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Transformative social protection: Do we understand what we are transforming?

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Introduction: A transformation narrative

Poverty reduction has been a key component of international development agendas for over half a decade. During this time, social protection, and its more recent transformative embodiment, has been the primary mechanism envisioned to deliver on poverty reduction goals.

The idea behind *transformative* social protection (TSP) is to address long-term development concerns faced by the poor in developing countries. Advocates of TSP believe that economic interventions can only have limited impact on poverty reduction – and that other underlying, structural reasons can better explain poverty. They argue that, in addition to livelihood risk, the poor also face a range of 'social risks' that are the underlying reasons for their poverty. For instance, social norms like a community's prejudicial attitudes towards widows or institutional factors such as lack of access to the legal system are factors that prevent the benefits of development policy from accruing to the poor. To account for these social risks, the theory calls for a recognition of the "positive relationship between livelihood security and enhanced autonomy or empowerment" (Devereux and Wheeler, 2004). Thus, it prompts a conceptualisation of risk and vulnerability that is not external, but endogenous to the socio-political context in which poverty exists. Through such a model of risk, TSP introduces concerns for equity, empowerment, and social and cultural rights into the poverty reduction discourse.

Devereux and Wheeler (2004) differentiate between 'economic' protection and 'social' protection, and advocate for a 'social transformation' of the socio-political context. This narrative has caught on in the discourse on social protection. The idea of 'transforming' social norms and human cultural behaviours which are believed to inhibit the development process has been endorsed by various international organisations and governments. Social protection agendas call for 'gender-transformative' social protection (FAO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024) and 'transformative adaptation' to climate change (World SP Report, 2024-26[1]). The 'transformation' messaging indicates that reconfiguring existing social relations to be more amenable to equity and inclusion can reasonably achieve these goals alongside development. The theory of change begins in the domain of human behaviours – inducing behavioural change will trigger the reconstruction of social relations, leading to unlocked growth potential which can subsequently protect the poor from other complex problems like climate change.

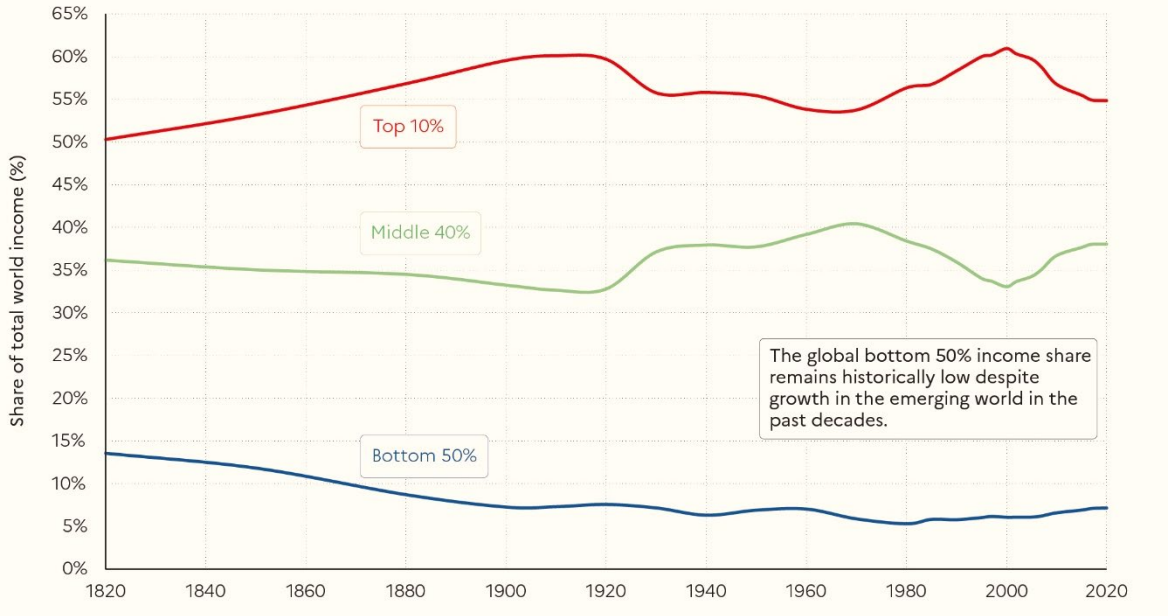
At face value, TSP is a welcome call for inclusive growth and development. However, its impacts on social outcomes can be complex and unclear. Concerningly, an appreciation for such complexity is often amiss from the literature endorsing it.

The resolve behind calls for transformation is appreciated, given the backdrop of sluggish poverty reduction efforts and worsening global inequality. Indeed, the World Bank has described the 2020s as a 'lost decade' for poverty reduction. The total share of population living below $6.85 a day has not changed much since 1990 (World Bank, 2024)[2]. The World Inequality Report (2022) indicates that the share of income going to the bottom 50% of the global income distribution has been largely stagnant since at least the 1920s (See Figure 1). As we progress further into modernity, it appears that a) economic growth is not translating to improvements in the lives of the poorest, and that b) achieving economic equality is becoming more unlikely and unfeasible.

[1] ILO flagship report - WRSP 2024-26

[2] Poverty Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank

Figure 1: Global Income Inequality (1820-2020)



Source: World Inequality Report, 2022

However, most development agendas are stubborn in admitting these observations into their conceptual model of reality. Over the past few decades, no tangible changes have been observed in global models of growth and the deadline for meeting poverty reduction goals has been repeatedly deferred.[3] The rhetoric on growth and development has insisted that inequality will be resolved by any means necessary, without much regard for earlier failures and corresponding course corrections. Since the 'ends' are pre-determined and morally desirous, any 'means' become legitimate – such as the transformation of human behaviours and cultural norms on a large scale, which in other contexts may seem to be an extreme and radical approach.

When one juxtaposes the calls for transformation against the stagnation of poverty reduction and equality outcomes, it appears that the rhetoric is trying to compensate for what reality simply cannot achieve. The calls for the transformation of social norms and relations in service of an egalitarian ideal stem from the human instinct for sympathy and empathy. This is understandable; however, it does not imply that TSP is the only legitimate solution for the complex problems of poverty and inequality.

This paper is structured as follows. Section I traces the origins of 'transformative social protection' and the historical context in which it has emerged over the last few decades. Section II lays out a set of arguments problematizing TSP as a blanket solution to global poverty. Section III will briefly lay out future alternative directions for social protection agendas. Section IV provides concluding thoughts.

[3] Most recently, in January 2024, the World Bank has admitted that the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) of "ending extreme poverty everywhere by 2030 is out of reach". See 2024 Key Development Challenges in Nine Charts .

Section I: Historical background of TSP

The rise and spread of neo-liberalism

Since the late-20th century, the global political economy has been contending with important questions of how nations should best organise themselves, interact with one another, and protect their best interests. In the wake of the second World War and newfound independence of erstwhile colonial states, the democratically governed nation-state in conjunction with a liberal market-economy came to be regarded as the preferred institutions for guaranteeing collective welfare and well-being. Fukuyama (1986)[4] in the popular essay titled 'The End of History?', describes the triumph of capitalist ideology in the Cold War as the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government". The ideology of free market economics in conjunction with liberal society[5] was widely accepted as the natural culmination of mankind's progression along the stages of evolution towards a more modern and egalitarian social organisation.

This idea of a linear theory of progress has been around for centuries and presupposes that social change always occurs in a single direction – from barbaric, violent, and traditional societies towards the modern, liberal and egalitarian. Those further along in this linear path are closer to achieving an ideal state, while societies 'behind' can only catch up by following the same path. In the context of the Cold War, such modernisation theory was the theoretical justification for American globalism (Pieterse, 1991).

Indeed, many countries today are organised as liberal democracies with free market economies, to varying degrees. In the 1960s-1980s, postwar America leveraged its economic resources and soft power to encourage other nations to adopt the same measures that helped it achieve rapid economic growth. For instance, the Marshal Plan provided financial aid to Europe to modernise industry and remove trade barriers. Developing nations which did not yet qualify as liberal market economies were provided financial assistance or loans routed through international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). These policies, collectively known as the Washington Consensus, promoted unfettered markets, private competition, a minimal role for government, and participation in the global economy. It was thought that distributional concerns could be addressed indirectly by growth-related efficiency gains and that the governments of developing countries should deprioritise goals of social inclusion and development (Hujo, 2021). Ironically, these same goals of social inclusion have since been accorded high priority by the industrialised nations in the recent past. Overall, the international community strongly discouraged developing countries from promoting full employment, providing social services publicly, or undertaking economic planning (Hujo, 2021).

Early theory and practice on poverty alleviation and 'development'

Poverty reduction has been a crucial component of global development agendas until recent years, and economic growth has been theorised as the primary pathway to poverty reduction.

[4] The End of History? on JSTOR

[5] Here and thereafter, this paper uses the phrase 'liberal market economy' to refer to economies wherein market forces determine much of economic activity, and the role of the state is limited. The term 'liberalism' is used wherever the author is referring to the social and political emphasis on protecting the rights and freedoms of the individual, equality of all before the law, equality of opportunity.

A preliminary examination of the World Bank's annual World Development Reports (WDR) can help to trace the genealogy of TSP as a culmination of decades of discourse on poverty alleviation and development. The arc of development of that discourse is laid out in Table 1.

Table 1: Identifying priorities of the global development agenda from World Development Reports

WDR Publication	Global priorities	Components of poverty alleviation strategy
1980	Social and economic development; Poverty alleviation	• Productive use of human capital (through improvements in health and nutrition) • Development of human capacity
1990	Growth; poverty alleviation	• Productive use of human capital • Provision of basic social services to the poor • Well-targeted transfers and safety nets
2000-01	Poverty alleviation; inequality	• Promoting material opportunity for the poor • **Facilitating empowerment by improving governance and strengthening institutions** • **Reducing vulnerability to risk**
2010	Sustainable development; poverty reduction	• Economic growth (to be able to finance mitigation and adaptation measures) • Collective action to tackle climate change • Access to social protection so the poorest can cope with climate change • Food and water security • Transforming energy and food production systems
2020	Revival of trade-driven growth	• Re-invigorate global value chains

As the first two rows of Table 1 indicate, global development goals in the 1980s and 1990s were centred around poverty reduction by improving conditions of health, nutrition, education, etc. to improve human capacity and harness it towards productive uses. Social protection, in its contemporary form, was only a supplementary strategy. In the 1990s, enabling access to basic social services was prioritised, and the protective role of the state was limited to ex-post support through social safety nets in the event of economic crisis or structural adjustments. The developmental goals of the state were viewed as attainable through economic growth.

In contrast, rows 3-5 of Table 1 imply different priorities in the poverty alleviation strategy espoused by the World Bank. The WDRs published after the turn of the millennium indicate that a growth-focused approach to poverty reduction was unable to account for complex interaction

effects of growth with the environment, local cultures, societal structures, local political dynamics, etc. The 2000-01 WDR directs states to 'promote material opportunity for the poor', but also 'facilitate empowerment by improving governance and strengthening institutions', and 'reduce vulnerability to economic risk'.

This change in orientation away from economic growth emerged in the foreground of the concerning impacts of economic growth that had become observable by the late 1990s. Per capita incomes and living standards of the global poor dropped drastically in the 1980s (World Bank, 1990). The ineffectiveness of the Washington consensus policies to revive growth in Latin America and the African continent as well as the explicit harm to regional social systems are well-documented (Hujo, 2021; Stiglitz[6], 2004). The East Asian financial crisis of 1997 made it apparent that economic growth alone was an insufficient means to achieve sustainable poverty reduction. Concerns of rising inequality also emerged in the backdrop of rising growth rates in the West, implying that a) sufficient wealth was not being created to have considerable poverty reduction effects, and/or that b) this wealth was not being equitably distributed.

The WDR 2000-01 explicitly acknowledged that growth is an insufficient criterion for poverty reduction. Poverty began to be conceptualised as a multi-dimensional, complex problem with many contributing factors. The 2000-01 WDR understands poverty as a simultaneous occurrence of multiple deprivations – material deprivations of food, shelter, education, health; increased vulnerability to disease and natural disaster; the unresponsiveness and arbitrariness of state institutions; and restrictive social norms, values, and customary practices. Norms were viewed as leading to the exclusion of the socially disadvantaged. Accordingly, the report recommends the empowerment of the poor by strengthening state and social institutions, promoting equity, and tackling social barriers to the upward mobility of the poor. While WDRs of 2010 and 2020 do not call explicit attention to the tropes of equity and inclusion, they do resurrect these tropes indirectly by their insistence that 'social inequalities' are the root cause of many development issues. This is representative of what scholars have described as a global 'social turn' towards asserting social issues in development agendas (Hujo, 2021).

While socio-political factors such as norms and institutions are mentioned as drivers of poverty and inhibitors of equitable growth, they had not been formally incorporated into the strategies for social protection suggested by the international community in the early 2000s. In 2003, the World Bank published its Social Risk Management (SRM) framework after the East Asian crisis and clarified that growth-based poverty reduction measures were insufficient in the absence of social protection. Framed as a more 'comprehensive approach' to poverty, the framework sought to "reduce the economic vulnerability of households with appropriate instruments and to help them smooth consumption patterns" (World Bank, 2003[7]). The SRM recognised that the poor are the most vulnerable to a diverse range of risks such as natural disasters, inflation, illness, untimely death, etc. These events can affect the incomes and assets of the poor and providing them with risk management strategies can allow them to participate in higher risk-reward activities and move out of poverty (World Bank, 2003). In laying the argument for TSP, Devereux and Wheeler (2004) criticised the SRM's conceptualisation of vulnerability as being narrow and limited to the income variability of the poor. They argued that the 'social' dimensions of risk that also contribute to

[6] Microsoft Word - THE POST WASHINGTON CONSENSUS CONSENSUS_FINAL.doc

[7] documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/494981468762925392/text/302560SRMWB0ApproachtoSP01public1.txt

poverty must be included in modelling vulnerability for social protection provisions to be meaningful.

As the social protection discourse evolved, there was a call to revive social and distributional concerns in the global economic discourse. This call marked a rejection of the assumptions of trickle-down economics that linked liberalisation to a virtuous circle of growth, of poverty reduction through employment generation, and of the notion that the key social function of governments should be restricted to just the provision of safety nets. This revival can be seen in various international development agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 10 called for the reduction of inequality by adopting fiscal, wage and social protection policies and other goals are oriented towards inequality and discrimination.

The 'social turn' and the language of social risks, norms, and human behaviours that entered the vocabulary of international development set the stage for what is now being called 'transformative social protection'. Today, various states, international organisations, and multilateral agencies have quite explicitly included 'transformation' and 'inclusion' through social protection on their agendas.

The first papers about TSP emerged from the Institute of Development Studies, the United Kingdom's national institute of development studies, as well as the United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development. Both approaches of TSP critique earlier risk-based, fiscally motivated approaches towards poverty reduction and argue that governments have a higher order burden to bear when it comes to the social wellbeing of its citizens.

Over the past few years, various international organisations have advocated transformative approaches:

- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)'s 2022 social protection offer promoted a "transformation towards an equalising, greener, and more sustainable way of living" by addressing "structural drivers of poverty, inequality and vulnerability, including by addressing social norms" (UNDP, 2022).
- The United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development (UNRISD, 2016) defined transformative social development as involving "changes in social structures, institutions and relations, including patterns of stratification related to class, gender, ethnicity, religion or location that may lock people (whether current or future generations) into positions of disadvantage or constrain their choices and agency." The organisation also considers the transition to environmentally sound consumption and production patterns to fall within the ambit of transformation.
- The ILO in its World Social Protection Report (2024) stated that, "Transformative system-wide changes are required to address the root causes of vulnerability, which are invariably linked to poverty, the exclusion of vulnerable groups and structural inequalities".

The domain of gender politics has also seen extensive application of TSP concepts and is perhaps the foremost example of transformative programming in application. The potential for social protection to radically transform gender relations and achieve gender equality has been quoted by multiple international agencies:

- A gender-transformative approach is "concerned with redressing gender inequalities, removing structural barriers, such as unequal roles and rights and empowering disadvantaged populations by changing laws and policies; systems and services;

distribution of resources; norms, beliefs and stereotypes; and behaviour and practices." (UNICEF, 2022)[8]

- The FAO (2022) defines the core objectives of gender transformative social protection as the "examination of how norms and other social structures affect and contribute to poverty and vulnerabilities across the life cycle; alter harmful norms and address gender bias in social protection interventions to ensure equitable access and outcomes; and promote equitable gendered social norms, relations and social structures through social protection design and delivery."
- The World Social Protection Report states that "Gender-responsive social protection strives to transform the structural constraints and discriminatory social norms that drive gender inequalities." (ILO, 2024)

A similar thought process that informs TSP can also be seen in how various international organisations approach the potential for social protection to aid climate-adaptability in the context of the imminent and detrimental impacts of climate change. The concept of adaptive social protection stresses the role of social protection policies in building household resilience to shocks, and the transformative capabilities of social protection are acknowledged in such a framing also:

- The World Social Protection Report states that, "Social protection is fundamental for climate change adaptation as it tackles the root causes of vulnerability by preventing poverty and social exclusion and reducing inequality. It enhances people's capacity to cope with climate-related shocks ex-ante by providing an income floor and access to healthcare." (ILO, 2024)
- The World Bank lays out a framework for adaptive social protection that can enhance the resilience of the poor in relation to covariate shocks. Resilience is thought of in terms of capacities of households to "adequately prepare for a shock (anticipatory), adapt and reduce their risk to a shock over time (adaptive), cope with impacts of the shock (absorptive), and potentially even completely ameliorate exposure and vulnerability to the shock through a structural transformation in the household's livelihood, assets, and/or location".

To reiterate, TSP identifies one of the underlying causes of poverty and inequality in developing countries as the restrictive social norms, structures, institutions, and relations[1] that perpetuate vulnerabilities through limited access to resources and inequality. It aims to address those instead of simply helping the poor tide over shortfalls in income and consumption capacity. It expands the ambit of social protection from protecting against and preventing poverty to also addressing questions of 'equity, empowerment and economic, social and cultural rights' (Deveraux and Wheeler, 2004). That is, the poor in developing countries (the primary beneficiaries of social protection policy) require not just economic, but also 'social' protection against discrimination of various forms.

In the conviction to achieve goals of equity, insufficient attention has been paid to a) the consequences/disadvantages of transformative approaches, b) how such consequences may manifest in different nations and their social and institutional cultures, and c) how to potentially mitigate them.

This section has traced the historical context for TSP as a concept and explored the percolation of a transformation narrative into global social protection agendas. This warrants a serious

[8] https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/43146/file

consideration of the underlying assumptions, desired objectives, and potential impacts of TSP, dealt with in the upcoming section.

Section II: Problematizing the 'transformative' theory of change

TSP wrongly identifies the root cause of vulnerability and inequality

TSP identifies one of the underlying causes of poverty and inequality in developing countries as the restrictive social norms, structures, institutions, and relations[9] that cause inequality. The transformative approach is imagined to be able to correct imbalances of power which perpetuate vulnerabilities through limited access to resources, limited participation in political processes, or otherwise discriminatory/abusive behaviour. TSP claims that radically transforming the underlying structural factors causing poverty can lead to a reduction in social vulnerability, and a more equal society overall.

The above appears to be a narrow and limited approach to understanding the mechanics of poverty and equality – it insufficiently accounts for a very important piece of the puzzle, which is the economic context.

In modern-day economic systems, the primary unit of valuation is monetary. Every aspect of human life from basic consumption needs to higher-order attainments like education and skilling is valued in monetary terms. Such monetary measurement necessarily introduces volatility – a unit of currency does not have the same value (in purchasing power terms) at different points in time. In fact, the value of a unit of currency only appears to go on decreasing with time.

Muller (2024) describes how forces of nature used to be the primary cause of insecurity in human life and have now been displaced by economic forces. As opposed to the past where most basic consumption needs could be met within the homestead, now most tangible needs can only be fulfilled by exchanging participation in productive activity for wages and deploying those wages for consumption of food, water, shelter, and the like. As the frontiers of financial possibility expand, our economies depend on constant technological advancements and innovation to power growth.

The Cambridge History of Capitalism (2014)[10] traces the origins and history of capitalism globally and has been relied on to appreciate the evolution of modern capitalism. The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century prompted rapid growth of Britain's manufacturing output, from 2% of global output in 1750 to 23% in 1880 (Allen, 2014). Factory capitalism was supported by the cheap availability of coal, and Britain developed a strong competitive advantage in manufacturing.

The United Kingdom was heavily reliant on exchanging manufactured exports for food and raw material imports from poorer countries. Thus, global trading activity rose exponentially, supported by technological advancements in transportation and communication, the enforcement of liberal policies globally, and income growth. The United States and other European countries adopted the 'Standard Model' of economic development, which created conditions conducive for the generation of profits and the re-investment of those profits as new capital.

[9] The collective of these human behaviours is referred to as 'socio-political context' in the rest of this paper for ease of reference.

[10] https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781316022726_A23888783/preview-9781316022726_A23888783.pdf#page=13.16

Global capital markets matured, driven by British and European exports of capital and the lucrative returns on investments in America and other poorer countries (Rourke and Williamson, 2014). This incipient liberal international economy was abruptly interrupted by the first World War. The postwar recovery was turbulent and challenging, with many countries abandoning the gold standard and discouraging trade through tariffs and controls. Especially in the developing world, many countries adopted communist economic systems and centralised planning. The recovery of global free trade occurred only after the second World War, and the Western world reformed the capitalist system to meet demands of stability and fairness. Matured financial markets became ubiquitous, bringing a phase of financial capitalism that lasted until very recently in the twenty first century but failed to deliver any lasting measure of stability or fairness.

Yanis Varoufakis (2024)[11] has noted that the present-day form of capitalism is no longer driven by markets and profits, but by digital trading platforms and 'cloud rent'[12]. Today, algorithms play an important role in shaping the behaviours of workers and consumers alike. Power is concentrated in the hands of the owners of cloud capital, not those of traditional capital like machinery, buildings, railways, etc. An economic system of this form is hyper-financialised, and rewards high-risk investments of capital (or cloud capital) leading to churning of employment and the creation of precarious, temporary jobs.

In such an economy, the next wave of technological innovation could leave many lacking employment. Large parts of the workforce in many countries already rely on digital platforms for employment. Some countries are recognising that such workers must be covered under formal social security programmes, evidence that the risks of precarity and churn are once again being recognised at a global scale. Workers such as these are unlikely to own meaningful stocks of financial capital, and a hyper-financialised economy makes it difficult to meet even basic survival needs through other means (such as the 'social' economy or say, living off the land). Unemployment and under-compensation are realities – the demand for labour may be limited to some geographies or have barriers to participation (requirements of qualification or experience).

So, participation in the economic system is compulsory for survival but does not immediately guarantee financial security for most. External sources of support must be introduced for additional help and stability. Historically, in the face of uncertainty, such help may have been provided through community linkages and family relationships. However, the modern economic system is increasingly oriented towards the individual, not the family or the community. The creation of more individual agents implies a larger number of consumers of products and financial services. Faced with financial insecurity, most individuals are forced to prioritise their own needs and wants over those of the people around them. Such atomisation of the individual causes the breaking down of traditional systems of familial investments, loans, and protections which may have supported human economic life in the past. Clearly, insecurity and vulnerability are built into the modern-day economic system.

Fairly early in the development trajectory of the Western world, it was understood that the distributive capacities of the market, or rather lack thereof, would not permit all individuals to protect themselves from economic risk, especially in situations of war and epidemic. Widespread poverty (despite an overall increase in output) in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and two World Wars prompted a realisation that the economic system required counterbalancing forces. American, British and French governments as early as the 1800s realised the importance of

[11] The Age of Cloud Capital - Persuasion

[12] Rent paid to access digital platforms and the cloud.

spending on the 'social' aspects of human life to provide some protection to citizens. These countries leveraged their financial resources and institutional administrative experience accumulated through military activity to establish redistributive measures, funded through taxation. The universal provision of basic public facilities such as potable water, health services, and education services, followed by pensions systems, unemployment benefits, etc. all evolved to protect people from market vagaries.[13] The welfare state, collectivised bargaining, labour rights and other regulatory protections all emerged as well. To attribute the economic inequality that existed in 1880s industrial London or 1900s migrant America to the societal norms and institutions of those eras would have been ludicrous – it does not paint a complete or accurate picture of the reasons for inequality between the classes and the pronounced vulnerability of certain sections of the population.

Yet, transformative social protection espouses the idea that the underlying structural reasons for poverty and inequality today can be addressed through altering norms, social structures and institutions. The idea that the local socio-cultural context is the primary reason that the poor remain poor in developing countries runs contrary to the understanding that the prevailing economic system engenders insecurity and vulnerability – which was acknowledged when the Western nations saw the need for a formal welfare state. TSP appears to overweight the importance of the socio-political, or cultural context in contributing to vulnerability and inequality.

The financialised and globalised economy is a mainstay of contemporary times, as are the social structures it engenders and the risks to global human well-being it forces us to confront. We may focus our efforts on engineering the system to minimise harms caused to individuals, the communities they live in, the nations that comprise those communities, and the environment at large. Uprooting the global economic system is admittedly not a reasonable objective to aim for. Rather, this argument is intended to impress upon the reader a fundamental fallacy that underlies TSP. The primary cause for widespread vulnerability and inequality in developing countries is not their socio-political context (even though it can appear externally as most proximate), but the economic context of hyper-financialization, which has historically introduced people to a great deal of risk and precarity.[14]

Indeed, there is little to no empirical evidence that supports the claims that the socio-cultural context is the root cause of poverty and inequality in developing countries. This is curious, as the social protection literature typically values robust impact measurement of the impact of policies on development outcomes such as education, nutrition, income, empowerment, etc. Indeed, without robust measurement, it would be difficult to advocate for the implementation of these programs. Why, then, has the same level of importance not been accorded to measurement efforts that can establish a causal relationship between socio-political context and poverty/inequality?

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[13] Despite the existence of a machinery devised specifically to protect individuals from economic risk, it was not possible to insulate even the populations of developed countries from the effects of covariate shocks such as COVID-19. Further, inequality has only been increasing over the past few decades, even as the welfare state becomes more pronounced. Admittedly, the Western welfare state does not appear to be a complete and universally successful way of protecting people from risks.

[14] Admittedly, a hyper-financialised economy has provided widespread access to the tools of finance (especially credit), thereby allowing ordinary individuals to mitigate risk. However, the very opposite effect is observable at the aggregate level since the widespread provision of credit also leads to high levels of systemic risk (as has been demonstrated by various financial crises over the past few decades).

It appears that TSP is based on claims which are not adequately substantiated by evidence. There is an urgent need to a) discover the true nature of the relationship between socio-political context and poverty/inequality, and b) re-orient social protection policies to reflect that relationship.

If social protection as a policy tool is to succeed in bringing economic security to its constituents, the discourse which influences policy must closely follow reality, and not be borne out of questionable theory. Indeed, we must be wary of committing such conceptual errors while theorising the nature of social protection policy that will eventually be adopted in the developing world.

The TSP theory of change is incomplete

There is a bi-directional causal relationship between the socio-political context of a nation and any policy it adopts:

- The 'context' determines what policy may be successfully implemented and its efficacy. For example, an Islamic country is unlikely to legalise gay marriage because the society's values do not align with such a policy.
- The policy may go on to influence the 'context'. For example, encouraging women's labour force participation may lead to falling fertility rates, affecting social structures and future size of the labour force.

A social protection paradigm that takes the above into cognisance could be more successful in influencing behavioural change. Unfortunately, the TSP theory does not account for either of the above.

Herea, we primarily address the first point above, that is to say: **TSP does not pay heed to whether transformative policies will succeed in different contexts**. That is, transformative policies do not consider whether all cultural contexts are equally amenable to the same kind of transformation, or whether different contexts could lend themselves to different levels of transformative success. In the presence of any inequality, local cultures and institutions may be implicated as perpetuating discriminatory norms and vulnerability. This is concerning as there is not much room for a nuanced understanding of how, in some cases, local contexts may actually create favourable conditions for development outcomes. The narrative normalises taking a blunt tool to any group behaviours which are perceived as being harmful.

Devereux and Wheeler's (2004) seminal paper on TSP quotes the 2002 anti-discrimination campaign launched by the Uganda Red Cross Society to protect people living with HIV AIDS from stigma and discrimination as a 'transformative' measure which addresses the social needs (rather than the economic needs) of a vulnerable group. The authors do not address what specifically was *transformative* about the Ugandan anti-discrimination campaign, or whether perhaps behavioural/attitudinal change in discriminatory behaviour was observed to a greater degree in Uganda compared to other nations similarly affected by the AIDS epidemic. Let us presume that it was, as the Ugandan case has been explicitly referred to as an example of transformative social protection.

Uganda's response to the HIV AIDS pandemic is often cited as one of the world's earliest and most compelling successes of AIDS prevention since it managed to incite lasting behavioural change in individual sexual behaviours, leading to a pronounced decline in HIV AIDS cases. Since AIDS-prevention efforts were applied in multiple affected countries, without much success, it is instructive to ask why Uganda alone witnessed a pronounced decline. Key elements of Uganda's

national response included the mobilisation of community-level and face-to-face communication campaigns which involved political, community and religious leaders. In particular, Ugandan religious organisations and leaders were mobilised fairly early in the AIDS education and prevention activities, which made for an effective strategy since religious belief is a defining feature of Ugandan society. A study commissioned by the Ugandan Ministry of Finance[15] (2003) recognised that certain kinds of cultural practices occasioned much more commonly the risk of the AIDS virus spreading, such as funeral and birth ceremonies, which were also sites of considerable sexual promiscuity. The intervention then consisted of interjecting an education component into these sites of cultural practice, that would be delivered by local religious leaders (from mosques and churches) and community workers and contain cautionary messaging against a religious backdrop. (Green et. al., 2006)[16]. Other kinds of cultural practices also presented themselves as sites of cautionary messaging, even when such messaging was not explicitly couched in religious terms. For example, the cultural practice of a bride's paternal aunts counselling them on marital life began to incorporate discussions of HIV testing (Ugandan MoF, 2003). These efforts appear to have engendered a culture of openness about AIDS and its dangers. For example, a cross-country comparative study (that covered Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, and Uganda) by Low-beer and Stoneburner (2010)[17] finds that "*Ugandans seemed to communicate about AIDS and people with AIDS differently*" between themselves. In other countries, where personal channels of communication could not be so relied upon, country authorities felt compelled to rely more on mass or institutional media sources to prompt reflection among their citizens on AIDS and its dangers. The prevalence of personal channels of communication increased in Uganda between 1989 and 1995.

From the Ugandan example, we learn that policies described as 'transformative' (like an anti-discrimination campaign) may be enabled by contextual factors such as community institutions, the community/cultural outlook on sexual behaviour, etc. It would be an exaggeration to describe any anti-discrimination campaign as inherently transformative in nature. Instead, the transformative potential is unlocked by various cultural and socio-political factors. Learning about and acknowledging these factors could help strengthen policy responses in other contexts.

TSP is rooted in an incomplete understanding of the socio-political context, i.e., the interaction between social norms and the human subject

The framing of social norms, group relations and social structures by those that endorse TSP leaves much to be desired. Norms and any social structures are largely viewed as imposing constraints on individual freedoms and as contributing towards 'social power imbalances'. Underlying this rejection of norms is the assumption that the human subject is always motivated to privilege their individual freedom over societal or communitarian goals. Humans have a fundamental need to associate with others, and therefore shared goals and visions are a common feature in human societies – indeed, they are what make the societies "social" in any real sense. As such, the psychological processes that inform a human subject's actions and behaviours are just as much culturally determined as they are by that subject's individual preferences or inclinations. The cultural context is itself shaped, and in turn shapes, other aspects of context such as the economic,

[15] social_cultural_factors Uganda.pdf
[16] Uganda's HIV Prevention Success: The Role of Sexual Behavior Change and the National Response - PMC
[17] Sci-Hub | Behaviour and communication change in reducing HIV: is Uganda unique? African Journal of AIDS Research, 2(1), 9–21 | 10.2989/16085906.2003.9626555

the social, the political, and the ecological. The impulse to change or transform social norms should contend with all of the aspects of context carefully and deliberately.

Scholars of anthropology and cultural evolution display a far more nuanced understanding of norms. For instance, evolutionary biology has long understood that human beings are an inherently cultural species (Henrich and Muthukrishna, 2018); that is, we inherit not just genetic material, but also nongenetic information such as 'strategies, attentional biases, motivations, tastes, and cognitive heuristics'. This nongenetic information helps us cooperate with one another and survive as a species. Such cultural modes of learning give rise to norms, which encourage cooperative behaviour by establishing mechanisms of reputation, punishment, and/or signalling. Chudek, Zhao and Hendrick (2013)[18] describe norms as 'stable behavioural regularities within groups, or equilibria, in which deviations do not spread via adaptive learning' (p. 5). Thought of in this manner, the norms and the institutions that embody them are products of culture-gene co-evolution spanning decades, if not centuries. Culture-gene co-evolutionists describe norms as representing a certain behavioural equilibrium. Cultural transmission explains how, over generations, some traits are transmitted (while others aren't), resulting in a "selection for traits that fit a niche defined by social, economic, psychological, and environmental factors" (Waring et al., 2015). This transmission process accumulates cultural adaptations which are too complex for any single individual to have invented in one lifetime. As such, any cultural traits (beliefs, norms, language, behaviours, values, etc.) are not to be viewed merely as restraints on the 'ideal' expressions of human behaviour and organisation – they have a societal fitness function to perform, insofar as they help to preserve a sense of social order through time. Such an understanding of norms implies that individuals or groups that abide by norms will have an evolutionary advantage over those who do not. So, on average, those who deviate from norms do worse (in terms of survival) than those who abide by them.

Social norms can be costly, i.e., the individual or group pays (in time, effort expended, missed opportunity, etc.) to uphold them. Often, it is such norms that are called to be dismantled or reversed as these costs are seen as evidence of an oppressive, restrictive, or otherwise harmful and therefore undesirable culture. Seen from an evolutionary lens, however, the cost is being balanced out by the advantage of individual or group level biological survival that norm-following bestows. Whether on balance adherence to the norm is beneficial or costly is a complicated matter, to be carefully deliberated before a decision is taken to transform the norm.

Section III: The way forward for social protection?

Policymakers[19] must be cognisant that any norms they try to amend introduce an external selection pressure on that population. This selection pressure will determine individual and group-level outcomes of survival – various adaptations in cultural traits will emerge. So, the reversal of norms could result in starkly different (and potentially even detrimental) evolutionary outcomes compared to the original pathway that the individual/group was on. Then, calling for the

[18] www2.psych.ubc.ca/~henrich/pdfs/Henrich_Joyce_Volume_Final.pdf

[19] While the remaining part of this paper refers to the policymaker as the primary agent of change that could influence social policy, the same concepts may be extended to development aid professionals or even researchers designing interventions. Further, distinctions on the appropriate 'level' (local, state, national, intranational) of governance and policy administration are not being explicitly made and so the term policymaker may be interpreted flexibly.

dismantling of any and every social norm that appears costly may not be appropriate or responsible. If one accepts that the policymaker has some moral responsibility towards citizens, then any policy that seeks 'transformation' has a much greater burden of responsibility to ensure that outcomes of evolution are not worse off than in the counterfactual without it. This higher order obligation is derived from the simple fact that the policy is then interfering with what would otherwise be natural order.

This is not to say that all social norms will always be universally relevant or should be perpetually preserved, just because they are products of culture-gene coevolution. Some norms are truly marginalising and excluding, i.e., the costs may not be balanced out by any survival advantage. In such cases, norm following may explicitly cause survival harms either to the individual or to others. It is certainly important to question the validity of such norms, and for the policymaker to have some tools to intervene in them. A policy designed to intentionally apply selection pressures, with knowledge of the adaptive mechanisms and dominant levels of selection at play can facilitate the emergence of behavioural adaptations that are favourable for the beneficiary population and aligned with the objectives of the policy.

The question now arises, how does one identify which norms are mostly harmful, exploitative, and exclusionary in nature, and differentiate their treatment from those which serve, on balance, an evolutionary fitness purpose, and therefore ought to be preserved in some form? To decide, the policymaker requires a clear articulation of the grounds on which behavioural intervention on a norm is justified and further, how such behavioural intervention may be successful. This may be answered in two parts: first, arriving at a consensus on what constitutes 'harm'; and second, an enquiry into the history of the specific norm.

The conceptualisation of a 'harm' threshold of sorts is first required – all individual costs are not equal, and so all norms do not merit the same kind of intervention. For instance, the norm of women assuming responsibility for caregiving in the household does not cause the same level of harm as intimate partner violence. This kind of generic treatment of harms is unhelpful, and (as described in the above section) ignores both the individual's own interest in aggregate well-being as well as their agency in navigating or internalising these costs. To this author, threat to life or outright bodily harm may constitute such a threshold, and anything beyond that may not necessarily mandate the policymaker's intervention in the form of norm reversal/amendment.

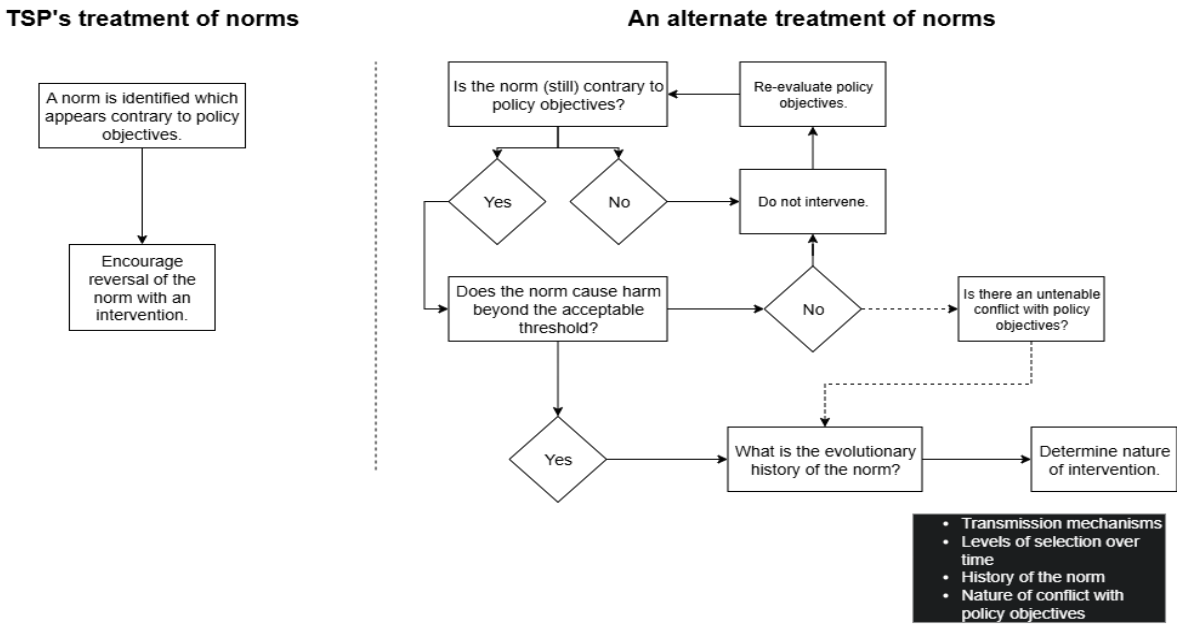
Often, norms are identified as problematic and their dismantling is advocated, but insufficient attention is paid to whatever new system or model of behaviour would take its stead. This creates a sort of cultural vacuum wherein familiar systems are abandoned and the externally determined behaviours do not endure or cause further complications at the societal level, requiring further intervention. This is a sort of vicious cycle that can leave beneficiary communities perpetually dependent on the State/policymaker's intervention and can create a new type of political economy which may be 'oppressive' or 'marginalising' in its own right. For instance, scholars have argued that the slew of new policies providing Indian women with cash transfers imagined as correcting traditional gender norms are simply creating a new political economy of 'techno-patrimonial competitive welfare'.[20] Treating norms with a detached curiosity about their role, as opposed to presuming their role in perpetuating inequality and vulnerability is the first step for a policymaker intending to apply *transformative* thinking onto social protection policy.

[20] Technology for Votes | Economic and Political Weekly Yamini Aiyar & Niranjan sircar

Once a norm has been identified as causing unacceptable harm, and therefore requiring intervention, the policymaker should undertake a deep enquiry into the evolutionary journey of a norm, i.e., its history and function. In the field of the environmental sciences, Waring et al. (2015)[21] have conceptualised a framework to describe how multilevel cooperative dynamics can determine environmental conservation outcomes. This framework can be broadly generalised for any complex adaptive system involving human subjects. It enables one to appreciate the mechanisms through which a norm is transmitted, how that transmission was sustained, whether the norm is cooperative/competitive in its nature, the selection pressures and levels at which they operate, changes in trait distributions, whether there have been changes in the dominant level of selection over time, etc. The idea is to develop a 'causal model of endogenous cultural processes' by understanding patterns of cooperation and explaining multilevel interactions between individuals, groups, etc. This type of enquiry necessarily involves anthropological approaches towards understanding how a norm has mutated into its present-day form. For instance, one would need to enquire into the historical events that may have caused deviations from how the norm would be enforced in the past, the contexts in which it would be enforced or relaxed, and even the myths and stories that a community uses to describe the norm. Studying a specific norm in this manner can reveal patterns which become instrumental in determining the site of an intervention and its parameters.

Such an enquiry may also reveal the potential unintended consequences of reversing or otherwise trying to 'amend' norms. One may also find that norms that have a longer history may be more resistant to change than those which have more recent origins. Alternatively, one may find that enquiry into a norm's history reveals that the context in which abidance to it gave rise to a survival advantage is no longer relevant. The policymaker may, thereafter, try to reach a judgment as to whether the norm needs changing.

Figure 2: Comparing TSP's treatment of norms with an alternate approach



Source: Author

[21] https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270218

For instance, when small-holder farmers need to suddenly adapt to survive climate change – what tools are at the policymaker's disposal to induce such adaptation? The present paradigm would frame the prevailing social norms in farming communities as a hurdle preventing favourable behavioural changes that could help farmers and their families adapt to climactic risk[22], and reasoning thus, it would suggest pathways to overcome or dismantle these norms.

Alternatively, with an appreciation of the societal fitness-function of norms, the policymaker may acknowledge gene-culture coevolution as the primary mechanism through which human behaviours (and thereby, social norms) spread. Then, any behavioural change intervention would attempt to ride atop this mechanism, instead of trying to bypass or disrupt it. By neutrally facilitating the unfolding of the gene-culture coevolutionary process while also incorporating policy objectives, the policymaker may find that contextually relevant and long-lasting solutions to wicked policy problems emerge quite organically. If policies do not position themselves to inherently clash with social normative systems, they are more likely to endure due to their local relevance. This process mandates some amount of reflexivity in the policy-making process. That is, where the objectives of a policy/policymaker clash with a social norm, and that norm is found not to cause undue harm, the objectives may then be reconsidered. If this reconciliation is found untenable, the gene-culture coevolution mechanism and multilevel evolutionary frameworks may still be applied to ensure that selection pressures are being intentionally applied.

In this framing, the policymaker's relationship to the human subjects/communities (on behalf of whom they are decision makers) is crucial to the outcome they wish to bring about. That is, if they are entirely alienated from and unfamiliar with the *cultural context* within which an alteration of norms is being attempted, then neither the above-mentioned reflexivity nor the application of multilevel evolutionary frameworks will be possible, and any policy action will be most likely a failure. On the other hand, if the policymaker anchors themselves to the same culture and worldview that they are attempting to support the evolution of, and at the same time maintain some conceptual and emotional distance from those things, and this double gesture is by no means an easy task, then both policy concept and policy action will be altogether more effective.

Section IV: Concluding Remarks

Social protection policies are accorded a crucial role in modern financialised society – that of providing minimum levels of protection and well-being. If these policies are to succeed in their objectives, it is crucial that they are designed to acknowledge local cultural contexts, human behaviours, and social norms. Only policies that can embed themselves intrinsically to existing human behaviour and its historical roots will have lasting impact.

At present, the global machinery of development aid is going through a comprehensive overhaul and contending with various administrative and design-based choices made over the past few decades. At this time of reckoning, there are many calls to reorient the development domain towards structural change rather than temporary measures – a similar sentiment to what motivated TSP some years ago. This is an opportunity for those working in the development aid and policymaking spaces to acknowledge that, if policies that have a behavioural change component are to be lasting and endogenous, they must a) do no harm, and b) take cues from cultural context and, wherever possible, work in tandem with local culture instead of against it. This would necessitate that social protection takes more of a bottom-up approach in both its design and implementation, and abandon rigid, universalised, rhetoric-driven approaches to building social

[22] Gender-transformative climate change adaptation: advancing social equity | SEI

protection systems in favour of approaches which are context-specific, locally determined, and adaptive in their nature.