisation at the grass roots level is also important for effective delivery and realisation of outcomes of social protection spending. This would warrant mechanisms for promotion of participatory governance.
23. Inter-departmental coordination and convergence at the grass roots level is also important for enhancing effectiveness for the delivery of services at the field level. Mechanisms for such coordination need to be institutionalised.
24. Capacity-building through the pursuit of initiatives which reduce risks (longer-term and short term) and provide coping capacities for the populations is imperative.
25. Building capacities to monitor and analyze implementation of social protection schemes and policy frameworks is also essential for the countries of the region.

Learning and Sharing

26. Countries of the region are implementing various social protection programmes. It is important to learn from these programmes and to adapt them to the country-specific contexts.
27. Documenting best practices and cross-country studies is important for sharing and learning. Cross-country and exposure visits are also important instruments to learn what works where, and how they can be adapted to other countries.
28. Governments, leading social science institutions, and multi-lateral bodies need to develop mechanism for policy dialogue, sharing of experiences, and research-

policy interface at the regional level. SAARC may devise mechanisms for such a process.

29. Think tanks on social protection in the region need to be encouraged so that knowledge generation, sharing and learning can take place across countries of the region. Donor support for such initiatives is important.

Tracking and Forewarning

30. There is a need to strengthen macroeconomic and financial surveillance, and for the implementation of an effective economic early warning system.
31. Urgently establish a UN system-wide vulnerability monitoring and alert mechanism to track developments, and report on the political, economic, social and environmental dimensions of the crisis.

Other recommendations

The following additional points have come out during the discussions for the consideration in formulating policy responses to vulnerabilities and risks.

32. Strengthening of food security mechanisms at the national and regional level.
33. Strengthening of regional trade initiatives that would enable countries to expand trade and generate resources for social protection.
34. Social protection and urban poverty: new schemes needed to protect an increasing urban poor population, mostly neglected. Link-up with rural – urban migration.
35. Green economy initiatives through investments for environmental sustainability and climate-friendly development are essential for social protection. Technology and innovation becomes essential in this endeavor.
36. Promotion of decent work agenda.
37. Humanitarian support and assistance during emergencies and natural disasters.