

## ***“Social Democrats respond to the Crisis: Building a Social Protection Agenda”***

### ***Transformative social protection as a democratic and human rights response to the crisis***

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When we were beginning to discuss or talk in the Philippines about social protection as a response to the global economic crisis last year, some members of social movement there disliked or had strong reservation to the idea of pursuing social protection. They see social protection as too palliative and almost like giving crumbs to the people. But we in the Institute for Popular Democracy and other networks of the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) from the urban poor, political parties, women, and labor, the elderly, human rights and peasant groups that have later formed a network on transformative social protection see otherwise.

### **How do we look at social protection?**

First, we look at social protection in the framework of human rights. It is an assertion of the fulfillment of people's right to live with dignity - to live an adequate life. In particular, this is fulfilling the rights of people to enjoy the basic elements in living a life with dignity – employment or livelihood, food, and access to essential services particularly health, housing, water, education, and electricity.

Second, we see social social protection as a means to contribute in changing the system or policies in the government towards a more people-centered governance. Through social protection, the majority who are poor and marginalized can realize their collective economic and political strength as they reclaim the basic elements in having a life with dignity. Social protection programs in Europe such as free education until university and healthcare for all were not given on silver platter, the people fought for them. We say, social protection programs have to be fought for and these programs have to be institutionalized.

And lastly, the incremental changes the people have won in pursuing social protection programs, can give them greater confidence, strength, and experience in aiming for higher or bigger changes in the system in government. Even some militant groups are now realizing the strong potential of proactively engaging the government in social protection programs in advancing systems change.

### **What is social protection for us?**

We use the definition of social protection that describes all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized, with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. However, social protection should not stop here, it extends to arenas such as **equity, empowerment and economic, social and cultural rights** as enshrined in the international human rights covenants, laws and other instruments.

We recognize the “transformative” character in social protection, thus we use **transformative social protection** when we talk about social protection. It is concerned not only in providing social insurance to protect people against the risks and consequences of livelihood shocks, social assistance to extremely poor individuals and households, and social services to groups who need special care or would otherwise be denied access to basic services, but more importantly there is concern for equity and social rights. It aims to realize social equity to protect people against social risks such as discrimination or abuse. The re-integration or social inclusion of the poor and marginalised with the rest in the community can be done through social protection programs. (Social protection is a protective measure – it guarantees relief from

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deprivation; a preventive measure – avert deprivation in various ways; promotional – enhance real incomes and capabilities; and transformative – it addresses equity, empowerment, and social and economic rights.)

### **How is your approach different from more conventional approaches?**

Transformative social protection is **beyond the traditional social welfare programmes for the poor**. It challenges the limited ambition of social protection policy in practice from being “social safety nets” and one that aims to provide “economic protection” against livelihood shocks to one that can be affordable, extends to all the population, contribute to poverty reduction goals, and can empower marginalized people. It addresses livelihood threats from vulnerability associated with “being poor” (for which assistance is needed), vulnerability associated with “becoming poor” (for which social insurance is needed), as well as social injustice arising from structural inequality and abuses of power (for which social equity is needed).

It **addresses power imbalances** in the society through policy initiatives that support trade unions and empower workers, or awareness-raising campaigns to transform public attitudes and behaviour, or regulatory framework changes to protect vulnerable or minority groups against discrimination and abuse (landless informal settlers, for instance).

**We see the importance of instituting an approach where the people are at the center of policies of the government and are thus the driving force in making sure accountable, transparent, participatory, and transformative programs for them. People are not just passive recipients, but are central in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the programs.**

One member of the Network for Transformative Social Protection that while most countries have some forms of social protection, the experiences in developing countries reveal that there are gaps in terms of coverage and quality of service delivery. It noted that “most often developing countries lack administrative and fiscal capacities to design and implement social protection policies effectively. Low human development outcomes in developing countries are linked to lack of investments in basic services that can be classified as promotional social protection. Often protective and preventive social protection policies are implemented as an ‘add-on’ to the welfare programmes that meet the political exigencies of the ruling elite. Most social protection programmes face low coverage, massive inclusion and exclusion errors and administrative and bureaucratic lethargy and corruption. It is for these reasons that in many ways, social protection policies have not become ‘developmental’; rather they have been characterised as ‘residual’ in most developing countries. Further, such mechanisms do not address structural causes of inequities and exclusions that exacerbate vulnerabilities. In response to such a situation transformative social protection as a framework is being advocated to alter the discourse on social protection and move it into the realm of rights and entitlements of people over social policies. Thus, ideas, policies and programmes around social protection have moved from a narrow understanding of social security and protection for ‘workers’ (*a la* ILO framework) to social risk management (*a la* the World Bank) to the transformative social protection for all. This trajectory over time has resulted in expanding the imagination of implementation designs and structuring of social protection policies and programmes that attempt to transform social relationships and create conditions for growth with distributive justice.”<sup>2</sup>

Concretely, aside from public investments in jobs creation, mass housing, health services, education, and other social expenditures, governments and other institutions providing social protection have to improve quality of governance and to address the power imbalances in society such as supporting trade unions, empowering the workers, implementing policies or laws that protect the vulnerable and marginalized groups against discrimination and abuse. Changes in the development framework and awareness-raising campaigns that change attitudes towards the vulnerable and marginalized groups have to be instituted.

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<sup>2</sup> Upendranadh Choragudi, Brief on Transformative Social Protection, Social Protection in Asia, November 2009.

## **Why we need SP for socio-economic development?**

As unemployment rises and employment patterns move toward more unstable (“flexible and informal” labor markets) jobs, social protection systems cover fewer people and offer lower levels of protection. **Even in times of growth, economic growth did not automatically improve the lives of the poor or translate in lower poverty incidence.**

**Transformative social protection creates a policy environment that is conducive to pro-poor growth, accountable and responsive governance systems, and a social equity-grounded development approach.** Beyond its wealth redistribution effect, transformative social protection addresses problems of socio-economic-political stability, equity, empowerment, as well as sustainable development.

## **Some elements that constitute relevant and feasible SP items**

**Appropriate design and implementation architecture** are necessary in achieving the transformative potential in the content and delivery of social protection programs. In some cases, this would require **creation of entitlements and mechanisms** to realize such entitlements. For instance, in some countries the right to education or health is not a fundamental right. These rights have to be recognized through **legislation** that will give citizens this justiciable entitlement.

**Building community capacities including implementation capacities, mechanisms for grievance redressal, and people-centered advocacy and strategies** for these in respective countries are needed towards the progressive realization of social protection. The social movements – people’s organizations, NGOs, activists and civil society – and other progressives in the government need to take lead in this endeavour.

**Clear and decisive role of the state** is fundamental to transformative social protection, in order to transform social relations for instance. There has to be dynamic interface between state and the civil society. Research and advocacy network Social Protection in Asia has observed that often marginalised sections of the society appear to be more vulnerable while participating in markets (which also play a role in provision of some of the basic services) as they are inherently iniquitous.

Further, reliance and invocation of international covenants on basic human rights would enable development of advocacy strategies towards transformative social protection. Continuing study such as through learning and sharing of experiences of social protection policies among the developing countries is seen to be helpful for governments as well as civil society in promoting or realizing the right to transformative social protection.

**At the Southeast Asia regional meeting on Transformative Social Protection held in the Philippines in October this year, participants came up with the following initial agenda that have to be urgently addressed<sup>3</sup>:**

**1. Employment guarantee** or job creation measures. This can be through the **adoption of a LABOR INTENSIVE GROWTH STRATEGY** which does not only create employment, but also nurtures and protects worker’s rights as human rights. State and non-state actors must ensure job placement, job training, and assuring fair and decent wages and social protection measures (like pension for those who have been disabled, displaced, or retired) in accordance with the standards of the International Labor Organization. There has to be a strong **COMMITMENT AND DECISIVE ACTION ON WOMEN, RURAL AND FARM WORKERS’ RIGHTS** Women workers’ rights including the rights to guaranteed maternity leave and job return must be ensured. Like

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<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asia Regional Meeting on Transformative Social Protection was held on 12-13 October 2009. Members come from the following sectors/groups: urban poor, labor, women, elderly, migrants, peasant, human rights, research and advocacy institutions.

other informal workers, rural and farm workers should enjoy the same level of rights to employment and social protection.

In the Philippines, the urban poor movement for social protection demands the implementation of Labor-Based Equipment Support (LBES) Program – it engages the local governments to pass an ordinance for the implementation of LBES which aims to tap primarily workers from the locality – while the labor groups are pushing for the expansion and reform of public employment program where people’s organizations will be involved in the implementation of these programs to avoid such program from being used for patronage politics.

## **2. UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO SAFE AND QUALITY ESSENTIAL SERVICES**

**Water for all.** Commodification of water must be stopped and everyone must be ensured of access to clean and potable water to live a decent life. The Philippines’ network demands for at least 40 liters per person per day to be subsidized or provided for free to the poor.

**Humane shelter and housing** that is decent, affordable, quality, environment-friendly, and with access to other essential services such as water and electricity. Poor people’s right to the city must be recognized; towards this goal, draw up a democratic, people-driven development plan that integrates the poor and prioritises in-city housing for low-income settlers. Forced eviction must be immediately stopped. And humane shelter must be ensured in times of disaster.

**Education for all.** Free education must be provided until university. Six percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) must be allocated for education, following the standard set by UNESCO.

**Universal health care.** The same budget allocation of 6 percent of GDP for prevention and cure, for health education, and for reproductive health must be ensured. One way of ensuring budget for health and education can be by reducing the budget on military and defense.

**Access to affordable and quality electricity service.** Electricity should be made available to all. There must be no discrimination in the access to electricity.

**3. UNIVERSAL PENSION FOR OLD AGE,** where old people are provided food and health care and opportunity to be productive citizens who contribute to society’s well being. Initiate programs that ensure social inclusion for old people.

## **STRATEGIES by the Network on Transformative Social Protection**

- There is a need to empower the people by involving them in discussions at their community level and building their capacities.
- Broadening of the network of advocates.
- Working together of the people, the social movements, other progressives, and the government officials.
- Actively engage the government in its policy-making or decision-making, at the local, national, and regional/inter-regional levels.
- Intra and inter-regional sharing of experiences or learning exchanges

At present, the Network on Transformative Social Protection is not only linking up with other social movements, but also with the activist scholars and parliamentarians. We have a number of Asian parliamentarians in our network and we have begun linking up with a number of European parliamentarians and with the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, known as GUE/NGL

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