

## **The Social Commons: Social Protection in the Age of Sharing,** **by Dr. Francine Mestrum**

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In preparation for the 2015 MDG deadline, several international organizations are now proposing a 'social protection' program[1]. This sounds very interesting and it could be the beginning of policies that break with the Washington Consensus and tackle not only poverty, but also inequality and the labor market.

The question is, however, what does this 'social protection' mean and will these new proposals really go beyond poverty reduction? We should not forget how poverty reduction came about and was presented in the past.

In 1990, poverty reduction consisted of providing opportunities, that is, the creation of human capital and increasing the capacity of the poor to take advantage of these opportunities, i.e. making use of acquired human capital. For the World Bank, 'providing opportunities' meant encouraging economic growth that makes use of the labour force of the poor, while 'increasing the capacity of the poor' consists of providing basic social services such as education, health care and family planning. The UNDP saw things the other way round. Human development was making available basic social services in order to empower individuals to increase their human capital for productive, social and political gains within a context of economic growth. In addition to this dual approach, targeted social programmes were required to help those who could not participate in the market. A safety net was needed to protect those who were exposed to shocks and to take care of the victims of the competitive struggle.[2]

Three remarks can be made on this approach. First, it does not require any changes to the policies of the Washington Consensus. Secondly, the World Bank, as well as the UNDP, stress the impossibility and the undesirability of social security/social insurance for poor countries, which is a task for private markets, but certainly not for governments[3]. According to the UNDP, it was a '*diagnostic error to think of poverty in terms of social protection and social expenditure*'[4]. Thirdly, for both institutions, poverty is a multidimensional problem. Although the World Bank has strongly developed its statistical instruments on income and consumption poverty, it has constantly weakened its definitions with ever more subjective approaches. In its second poverty report of 2000[5], poverty has become a matter of vulnerability, the lack of voice and of empowerment. '*The poor rarely speak of income*' is the more than surprising conclusion of a major and very interesting participatory poverty research[6]. Income is a 'stochastic phenomenon'[7] and so it is easily ignored when talking about poverty reduction strategies.

At the level of discourse, things are certainly changing. As we have seen in previous chapters, inequality is now seen as a serious problem – though no solutions are adopted. And social protection has emerged as a new objective while the limits of poverty reduction and MDGs are recognized.

Most importantly, the income dimension has finally been integrated. For many years, the only way to talk about monetary income was ‘micro-credit’ and sometimes ‘remittances’. World summits were organised, and after the success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh – for which Yunus received a Nobel Prize – the formula was exported all over the world. Slowly, slowly criticism began to emerge however and micro-credit was described as a mechanism for the financialisation of everyday life. Instead of promoting solidarity, it destroys the traditional mechanisms that people always had. It is antagonistic to sustainable economic development, since it has no interest in the activities of small and medium enterprises, but only in individual or communal activities. Most micro-credit systems are not self-sustaining and can only survive with significant subsidies and philanthropic donations. Most of all, many people became entangled into problems because of accumulated debt, and in South Asia this has led to many suicides. But it did lead to profits for big business[8].

After almost two decades of ‘structural adjustment’, President Lula of Brazil started with a program of monetary transfers to poor families who promised to send their children to school and to make regular visits to a health centre. These initially very low amounts were a huge success and were followed by a social pension program and a rise in minimum wages. The government also took all measures needed to have schools and health centres in the neighbourhood of poor families and access to school meals and school buses. Mexico soon followed suit and before long the World Bank began to promote the formula[9].

All this is not surprising. For the governments it is a rather cheap solution. The Brazilian ‘Bolsa Familia’ only costs 0,5 per cent of GDP. And it is still a ‘targeted’ and ‘conditional’ programme that makes a selective social policy possible. While poor families are certainly helped, these programmes do not give rights to people and only in a very limited way empower them. The poor remain dependent on the government as ‘clients’ and the programs can have a severe gender bias.

For some governments, an extra reason could be to have user fees introduced for social services. When poor families have an income, they can pay for these services and profits can be made. What one hand - the government - gives, can be taken by another hand – the market.

The new proposals of the international organizations do not necessarily mean that social protection will be a major step forward as can be seen from three characteristics of the new proposals: the objectives of social protection, its scope and its coverage[10].

A first disappointment comes from studying the ‘objectives’ of social protection. For all organizations, the main concern is economic. Even if most of them refer to human rights, this is immediately followed by a long list of what social protection can do: as an automatic stabilizer it enhances growth and productivity, it enables the skills of workers

to adapt in order to overcome constraints in the labor market, it fosters demand and it promotes entrepreneurship.

The scope of the proposed social protection is not expanded on but it seems to be rather limited. Only ILO mentions '*essential health care, including maternity care, basic income security for children, for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability, and for older persons*'[\[11\]](#). It is clear that social protection will always have to emerge from domestic demands and policy processes, but the possibilities are so wide open, that some recommendation would be welcome. If the services are limited to essential health care and primary education, we are still in the logic of poverty reduction and the MDGs.

Coverage is another sensitive issue. While most documents speak of 'universal' social protection, this 'universal' seems to have different meanings. The 'social protection floor' of ILO is '*for the poor*', although a possibility of extension with '*eventually the aim of full coverage*' is mentioned, '*in a gradual way*'. ILO does however link its social protection floor initiative to its Convention on social security, which it sees as the 'vertical' dimension. It also states that there is only a limited possibility to make the right to social security a reality for everyone. As for the World Bank, it clearly remains a targeted program, more aimed at coherently coordinating the different initiatives than really to expand the social programs.

The only institution which is talking of social protection as an exclusive matter of citizenship and rights is the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)[\[12\]](#). For all the others, social protection is a 'social investment', even if human rights are mentioned. This is not encouraging, as 'investments' demand a 'return on investment' and it could be that without such return – on higher education for all, for example, or health care for the elderly – there would be no investment. Of course, it could also lead to a more Keynesian approach of a reciprocal strengthening of the economic and social dimensions, but that is not indicated anywhere in the documents. Social protection seems to be at the service of the economy, markets and growth.

As for the European Union, it also follows the line of 'social investments'. And for the poor it increasingly promotes 'social innovation' linked to 'social entrepreneurship' and 'social business'. It thus turns an excellent, progressive idea into a neoliberal mechanism of turning the participation of citizens into a profit-making exercise[\[13\]](#).

What the EU documents do not tell us should not be ignored. They do not speak of a redistribution of income or of a 'transformative' agenda as some UN organizations do, meaning that development has to put an end to dual societies and lead to substantial societal change. There are no proposals to change the economic paradigm away from productivism and an exclusively growth-oriented economy, without taking ecological constraints into account. It means this social protection can still be compatible with Washington Consensus policies and will not necessarily arrest the impoverishment processes.

Nevertheless, if they are implemented properly, they can mean a real improvement for millions of people, particularly ILO's Social Protection Floor initiative. And for that reason alone, they should be supported. Furthermore, they open a door to more

extensive policies that could make a change. It all depends on how these plans will be implemented, on the political willingness of governments and on the strength of social movements to put pressure on them. Social protection has an important transformational potential and this is what we should try to use.

### *Transformative social protection*

If neoliberal policies have to come to an end and if people are to be given protection, a coherent and comprehensive system, able to give genuine solutions to the needs of people everywhere will have to be developed. Here, the Western European experience is more than useful. It should be a system based on solidarity and on redistribution. It ought also to include the whole of society, from poor to rich, from local to national to global, as well as migrant workers all over the world and the growing 'precarariat'. Furthermore it should include the people who, for one reason or another, cannot be active in the labor market and of course children and the elderly. It should include productive and reproductive work, individual and collective rights and access to services essential for preserving social life. It should include the rights that protect workers against exploitative working conditions, as well as protection against climate change.

This social protection has to take economic conditions into account and it will have consequences for the way in which the economy is organized and regulated. The threatening climate change will also have to be taken into account and decisions made accordingly on the use of natural resources. Decision-making will be democratic and the principle of universalism respected, even if some targeting, aimed at achieving universalism may be necessary. It will be based on contributive and non-contributive mechanisms, leading to the promotion of progressive tax systems, nationally and internationally.

All this will lead to another kind of State in which class relationships will be present, in which there will be a permanent conflict between them, but in which all classes will have a stake and interests to defend. It will be a State with public interventions in favour of popular demands and in favour of the economy. What is intended, then, is not a class compromise. On the contrary, it will be a State in which different interests are present and fight to defend them. Obviously, this cannot be a State of the 1 % against the 99 %: major inequalities will have to disappear. Nor cannot it be a one dollar-one vote system, but a one man/woman-one vote system.

The social protection system I want to conceptualize is thus not a status quo. It is not a dismantling of social protection, but a new way of organizing and expanding it. It is based on the old Western European model which was introduced into most countries of the world, although never fully realized. It takes into account the new needs as expressed in many popular uprisings of the recent past. It thus can lead to systemic change and prepare the other world that is so badly needed.

The most important change in this new conceptualization will be the re-introduction and strengthening of the collective dimension. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, poor people had no political rights, because they had no possessions. Citizenship was based on ownership. But by building their collective and mutual funds, they constructed a collective ownership and were able to integrate into the political society. It was the worker's version of 'ownership'

which, at that time, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was necessary in order to be recognized as a citizen[14].

Seen from the perspective of social development, welfare states can be seen as a process of *'planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development'*[15].

Looking at the origins of social protection, we see that initially the collective dimension was predominant. This is what neoliberalism has tried to undo and what, unfortunately, is often supported by the focus on human rights. However, there is no reason why that should be so. Human rights necessarily also have a collective dimension. If we accept that individuals are not self-sufficient but are the result of social relationships from which they emerge, there is a possibility to look at how each being is questioned in relation to something in social life.

What all human beings have in common is indeed a common good and it is this what makes us both individuals and social beings. This is social life. Even if individuals can become responsible subjects, they only exist as members of society, which is an end in itself[16].

Neoliberalism threatens this society. It is in fact killing people because atomized individuals cannot survive. The threats against society caused by destroying relationships, communities and bonds, by promoting competitiveness, flexibility and the struggle for life are extremely dangerous. This is precisely what is happening today to the 'precariat' which could indeed become a dangerous class of 'denizens', non-citizens freed from all commitments and all bonds[17]. The welfare of the collectivity does not coincide with the welfare of individuals, and neoliberalism finally kills both.

This is why not only individuals but also society has to be protected, materially and immaterially, first by recognizing the primordial role of social life as a condition for the emergence and survival of individuals. It is not nature that can protect us. We need a collective will to protect us against the dominance of individual interests[18].

Which is also why we need a new and broad concept of social protection that will cover these material and immaterial needs. It will have to encompass, but also go beyond individual rights, stressing collective rights, the things we share, our interdependence and the links with nature of which we are part. It should entail the third generation of human rights, the solidarity rights.

At this point, the Latin American concept of 'buen vivir' can help. 'Buen vivir' is partially built on post-development and refers to an economy of life and for life. Its main priority for all forms of life – including nature – changes the way production and the means of production are conceptualized. According to this logic, nature has its rights because it is so important for life. The 'human rights' linked to 'buen vivir' are mentioned in the new constitution of Ecuador: a right to water, food and food sovereignty, a clean environment, education, health care and so on.[19]

Production and reproduction are major objectives, not profit making. Productive and so-called reproductive work are equivalent. All this work is necessary for the preservation of life. Nature and people are not factors of production but are the objective itself of

production and of the economy. This implies mutual recognition of everyone and cooperative alliances in order to achieve more social, economic, democratic and inter-generational justice. It aims at sharing a present and a future.

A central concept in this new economy is the social and solidarity economy. It is the State that will have to guarantee rights and social services, but the dynamics of the whole system will come from an economy aimed at solidarity instead of profit and which can be partially de-monetized. It means that all men and women, communities and cooperatives can work autonomously and decide on how they go about their affairs. The State can play a supportive role, not placing itself outside the society but being part of it.

It is not easy to achieve these goals and the current conflicts in Ecuador show that it is sometimes very difficult to reconcile divergent objectives. But it is most interesting to see the willingness to try and create a new logic, a new way of viewing the economy and its functions for life. This new discourse also tries to avoid the old dichotomies and makes it possible to escape the socialism vs capitalism contradiction. 'Buen vivir' is not socialism, and it is not capitalism: it situates both concepts within a new logic so that they lose their relevance. In that way, the 'buen vivir' philosophy is both radical and pragmatic.

These, then, should be the objectives of 'social protection':

- To preserve society and social relationships;
- To promote social integration and make relationships among people and with nature as harmonious as possible, knowing conflicts are inherent to progress and full harmony is impossible;
- To give people economic and social security and an adequate standard of living, through income guarantees, individual and collective rights, equal opportunities and sharply reduced inequalities.

### *The social commons*

However, is the conceptualization of 'social protection' still the most adequate one, especially as it is being hollowed out by the new initiatives of international organizations? The question is very important for social movements who want to engage in mobilizing people to demand better protection. Will this conceptual framework be sufficient to convince the current and future generations and to preserve or societies? How do we link this social protection to the need for 'sharing' and 'participation' as it is expressed in numerous mass protests of the past years?

Here again, our reflection on words and things can be relevant. Universalism, organic solidarity and de-commodification will have to remain the basic principles of all social policies that want to respect the three objectives we have mentioned. On that basis, it is peoples and societies who will have to decide what kind of protection, or what kind of sharing they want.

The 'social protection' that is now proposed by international organizations can be introduced without changing anything in finances or economics, although it will mean a permanent constraint on spending.

The social protection I have been proposing in the previous section does require a re-thinking of the economy and of democracy. It does not however really require a re-thinking of our way of thinking. It does not require the fully taking into account of the global village we are living in and the interdependency of all. It does not imply the awareness of solidarity as 'sharing'.

Here, the concept of 'social commons' might help. The term 'social commons' is meant to be analogous with the protection of the so-called ecological 'commons'. Defending 'the commons' means focusing on that which is shared by all human beings. It is the very foundation of collective life of humanity. It also means resisting the current commodification of everything and a breakaway from the dominant logic. The 'social commons' are human-made commons, meant to protect individuals and societies.

We noticed that the concept of 'social protection' has a very low appeal to young people who were raised in a neoliberal world in which individual freedom and competitiveness are presented as being natural. But these same young people do understand the value of solidarity and sharing with others. Changing the concept of 'social protection' to 'social commons' may change the perception and the understanding of an idea that may positively shape their future. It may also open up new analytical insights and lead to a new praxis fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 'social commons' better focuses on the fact that not only individuals need to be protected, but also societies. With its focus on competitiveness, neoliberalism is destroying social relationships, societies and communities. This collective dimension is particularly important when one knows that poverty is never a problem of poor people alone, but is the problem of societies with a skewed income distribution. It thus cannot be eradicated if the whole of society is not involved in solving it. This requires solidarity and active participation of all. Universalism will therefore be a major characteristic of 'social commons'. This is based on the fact that social relationships are not purely contractual but are constitutive of each one's individuality. Indeed, society is necessary for the survival of individuals.

The concept is based on an understanding of all – unequal - interests in society and of our common responsibility and possibility to care for them. The 'social commons' focuses on the collective dimension of the protection that is needed and on the collective endeavour to achieve it. The 'social commons' are thus not 'public goods' but refer to the 'common good' – that what humans share. Their emergence requires a participative approach without neglecting the necessary involvement of the State. It is collective action and the result of this action. It is based on a belief that people can master their present and shape their future within the framework of mutual respect and respect for nature.

The 'social commons' also aims to end the fragmentation of different social, economic and solidarity rights into different bits and pieces defended by different, often competing, social movements. Close cooperation in order to protect the poor, men, women, children, aged or disabled people, formal, informal, migrant and precarious workers, with assistance, social security, public services, labor rights and environmental rights. Too many grey zones have been created in the recent past, blurring the lines between

different categories of citizens. These old and new problems cannot be solved without a comprehensive approach, cooperation and solidarity.

It is also a transformative project by which we mean that its achievement will require changes in other sectors of society that cannot be delinked from it. In the first place, this is true for the economy, which will have to be re-arranged so as to satisfy all needs, focusing on the use value of goods and on non-exploitative labour. It is also true for democracy, which will have to make room for a broader participation of all members of society in many different sectors. The boundaries of the 'social commons' are open. They start with stopping the impoverishment processes and can lead to production, distribution and decision-making.

In the same vein as the concept of 'buen vivir', the 'social commons' wants to defend individual and collective life, as well as the life of nature. It is the right of societies to organise themselves and decide on the way they want to live. It is meant to give people and societies social and economic security, to satisfy their material and immaterial needs. It is a comprehensive approach aiming to offer bread and roses.

### *Conclusion*

Words do not make things, but words can help to shape our thinking and our acting. It can influence the way we are perceiving things and react to them, positively or negatively.

While the basic principles of 'social protection' remain valid, its rigid application linked to a labor movement that remains as necessary as ever, as well as to a delegitimizing campaign of neoliberalism, has taken away most of its attractiveness for your global urbans reaching middle class status.

Social protection is always based on a social compromise. It is thus important to use the words that speak to current and future generations and that have a concrete meaning for them. And it is even more important to take into account the concrete demands for social rights and public services, as well as for environmental protection and the need for 'sharing'.

Hence this proposal for 'social commons'. It can be accepted or it can be rejected, one can give other meanings to it. I just hope that in the meantime it can help to change our mindsets and to prepare for a better future for people, for societies and for the planet.

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