38. Effects of social protection on social inclusion, social cohesion and nation building

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38.1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, social protection was introduced and situated in a broad social contract or welfare state framework (Deacon 2007; Kabeer 2005; Mkandawire 2005), and in that sense had an explicit or implicit objective of contributing to social cohesion and nation building (Loewe et al. 2019). Conversely, the social protection schemes which have blossomed in low-income countries over the past 20 years tended to concentrate on addressing acute income poverty and related vulnerabilities, creating resilience and/or incentivizing behaviours regarding nutrition, education or health services or women’s empowerment (Molyneux et al. 2016; Leisering 2019). They were conceptualized as directed to individuals, or families/households, and were frequently rolled out as projects, rather than as continuous, publicly financed governmental programming and budgeting. A more systemic and political approach, looking at the role of social protection for social inclusion, social cohesion and nation building, as the responsibility of welfare states, was eclipsed from the agenda.

Recently, however, there has been a shift in the framing, returning to a recognition of social protection as a component of social cohesion, social contracts and of state or nation building (Babajanian 2013; ILO 2014; Molyneux et al. 2016; Evans et al. 2018; Loewe et al. 2019; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2020). This may be due to the recognition, in global discourse, of intensifying forms of widening inequalities, persistent chronic poverty, working poverty and social exclusion (UNDP 2020; OXFAM 2019) and the corrosive effects of climate change on vulnerable populations (UN DESA 2020). The proliferation of civil strife across the global South and of right-wing populist trends in the global North are additional factors. As a result, there is increasing attention to a broader role for social protection in domestic policy and development cooperation, including in fragile contexts (ILO 2014; Molyneux et al. 2016; Loewe and Jawad 2018; Valli et al. 2019).

At the multilateral level, the United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda refers to social protection in a disjointed fashion spread across the goals. References appear in economic targets (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1.3 and 5.4), in commitments to universal health coverage (SDG 3.8) and decent work (SDG 8.5) and also in the equity target (10.4) (ILO 2017). Even if the UN 2030 agenda does not use concepts of a social contract or a welfare state, these SDG references could perhaps be interpreted as an implicit broadening of the remit of social

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1 As one example of the range of intended outcomes of social protection programmes, a systematic review of the literature (Bastagli et al. 2016) on outcomes of cash transfers looks at the impact on monetary poverty, education, health and nutrition, savings, investment and production, employment and empowerment. Nation building does not feature as that was not a conventional objective of cash transfers.
38.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMINGS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION, TRUST AND SOCIAL COHESION AND THEIR ROLE FOR NATION BUILDING

Situating social protection in a political context and with a primarily political remit requires an iterative reflection: arguably, social inclusion can be seen as a prerequisite to horizontal and vertical trust, and to social cohesion, which in turn influences political stability and nation building. This piece addresses the question whether social protection, understood as tax-financed social assistance as well as contributory social insurance, should and can play that role.

Regarding social inclusion, there is a range of understandings and interpretations. Social inclusion or its inverse, social exclusion, and horizontal inequalities build on individual and group identities in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, caste, religious or cultural practices, sexual orientation, geographical location and others (Kabeer 2010; Silver 1994; Stewart 2008; UNDP 2020; World Bank 2013). Individual or group identities which may be self-ascribed or externally constructed are instrumentalized to exclude from employment, economic opportunities and assets; from access to social services and infrastructure; and/or from political participation. Exclusion translates into income poverty and fettered productivity, hunger and malnutrition, poor health, low education levels, indecent housing and a lack of mobility. It results in heavy burdens of care work, and the absence of political voice and representation. The impact is most intense for women and girls (Chopra and Campos Ugalde 2018; Kabeer 2010). The undermining of nation states, and at the most extreme, armed conflicts, are frequently fuelled by processes of social exclusion, even where the immediate trigger comes from other factors (Stewart 2008). Hence, social inclusion can be understood as a corollary for societal trust and a precondition for social cohesion.

Social cohesion is a multi-dimensional concept (Babajanian 2013, 13; UNDP 2020). It connotes strong social relationships, shared values, feelings of identity and the sense of belonging to a certain community, at times measured by the level of trust among society (Berger-Schmitt 2000; UNDP 2020). It has been characterized as ‘the glue that holds society together’ (Loewe et al. 2019, 3). ‘Social cohesion refers to both, the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, an inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good’ (Loewe et al. 2019, 7). Babajanian understands relations of trust and reciprocity as binding individuals in a society. He identifies two levels: a relational aspect concerning the nature and quality of interpersonal and social relations, and a distributional aspect referring to the patterns and the extent of the distribution of resources and opportunities in a society (Babajanian 2013).

It is necessary to deepen this notion: both relational and distributional aspects incorporate a dimension of power and hierarchy (Spicker 2020) which plays out in social protection design and delivery. Avenues for participation therefore need to be factored into the discussion. Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2020) present this as the right to active citizenship which they see as a precondition for effective social protection.
Social cohesion can be buttressed by policies – in this case social protection programmes and measures – which improve social inclusion and trust, an outcome which could in turn enhance nation building. ‘The literature on state-building assumes that social protection can help establish a state-society contract and serve as an effective instrument for strengthening state legitimacy’ (Babajanian 2013, 5). Molyneux et al. (2016) explore three dimensions of potential outcomes of social protection schemes. In terms of subjective transformations at the micro – or personal – level, they can result in feelings of dignity and respect; at the community level, they can enhance social inclusion; and at the macro level, they can have a ‘transformative effect on state–citizen relations and the social contract’ (2016, 1093). Analysing a particular modality of social protection transfers, the subsidies observed in countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Loewe et al. (2019) and Vidican and Loewe (2019) ascribe three functions to the state: protection – including the enforcement of rights, provision of basic social services and social protection and participation in political decision making (Vidican and Loewe 2019). These can create reciprocity between the government and citizens (Loewe et al. 2019) and equilibria in state–society relations (Vidican and Loewe 2019), suggesting that particular forms of social protection and its reform can serve to enhance the social contract.

The question in this piece presents on three levels: at the normative level – should social protection be expected to play a role in creating or deepening social cohesion? At the policy level – which role might social protection play? And at the empirical level – what evidence has been collated regarding its relevance or appropriateness for forging inclusion, trust and social cohesion?

Regarding the normative level, social protection is enshrined as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights, and more recently in the UN 2030 Agenda. Where social protection policy is deducted from a social contract, the state has an obligation towards its citizens to deliver equitable access to social services or to facilitate access to employment and incomes (Sepúlveda Carmona 2017; Kabeer 2005; Mkandawire 2005). Historically, many countries have commitments to a welfare state or social contract in their constitutions. Examples include India (Drèze and Sen 2013; Roy 2014), South Africa (Seekings 2002), Taylor Committee (2003) or Costa Rica (Román Vega 2012). Such declarations constitute the normative basis and obligation for state action regarding social protection.

At the policy level, the arguments for using social protection programmes to create social cohesion and foster a nation state need to interface with the three dimensions of social exclusion, or with the building of horizontal and vertical trust. Social protection programmes would need to succeed in increasing access to employment and incomes, or at least stabilize the income predictability and raise their financial resources above the poverty level, of the disadvantaged, ideally for the entire group, or at least the majority of its members. A social protection programme designed with an inclusion lens may enable individuals in a socially excluded group to access employment opportunities that are market-based, or the social protection programmes may take the form of an employment scheme – a public works scheme or subsidized employment in existing workplaces; the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a well-known example (Chopra 2014).

If social protection enables inclusive access to social services and infrastructure, then that too can contribute to social cohesion. Dedicated affirmative action components, such as a categorical social protection measure that addresses age, gender, ethnicity, caste or location, can help create cohesion. In fact, quite a number of social assistance programmes have integrated
a focus on women’s empowerment and gender equality, or on children or senior citizens (Bastagli et al. 2016).

Alternatively, social protection policies and programmes can have the effect of building vertical trust of citizens in their government if they enable better access to social services or social infrastructure across the board, albeit without privileging one location or one socio-economic group. To enhance vertical trust and social cohesion, the governmental effort needs to promote a welfare state that strives to be inclusive, transparent and equitable.

Even if the quality of subjectively perceived or de facto social inclusion is limited, due to vagaries of programme delivery or funding, citizens – or even eligible residents – may acknowledge and appreciate the government, resulting in improved vertical trust. However, these effects can also go in the opposite direction. If, for example, a particular programme is de facto mainly taken up by better-informed or better-placed elites and members of the middle class, it might exacerbate existing inequalities. This can be unintentional (Koehler and Namala 2020), or be a systemic problem, resulting from clientelist or corrupt service provision (Molyneux et al. 2016). Both horizontal and vertical trust would then risk being undermined.

In order to ensure that these programmes have an effect on social cohesion, it is also key that the government communicates its role in the programme (Evans et al. 2018) – be it via its direct funding from public revenue, or be it as a conveyer of other resources it has mobilized. This suggests that communication as well as behaviour change are crucial for a social protection programme to contribute to vertical and horizontal trust.

Some anecdotal examples follow, mainly focused on intentions of enhancing social cohesion.

Given that social cohesion is usually not a primary objective of social protection programmes, only a few of the available studies have empirically analysed the impact of such programmes on social cohesion. In the following, we refer to those programmes whose stated initial objectives or intention included promoting some elements of social cohesion. Even for these examples, however, conclusions are not based on hard evidence, as is the case for outcomes such as poverty, nutrition or health status, examined in other chapters of this handbook.

One popular format of social protection programming to which one could ascribe a nation-building effect includes transfers in the form of categorical targeting addressing age-related social exclusion, namely child benefits and social pensions. They constitute a right to income support not attached to any preceding contribution, thus conveying a sense of rights and citizenship, or more generally a sense of belonging. They can serve as a politically unifying programme – if every senior, every child in the country receives governmental support. In countries with a progressive taxation system, the child grant can moreover have a redistributive effect – a constituent element of well-functioning welfare states, enabling trust in the government.

Nepal is one example of social pensions and child benefits deployed in transitions to democracy and post-conflict settings (Babajanian 2013; Druca 2016). After a period of dictatorship in the 1960s, a new government introduced a universal social pension in 1995, one of the first non-contributory old-age pensions in Asia. Uprety (2010) noted the government’s expectation

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2 If average family size is larger among lower-income groups, families in this group would be receiving a larger share of the total grant moneys than other groups. In some schemes, the eligibility for a child benefit is however capped, for example for two children under five years (Nepal). Conversely, social pensions may play out as regressive, given the higher longevity of privileged social groups.
that a universal pension would support intergenerational *social cohesion*. Samson (2012, 229) cited government officials favouring a ‘universal approach … maximizing the likelihood of reaching all eligible older people without creating perverse incentives, stigma, social disruption, political tensions, or other adverse effects that undermine the program’s benefits’. After a 10-year armed conflict, a new government in Nepal acknowledged social exclusion as a root cause of the conflict (Government of Nepal 2009; Government of Nepal National Planning Commission 2007) and in 2009 introduced a set of social protection measures in response (Khatiwada and Koehler 2004) with categorical and universal social transfers. The enhanced social pension reportedly contributed to a subjective feeling of belonging to the state. Citizens in remote areas opined that the central government was ‘doing something’ for them, even though it had little economic impact on their lives (Garde et al. 2017). In a highly disadvantaged area of the country, the child benefit increased birth registration from 40 to over 90 per cent within a short period of time. Arguably, a birth certificate is essential to social cohesion, as it enables not merely access to social protection payments, but to health services and timely school enrolment, and can facilitate citizenship (Rabi et al. 2015).

In post-conflict Rwanda, the government established programmes explicitly in support of survivors of the genocide of 1994, covering a wide social policy gamut of housing, education and health services, as well as social protection measures in the forms of social assistance and income-generating activities (Ruberangeyo et al. 2011).

Social pensions feature in post-apartheid South Africa. With a long and discriminatory pre-history, the Older Persons Grant was revised in the 1990s to enhance equity and as an anti-poverty programme, by the incoming government of the African National Congress. In the South African model, citizens, permanent residents as well as refugees with legal status are eligible for the pension (ILO 2016a). The Older Persons Grant is income-tested (ILO 2016a). Its effects have been to decrease income poverty levels, and evaluations suggest that it promotes gender equality, as a result of harmonizing the eligibility ages for women and men. The benefit amount for different ethnicity groups is adjusted to address disparities (ILO 2016a).

In Namibia the old-age pension, called Basic Social Grant, is universal (ILO 2016b), and hence more comprehensive than that of South Africa. The stated intention is to overcome the legacies of colonialism and enhance the dignity of older persons who are often affected by acute income poverty (ILO 2016b).

In other contexts, the role of social protection transfers for social cohesion and vertical trust manifests itself whenever governments intend to downgrade or dismantle acquired rights. As an example, protests reacting to pension reform in Chile (Ortiz and Cummins 2019) and France (Hujó 2014) illustrate how a right to old-age security at established conditions functions as a ‘glue’, and social cohesion can quickly disintegrate when this glue dissolves.

Intent is important. However, programme scope, delivery mechanisms and the reliability and stability of funding are what determine the outcomes of social protection programmes, and would therefore be more indicative of effects on social cohesion and trust.

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3 On the limitations of its intended unifying effect, burdened by difficult conditionalities, see Babajanian 2013, 31, 40. Also see UNDP 2020, 86 on perceived inequalities in South Africa and their impact on social cohesion.
38.3 THE ROLE OF PROGRAMME SCOPE

The UN makes the point that social protection systems need to be combined with public services and sustainable infrastructure if they are ‘to mitigate risks and create resilience in the face of economic, social, environmental and demographic changes’ (UN 2019, 6). The public services and infrastructure highlighted include education, including school buildings with safe sanitation facilities for girls, electricity, water and access to new forms of information and communications (UN 2019). At the same time, actual and affordable access to social protection transfers depends on physical infrastructure – roads, electricity or access to bank accounts (Chopra and Campos Ugalde 2018). All of this is especially relevant to address gender-based exclusion (Chopra and Campos Ugalde 2018; Razavi 2011). In difficult or fragile settings, social protection has the double function of addressing the economic, political or social effects of social exclusion and supporting trust and social cohesion, or more ambitiously still, safeguarding or (re)creating a nation state. In this line of argument, monetary transfers need to be embedded in a broader set of social policy measures.

At the delivery level, in order to achieve social inclusion, social protection needs to be accompanied by effective awareness raising and information campaigns. This is especially the case where disadvantaged groups are challenged also by literacy and numeracy gaps and have poor access to media or public information. In many economically impoverished settings malnutrition persists, and campaigns, coaching and/or training on feeding practices and nutrition knowledge could contribute to consolidating the health effects of income transfers. Where income poverty is a result of a lack of decent work, skills-upgrading programmes are advisable. Such measures could be incorporated into the social protection programme.

In addition, behaviour change messaging to the population at large is required to overcome stereotyping and exclusion (Koehler and Namala 2020; Molyneux et al. 2016). In fragile settings, policies and public campaigns need to ensure transparency about intention, size and effect of each social protection measure, to avoid animosities among competing groups.

In this vein, several programmes combine financial transfers with other areas of social policy. Evidence shows positive outcomes on the immediate intended objective of the social protection outcome – food security and consumption, resilience against economic shocks or improved productivity, school enrolment or health-seeking behaviours – when transfers are flanked by measures to facilitate access to social services (Roelen et al. 2019).

Examples include the Ghana Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty (2008–present) programme, where bi-monthly cash transfers are accompanied by free enrolment into the National Health Insurance Scheme; Chile Solidario (2002–12), where the monthly cash transfer is combined with psycho-social support (Puente programme) and linkages to social services, with compulsory conditions agreed by households and social workers to fit their respective situations; or the Ethiopia Productive Safety Net Programme (2005–present), which links its public works programmes and unconditional food or cash transfers to behaviour change communication for improved nutrition as well as case management to set up linkages between services for beneficiaries (Roelen et al. 2019).

In fragile settings, some evidence suggests that social protection programmes can create vertical trust and cohesion when low-income and marginalized citizens/residents and incoming migrants or refugees are eligible for the same types of programmes (Loewe and Jawad 2018; Valli et al. 2019).
38.4 THE ROLE OF DELIVERY AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

Social protection programmes, especially social assistance programmes, are difficult to operationalize in societies riven for example by deep-seated social exclusion, with predominantly informal economies or in remote areas. The challenges are even greater in situations of upheaval – be they a humanitarian disaster, an armed conflict or a population surge notably in low-income areas as a result of internal displacement or cross-border flight. Horizontal inequalities (Stewart 2008) and social exclusion processes based on identities easily intensify. Horizontal and vertical trust and social cohesion can quickly come under pressure. Therefore, if a social protection programme is to underpin and strengthen trust, social cohesion and nation building, it needs to be carefully designed, screened and monitored.

Detrimental effects include information barriers, physical barriers or procedural barriers which hamper or bias accessibility. The transaction costs in time and expenditure connected to retrieving a social protection benefit may lock out those recipients with the most urgent need for support. Other obstacles include cultural and language barriers, or technology-related barriers, such as accessing a paypoint (Sepúlveda Carmona 2017). Gender-related social norms and intersecting inequalities can severely jeopardize access to a scheme, place additional work burdens on women and girls and put them at risk (Chopra and Campos Ugalde 2018; Razavi 2011; Sepúlveda Carmona 2017).

As Roelen (2019, 705) has pointed out, cash transfer schemes can be stigmatizing which ‘undermines social assistance’s potential in breaking the poverty–shame cycle and ignores its role in the (re)production of shame and stigma’. In the case of Nepal, for example, the Planning Commission criticized the lower age threshold applied to the social pension for a particularly disadvantaged area of the country and for persons of the Dalit community, fearing this could lead to social discrimination (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission 2012). Babajanian (2013) reports similar issues from Sierra Leone and Liberia, and Evans et al. (2018) for Tanzania.

A key issue, frequently overlooked, is that of power relations. Fear of reprisals is often mentioned (Molyneux et al. 2016). The institution or individual deciding on eligibility or delivering the social protection grant is in a position of power vis-à-vis the recipients. In Nepal, registration, payment and accountability for the schemes are concentrated in the hands of local officials, giving them power over beneficiaries (Koehler and Mathers 2017). In a politically different context in Myanmar, the only ministry that has village-level offices and officials is the Ministry of Home Affairs. There is a concern that this ministry, which has been responsible for arbitrary arrests and the oppression of dissidents, is tasked with disbursing cash transfers, so that the social transfer payment enhances the image of the Ministry and its officials, or even worse, citizens are again subjected to power hierarchy and oppression (Koehler and Mathers 2017). In China, the minimum income grant is disbursed by local committees and the entire community decides whether the intended beneficiary is eligible, leading to considerable pressure to conform socially and politically and to accept the decisions made (Audin 2020). Such procedures easily undermine both horizontal and vertical trust, especially since social assistance funding in China overall is insufficient to cover all entitlements, leading to horizontal competition over scarce funds.

Because of these multiple barriers at the delivery level, social protection transfers, instead of creating trust and social cohesion, may actually reinforce the power hierarchy. The social contract between a powerful and dominant bureaucracy at the central or local government level and the citizens – or residents – legally entitled to a benefit may play out to the latter group’s detriment, and undermine trust rather than building it. Avenues for redress – facilities
for placing claims – can be an instrument to address this, but the issue of genuine political empowerment is far larger than that.

Conversely, a social protection programme or policy can serve to enhance vertical trust. Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2020) argue that if active citizenship is at the centre of social protection programmes and effective social accountability spaces are guaranteed, social protection becomes progressive. Transparency and accountability mechanisms can address some of these obstacles (Molyneux et al. 2016).

The criteria for inclusion in a programme need to be clear, reasonable and transparent. In a conditional cash transfer scheme piloted in Tanzania, for example, the government convened a series of village-level meetings, transmitting information on the programme, its conditions, eligibility criteria and benefit levels. A study by Evans et al. (2018) found that this process served to increase vertical trust in the government. In Brazil, as another example, the Bolsa Familia programme was connected to existing mechanisms introduced earlier to facilitate accountability to citizens. Thus, Bolsa Familia beneficiaries were invited to participate in the country’s municipal-level councils (conselhos). However, they did not believe that these councils were ‘truly available to them for participation, monitoring, and accountability’. Instead, it was the media and civil society, rather than the beneficiaries themselves, that assured the promised transparency (Molyneux et al. 2016, 1093, citing Borges Sugiyama 2016). Time constraints and physical access can hinder participation, as can a lack of subjective confidence (Pavanello et al. 2016).

### 38.5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy recommendations concluded from the above observations and fragmented evidence suggest that social protection needs to address the objectives of social inclusion, trust, social cohesion and nation building in an interconnected, linked-up fashion. At the normative level, citizens and residents have a right to social protection, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights, the Global Compact on Migration and other human rights instruments, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Many constitutions, or party programmes, both commit to a rights-based approach and aspire to social cohesion. Such commitments need to be referenced as the overarching rationale, but remain hollow if there are no arenas for active citizenship enabling the rights to be claimed, no effective mechanisms of redress or funding is lacking.

At the policy-making and implementation level, to be effective, social protection transfers need to be part of a broader social policy mix, ideally in the framework of a welfare state. This would suggest including access to employment and income programmes, and equitable access to social services and social infrastructure. At this level, too, voice and active participation are key. Policies also need to be cognizant of stigmatizing side effects. In fragile contexts in particular, there needs to be full transparency of the sources of and criteria for a social protection entitlement. And funding needs to be predictable, consistent and sufficient.

If the social protection transfers are delivered with deliberate attention to social inclusion and building trust, and ideally with a notion of a rights-based social contract, they can contribute to social cohesion, trust and nation building.
REFERENCES


