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Research report

Forum: The United Nations Economic and Social Council

Issue: Enhancing universal social protection systems to guarantee access to vital social services for vulnerable populations

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Introduction

In September of 2015, the United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals focus on reducing matters such as poverty, hunger, and inequality all around the globe. Universal social protection systems are crucial when it comes to achieving the ambitious targets the UN has set up for itself and its member states. Social protection systems provide a safety net for times of hardship. This safety net is especially necessary for vulnerable and less fortunate groups. However, the groups for who the systems are most crucial are often times the ones having trouble accessing it. Multiple barriers are in place that make it difficult for certain parts of the population to receive the aid they need.

Social protection systems include a variety of policies and programs invented to protect and aid individuals and families from social and economic struggles. Examples of such measures are healthcare, unemployment insurance, pensions and other types of financial aid. As the world is changing at a pace we have never encountered before in history, and the protection of vulnerable groups has never been more crucial or urgent. The importance of universal social protection systems has never been more apparent than right now.

Universal social protection systems aim to provide every citizen with vital social services. These services should be provided despite anyone's socio-economic status. Such services are essential for ensuring a certain standard of life to be carried out through all layers of society. Equal access to social services fights social exclusion, discrimination and poverty. Social services like education, housing and food security have been stated to be universal human rights by the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)** which was signed by 193 UN member states. These member states should strive to achieve an equal standard of living for all of their inhabitants. Social protective systems that ensure more access to vital social services are a crucial part of protecting the UDHR, achieving the SDG and creating a more equal global community.

Definitions of key terms

Universal Coverage

A system of assuring and providing healthcare services to all citizens of a state/country. This system can be set up in various ways, like mandatory health care insurance for example.

Social Safety Net

Social safety nets can be defined as policies and programs that help individuals and families manage risk and volatility, protect them from poverty and inequality, and help them access economic opportunity.

Income Security

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Income security is the assurance and confirmation of an income not just right now, but also in the future. Things like unemployment benefits are examples of income security.

Poverty Alleviation

Also called poverty reduction or poverty relief, poverty alleviation is a set of policies and measures to lift people out of poverty. These programs can be both economic and humanitarian.

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society. It is focused on minimizing polarisation and social division by factors such as one's identity or socio-economic status.

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General overview

“Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable”

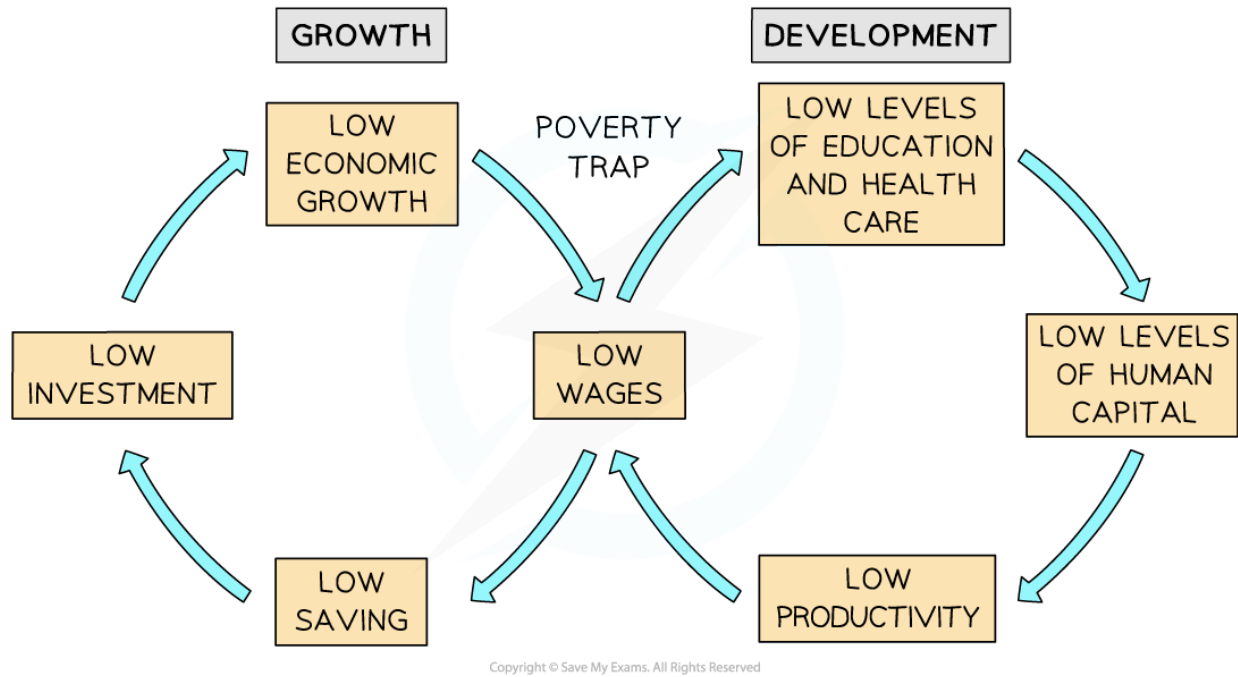
- target 1.3 of the SDG's

Enhancing universal social protection systems to guarantee access to vital social services for vulnerable populations is crucial. Vulnerable populations like migrants and refugees, the lower educated and less prosperous groups often lack the resources to access basic human rights like education, healthcare, and housing. These social protection systems are crucial to ensure equality in an ever-polarized world. Without government interference and support systematic exclusion can lead to generational subordination and increase inequalities and risks of hunger, economic instability, illness, and other scenarios that have consequences on both individual and a collective level.

One of the main consequences of poor social protective systems is poverty and lack of unemployment benefits. The world saw this during the COVID-19 epidemic when millions of people lost their jobs due to the lockdown and global economic crisis. In countries without unemployment benefits, many were left to fend for themselves. This also happens on a smaller scale. In scenarios of sudden illness, natural disaster, conflict or any sudden job loss in general, without a safety net, this poverty will increase and interfere with other aspects of one's life. Lack of access to education, food insecurity and even homelessness are all consequences associated with a lack of unemployment benefits. This poverty can result in generational poverty, making it an everlasting cycle that is near impossible to break out of without governments investing in social protection systems.

Another concept that plays a part when discussing the effects of poverty is the **poverty trap**. This phenomenon describes the endless cycle associated with poverty and healthcare. If you have little money, you can in many cases not afford the proper health care. Once fallen ill, your productivity decreases leading to lower wages and potential job loss. This leads to even less funds to supply yourself with the proper health care and so forth. This trap can also be seen in terms of investments and economic growth as is explained below.

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Social security services can help to stop generational poverty. If education is paid for by the government, being educated and having access to a larger and better-paying sector on the job market is an opportunity for everyone, not those whose families can afford it. If vital services are granted by the government it makes for a more equal society, and it breaks patterns to create opportunity for all.

The list of personal consequences of poorly developed social security systems is endless, but it also has an impact on a nation as a whole. On a national level, better social security services help decrease criminality and create more social cohesion. It will help merge the gap between social classes. It can help increase and stimulate economic growth and literacy. All and all, social protective services improve the quality of life and the quality of a nation. However, as beautiful as this all sounds there are reasons why countries and individuals do not favor these systems. This can be due to many explanations like the high costs for these programs or ideologies like capitalism that believe all will get what they deserve if they work hard enough, or other conservative/right-wing ideologies that believe the government should not interfere with their citizens as much as these systems would. Many also fear it would make a population lazy, or solely reliant on their government, losing the internal motivation to work. Furthermore, more social protective systems lead to more bureaucratisation which means more time, people and documentation is needed in a nation. Overall, social security systems ask a lot of a government,

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which can lead to the decision to not enhance them. It is therefore vital to find sustainable, dialogistically acceptable and affordable ways to enhance social security systems.

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Major parties involved.

Denmark

Denmark has an impressive welfare system that is ranked among the best in the world. The nation provides free healthcare, free schooling for all citizens until the age of sixteen, and well-worked-out unemployment benefits and pensions. The combination of the flexibility of Denmark's labour market and its strong social protection ensures citizens of security and retirement in times of unemployment.

Austria

Austria upholds a mandatory insurance system to ensure security for its citizens. It is required for all people living in and visiting Austria to have health care insurance. Other types of obligatory insurance include unemployment insurance, car insurance and home insurance. All other insurances are optional, but the four main insurances make up most of Austria's social protection systems. It has proven to be an effective system, as Austria's social security is ranked as one of the best in the world.

Mexico

Despite being one of the 20th biggest economies in the world, Mexico has a lower coverage and expenditure than most Latin American countries. Social insurance only reaches 30% of the working population and there are no unemployment regulations in place. Pensions have been privatized, making them more expensive and less accessible to the general population. In January of 2020, a health care insurance program for poorer groups that covered 45% of the population was replaced by a program that has been proven to be less effective.

United States of America

The United States of America has a mixed welfare system. In one of the wealthiest countries in the world, unemployment benefits and free healthcare are nonexistent. Ranking at 28 of 163 in the latest Social Progress Index, the USA is well behind its peers from the Global North. There are social protective systems in place, but they are often times limited to the wealthier part of the population.

United Nations

The United Nations has made it their mission to increase living standards and improve living conditions for all residents of our planet. In 2015 the organization adopted a set of 17 so-called

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Sustainable Development Goals that they wish to achieve by 2023. Target 1.3 of the 17 Goals reads *‘Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable’*

Yemen

Yemen is a nation struck by conflict, hunger and displacement of people. This has led to many of its citizens being very vulnerable and in need of social protection systems. However, the government has not been able to support its population adequately. The lack of government support has led to the unequal distribution of goods, lack of proper education and famines.

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Timeline of Key Events

| | |
|------------|--|
| 01/11/1942 | The Beveridge report was published, promoting the idea of social protection and laying the foundation for the British welfare state. |
| 10/12/1948 | The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was published and adopted by the United Nations |
| 30/07/1965 | President Johnson of the United States adopted the Medicare Act |
| 02/30/1990 | The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted |
| 01/01/2016 | The United Nations adopts the Sustainable Development Goals |
| 02/2020 | The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that tested the strength of countries social protection systems |

*All documents mentioned can be found in the further readings

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

[Beveridge Report \(1942, UK\)](#)

In 1942, William Beveridge wrote the Beveridge Report officially titled Social Insurance and Allied Services. This government report established the welfare state in the United Kingdom and paved the way for the establishment of the National Health Services (NHS) in 1948. The NHS has provided many vulnerable groups with adequate healthcare and still serves 600 million people in the UK to this day.

[Bolsa Familia \(2003, Brazil\)](#)

In 2003, Brazil introduced the Bolsa Familia, a conditional cash transfer system that aims to reduce poverty and break the generational poverty trap. In exchange for money, families must provide their kids with education and regular health check-ups. This program has lifted many families out of poverty and reduced generational consequences within vulnerable groups associated with bad health, low education and low income.

[Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(2005, India\)](#)

In 2005, India adopted the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act. This act enables 100 days of paid work per year for rural families. This act protects vulnerable families outside of the main cities and provides them with a basic income to break the pattern of poverty in the countryside.

[Basic Income Trails \(2017- Present, Globally\)](#)

From 2017 onwards many countries have experimented with a Universal Basic Income (UBI). These trials have taken place in many countries around the globe such as Finland, Kenya and Canada. This UBI should reduce poverty, improve global health and protect vulnerable groups. As limited as these trials have been, they have sparked global discussion about the UBI and its role as an addition to the social protection systems, or as a complete replacement of them.

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Possible solutions

There are many different approaches to social protection systems and how to improve them to ensure a good quality of life for all global citizens. Some solutions proposed in the past have come in the form of conditional money transfers like in Brazil, unemployment benefits, affordable or even free education and accessible health care. The main issue at hand is the inaccessibility of social services, especially for vulnerable groups. The root of the issue can lie in many different places, like natural disasters, conflict or poverty. In order to solve the issue at hand it is crucial for delegations to find sustainable solutions that not only provide resources to vulnerable groups, but that find a way to break the so-called poverty trap and generational inequality.

Further reading

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