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**NEW WELFARE POLICY INSTRUMENTS:  
INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND IMPLICATIONS  
FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES**

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# NEW WELFARE POLICY INSTRUMENTS: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Margherita Scarlato\*

## Abstract

In this paper recent approaches to the role of social protection systems within economic development policies are discussed. Important experiences are considered, in particular those implemented in medium and low income countries, where new tools for increasing the effectiveness of social and development policies have been tried and tested. Some lessons are also examined that prove useful for defining mechanisms that enhance the quality of services provided by social enterprises in the Italian context.

Keywords: social protection system; development policy; social enterprise.

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\* Department of Economics, Roma Tre University, Via Silvio D'Amico 77, 00145, Roma, e-mail [mscarlato@uniroma3.it](mailto:mscarlato@uniroma3.it). The paper continues and further develops reflections made during the Iris Network Round Table at Roma Tre University, 22 May 2010, and is part of a larger research project in progress, jointly undertaken with Ugo Gentilini (*United Nations World Food Programme*) on innovative social protection and assessment tools which are being tested in an international context.

## **1. Equity and growth: moving beyond a trade-off**

There is a growing conviction in economic research that development is multidimensional and that growth of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is only one way of looking at the economic and social development of a country.

Current debate centres on people's quality of life rather than the growth of a synthetic value that approximates the size of market transactions such as the GDP. Therefore, more importance is given to aspects which are usually neglected by economists such as health, education, time spent on work and care, political participation, social relations and personal and economic security. These intangible factors are assigned an intrinsic value, but their importance with regard to efficiency and economic growth is also stressed.

All this indicates that the debate on the trade-off between equity and efficiency is no longer valid: there is widespread consensus for the idea that social and poverty-reducing policies also comply with reasons for growth (Ravallion, 2007, 2009).

There is a wealth of literature that examines the links between growth, inequality and poverty, but here I will briefly mention some channels that reduce the conflict between equity and growth:

- Vulnerable social groups face a high degree of uncertainty about the future, which shortens the time horizon of choices. An effective social protection system reduces risks and increases incentives to invest in physical and human capital by improving resource allocation.
- Growth is increased by social capital where social capital is seen as trust or ability to coordinate the supply of factors of a collective nature (knowledge, the environment, communication and social networks) (Scarlato, 2009, 2010). The "social capital" driver is produced by a cohesive society. However, in the new international scenario, social balances are continually destabilised by redistribution of competitive advantages and the reallocation of production on a global scale. Uncertainty and risk prevail and cohesion needs to be built on one step at a time using a social protection system that ensures an acceptable level of equity.

Another line of study shows that, on a more general level, the quality of life in an area is a crucial growth factor in the new integrated economic system. For example, cities attract external resources and incubate innovation if they offer specific local factors (knowledge, human capital, services) that act as magnets for business and talent (Rullani, 2009; Glaeser and Gottlieb, 2008). Therefore, providing collective services and merit goods directly helps to strengthen the competitiveness of an area.

## **2. Welfare and development in international debate**

If the various lines of research which have been briefly mentioned are brought together, a multidimensional view of development emerges based on the quality of life, social inclusion and access to collective services.

I will briefly summarise some particularly interesting issues emerging from theory and practice in the international context that, in line with this approach, have interpreted the social protection system as a tool that accompanies development policies in the area. In emerging and developing countries in particular, these systems are considered an integral part of development policies. I will discuss this in more detail

below.

It is important to bear in mind that social protection systems are meant in their widest sense in the economic literature and include social services, the supply of public goods, such as education and health and active labour market policies. In short, because of its broad scope, the concept of "social protection" is open to a variety of approaches and is still being defined (Gentilini, 2007). Furthermore, as new needs and new forms of poverty have emerged, the boundaries of this area of intervention have been extended: from traditional humanitarian reasons, they have acquired more complex implications to the point where they examine how an integrated social protection system can guarantee the rights of citizenship and the empowerment of citizens.

The objectives can be divided into four different areas (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004):

- protecting against deprivation (for example, by introducing safety nets to counter poverty, by providing social services);
- preventing poverty (for example, by providing risk insurance instruments such as unemployment benefits, health insurance);
- promoting opportunities/capabilities (for example, using microcredit, active employment policies);
- transforming the behaviour and status of socially vulnerable groups (for example, with programs aimed at empowerment, respect for the rights of citizenship, increasing voice and accountability).

The transition from purely redistributive action to measures that aim to promote individual skills and incentives is a totally new element in international debate. Importance is given to the fact that social policies only have non-transitory effects if they act at the root of "poverty traps", i.e. if they are able to change expectations of economic agents, resulting in profound changes in behaviour and resource allocation decisions (Barrett, Carter and Ikegami, 2008).

On a general level, the extension of social policy objectives leads to the identification of a welfare system that can be defined as "enabling" in the words of Stefano Zamagni (Zamagni, 2009), i.e. a welfare system that increases individual responsibility. From this point of view, social policies are similar to policies that encourage development and growth.

### **3. Challenges**

If an effective social protection system is to be implemented, the problem of compatibility with limited financial and administrative resources must be addressed. One problem is the negative opinion of the effectiveness of aid and social policies caused by wastefulness associated with State intervention, the risk of increasing rent-seeking and the possibility that welfare policy is used as tool designed to obtain electoral consent. These obstacles should be recognised and overcome through reforms based on principles that give credibility to the policies: accountability, monitoring and enforcement of laws that protect citizens.

In order to apply these principles, a clear understanding of the institutional weaknesses behind failures is necessary. Empirical evidence points to a number of problems that reoccur in the management of development policies as well as social policies: fragmented programmes, a multitude of responsible parties, a lack of

coordination and a great deal of attention paid to input and little to outcome. An inability of the various politicians, administrators and actors involved to learn from mistakes they have made and experiences gained systematically emerges. This is because data collection, monitoring and evaluation activities are expensive and therefore not widespread and because project promoters are unwilling to acknowledge mistakes made during their mandate. These problems are interrelated. For example, the lack of accountability also depends on the fact that projects focus on input, a lack of local learning and fragmented projects.

To preserve the credibility of the management of public and private resources allocated to social expenditure as well as the validity of development aid, policies are needed that lead to progress which can be measured and made transparent to public opinion. This awareness is at the basis of international debate on development aid which has strongly promoted the research and testing of new results-based approaches. The underlying idea is that an increase in the volumes of aid is not enough for poverty reduction and development: to achieve these goals we must improve aid effectiveness as well.

This trend is underlined in the Paris Declaration<sup>1</sup>, signed in 2005 by more than 100 countries and multilateral organisations which formalises the commitment made to introduce ambitious plans for reform to improve aid effectiveness. Of the commitments made, two are particularly important:

- focusing aid policies on results and outcome as measurements of performance;
- making donors and beneficiaries mutually accountable in order to define a pyramid of effective aid.

The process is making a huge impact on the management of development aid. For example, the principles of the Paris Declaration have been adopted by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the DAC (Development Assistance Committee), the body that deals with development cooperation, now uses impact evaluation as a mechanism of transparency and accountability for aid programs (OECD-DAC, 2009).

At the same time, the Paris Declaration has directed research towards economic analysis of new solutions that increase the effectiveness of aid policies and combat poverty. By moving in this direction, development theory has adopted a practical approach which aims to promote economic policy measures based on the ability to provide real improvement in the lives of beneficiaries. As a result, a new generation of instruments is emerging: controlled experiments, ongoing assessment followed by subsequent corrective actions, conditional transfers, cash on delivery contracts, etc. The characteristics that these various experiments have in common are briefly (World Bank, 2008):

- social protection systems are the core of development policies;
- State welfare is combined with private associative forms in order to alleviate financial constraint and increase the ability to tackle new risks;
- the application of social policies explicitly takes a constraint into account: the risk of opportunism leading to a squandering of resources;
- the choice of various instruments is based on the specific characteristics of the economic and social contexts in which they are used and the goals that are set;

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<sup>1</sup> Paris Declaration On Aid Effectiveness: Ownership, Harmonisation, Alignment, Results And Mutual Accountability, March 2 2005, Paris.

- the results-based approach and experimental research are the recommended methods for finding out which measures work and which social innovations should be introduced.

In particular, solutions that explicitly show how to tackle the problems of implementation and evaluation of operations, trade-offs linked to the scarcity of financial resources and administrative capability and the need to strengthen incentives that maximise the impact of programmes and minimise waste are recommended (Gentilini and Omamo, 2009).

#### **4. Testing the new generation of instruments**

There are a great deal of international experiences to learn from, many of which have been started in developing and middle-income countries and have begun to spread more recently in developed countries including the United States.

The issues that I would like to briefly discuss here regard the progress made in indicators, evaluation methods and instruments.

##### *4.1. Information flows and new indicators*

The first point is that aid policies must also include investment in data collection and the development of measures of institutional capability. The construction of impact indicators (focusing on results and changes in people's well-being) and the use of traditional process indicators (which measure the inputs and activities performed) must also be considered an integral part of policies (Davies, 2009).

From this point of view, the work by DFID (Department for International Development), the British government agency that deals with the monitoring of development aid, is very interesting. The DFID, in particular, has concentrated on Voice & Accountability (V&A) indicators (Holland e Rhirkell, 2009). These variables are considered crucial in the fight against poverty. DFID therefore intends to examine to what extent the policies adopted by the State and non-profit organisations affect these factors and what effect this has on development. The framework used to construct V&A indicators is called CAR - Capability, Accountability, Responsiveness. Capability refers to the ability of governments to ensure the implementation and effectiveness of policies, Accountability describes the ability of citizens and civil society to judge public action and Responsiveness indicates the degree of response of public, State and non-state institutions to respond to the needs of citizens and the safeguarding of citizens' rights, including access to collective services.

Studies conducted by the World Bank are equally important and identify indicators of governance which are increasingly linked to the ability of governments to provide public services efficiently, improving accessibility, outcomes, and the overall quality of life (Ivanyna and Shah, 2010). The World Bank is also conducting a research project that attempts to refine subjective indicators such as indicators of citizens' level of satisfaction with basic services which are needed to evaluate changes induced by policies (Dasgupta, Narayan and Skoufias, 2009).

In this respect, these studies emphasise that indicators that attempt to capture citizens' opinions of public services such as health and education are subject to considerable distortion. Satisfaction is influenced by factors other than quality including demographic factors such as age, gender and educational level as well as

factors related to attitudes, past experience and expectations.

Although most demographic factors can be observed and controlled, others (expectations, experiences) are difficult to measure. In citizen satisfaction surveys, for example, expectations vary a great deal according to whether rich or poor districts are considered and this creates distortions in the outcome which must be taken into account. The problem lies with the fact that there is no standard or universal benchmark on which responses are based. Consequently, it is difficult to interpret results and make comparisons and there is no strong correlation between objective measures of quality and respondents' perceptions.

It can be concluded that indicators based on satisfaction are a useful starting point for a debate on policy performance and increase the accountability of those responsible, but cannot be used to assess the real quality of public services. However, these studies also show that if statistical control for citizens' expectations is used in analysis, some distortions can be corrected and the explanatory ability of collected data can be improved through surveys on satisfaction with basic services.

#### *4.2 Evaluation methods: experiments and pilot projects*

As more refined indicators are being constructed, new methods for assessing policies are being used in emerging and developing countries (Ravallion, 2008). The theoretical approach is based on the belief that the impact of aid on traditional macroeconomic variables (GDP, growth) must not only be monitored but microeconomic techniques must also be used which can get "inside" the mechanisms of policies.

More specifically, the use of randomised controlled trials to assess the effects of specific programmes regarding schools, hospitals, infrastructures, etc. is becoming more widespread (Banerjee, 2008; Banerjee and Duflo, 2008, Banerjee and He, 2008). These techniques are based on counterfactual logic: possible beneficiaries are randomly assigned to various groups and the results on the "treated" population compared with a specific policy intervention and results obtained on samples of the population which do not undergo "treatment" (control group). The effect of the intervention is the difference between results when it is present and when it is not.

In short, experiments and pilot projects can be used to verify step by step the effectiveness of programs funded with public resources or external aid and measure the impact of interventions on the well-being of the population (Baird, McIntosh and Ozler, 2010).

However, this approach has its limits. The results are context-specific, cannot necessarily be exported and are compatible with various economic theories. However, they provide an extremely useful guide: this type of test can be used to isolate individual mechanisms, identify errors and adjust the course of actions performed locally while work is in progress.

#### *4.3. Instruments that impose conditions on welfare polizie*

In abstract terms, equity is associated with a concept of universal and unconditional welfare. However, when stringent constraints (financial, institutional capability) are present, this theoretical concept becomes a system that is both ineffective and unfair. This explains why programmes that only allow aid to be transferred when specific conditions are met have become more widespread in developing and middle-income countries over the last ten years.

The most widely used instruments are Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) which aim to improve access to education and social services for the poorest members of society (Skoufias, 2005; de Braw and Hoddinott, 2008; World Bank, 2009). Under the scheme, cash transfers are made to poor families contingent on certain behaviour: to receive the cash transfers, families must send their children to school and undertake regular health visits. The aim is therefore not only to alleviate poverty but stimulate investment in human capital and especially children so that poverty is not handed down from one generation to the next.

In addition to schooling and health care, Conditional Cash Transfers can be linked to social services, job seeking, training and microcredit. The key to the success of CCTs lies with integration of the various health, schooling and nutrition projects based on the idea that the various aspects of well-being are interdependent. The other critical point is that this scheme reduces waste and the risks that benefits will reach people who do not fall within the target population (i.e. people in extreme poverty). At the same time, the programme minimises the interception of resources by local political powers through cross-checks on requested requirements and checks by various actors (government agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations, NGOs).

Programmes of this type have been implemented in Brazil since 1993 (Bolsa familia supports 12 million households) and in Mexico since 1997 (Progresa, later renamed Oportunidades). Overall, the CCTS in Latin America have currently been introduced to 15 countries and cover 22 million households, 16% of the population (Ferreira and Robalino, 2010).

Progresa's experience, in particular, was revolutionary because it included continuous monitoring and evaluation (randomised) to improve effectiveness at every step. It is also interesting to note that, after being distributed throughout Latin America, the Progresa programme was launched in developed countries and not only other emerging and developing countries (Africa and Asia). One case in point is the application of the programme in New York with the launch of Opportunity New York City (Miller, Ricco and Smith, 2009). Even in European countries, there is ongoing debate on the opportunities for reform that increase the effectiveness of programmes and incentives to beneficiaries so that they become an active part of policies (de Neuburg, Castonguay, Roelen, 2007). For example, in 2008, the United Kingdom launched a reform of the welfare benefits for unemployed people based on conditionality and evaluation of effects.

The second instrument which is being tested at international level is social vouchers. Social vouchers can only be used to buy essential services at places authorised to do this (i.e. social enterprises and NGOs). Using this instrument produces effects which are similar to those of Conditional Cash Transfers. Social vouchers facilitate the self-selection of groups of beneficiaries, regulate demand and encourage desired behaviour. They also have greater compatibility with incentives to build assets such as human capital which improve the ability to earn an income. Once again, international experience shows that social vouchers are preferable to cash transfers and the monopoly of services provided by the State especially in fragile institutional environments (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, 2006).

Finally, the Centre for Global Development has recently introduced the Cash on Delivery Aid (COD Aid) programme which tackles the problem of incentives and accountability in a different way (Birdsall, Savedoff, Vyborny, 2008; Birdsall,

Savedoff, 2010). The proposal, which is based on the relationship between aid donors and recipient governments, is to stipulate a medium-term contract (at least 5 years) which makes payments once progress made in mutually shared goals has been checked. This progress must be assessed using outcome indicators that have a continuous unit of measure (for example, number of children attending school, reduction in drop-outs, etc.)<sup>2</sup> and should be made transparent to the community. On the other hand, input and policies are not monitored and beneficiaries are given full autonomy and responsibility.

## **5. Implications for social enterprises**

In my opinion, the innovations I have mentioned are highly relevant to the debate currently taking place in Italy on the prospects offered to social enterprises as engines of economic development.

By simplifying and schematising, a common consensus appears to have been reached on the specific value of social enterprises in local development for a number of reasons, including their ability to overcome coordination and information asymmetry problems related to collective resources and direct production of social cohesion in particular (Borzaga, 2010). On a more general level, social enterprises can play a central role in a perspective that sees development in a multidimensional sense and the welfare system as an enabling system that goes beyond the idea of redistributing wealth and income. Indeed, social enterprises help to provide social security and increase the space of capability of vulnerable citizens and democratic participation (Scarlato, 2008).

At the same time, new problems emerge such as those related to incentives and accountability, physiological problems when the resources used are largely external or come from donations or public funds. What is more, there are often multiple and volatile sources of funding. This further fragments and weakens the flow of information required for assessments. It is therefore difficult to allocate responsibility for the results achieved and guarantee transparency. Other frequent problems are:

- information asymmetry on the quality of services offered;
- the difficulty in defining standards and targets concerning the characteristics of assets such as health, education, the well-being of vulnerable groups (children, old people, disabled people), poverty reduction;
- the presence of a number of often conflicting objectives. For example, when dealing with education/the right to study, should the number of people enrolled on courses be maximised or the standard of the courses?

Consequently, when implementing the supply of services typically offered by social enterprises, the party providing funds has no way of checking how the inputs are combined to obtain a specific outcome.

Obviously, accountability tools exist: ex ante assessment by municipalities and local authorities and accounting systems including social reports and codes of ethics. However, as shown in the recent *Rapporto su Sussidiarietà e Pubblica Amministrazione Locale* (Report on Subsidiarity and Local Public Administration), impact assessment in terms of effectiveness of interventions, response to citizens' needs, assessment of the quality of services, fallout in terms of qualitative as well as economic indicators related to voice, participation, etc. is still not very widespread

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<sup>2</sup> More precisely, a fixed amount is paid for each completed progress unit.

(Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà, 2009).

Other recent studies (and news reports) denounce the existence of social enterprises that are simply empty boxes, created in order to secure public funds, or social enterprises which do not comply with the stated mission (see, for example, Becchetti and Castriota, 2010) and so do not use the combination of monetary and non-monetary incentives, which are a strength of genuine social enterprises. These examples bring discredit to the entire social cooperation system and social enterprises in general and should be strongly opposed. This can be done by focusing on the constraint that opportunism poses especially where public institutions are fragile and behaviour based on trust is rare<sup>3</sup>

On an economic level, the problem is to create incentives that produce a mutually beneficial outcome. The problem faced when designing schemes that are compatible with the incentives is correctly defining who bears the risk of the contract.

Systems that provide clauses in favour of social enterprises shift the risk onto Public Administration and therefore risk creating weak incentives for efficiency or effectiveness in the organisation of the social enterprises. Systems that award contracts by public tender with downward bidding, on the other hand, shift all the risk onto the social enterprise. This is an excessive burden for the social enterprise which prevents a rise in the quality of services offered and the introduction of "social innovations" or new solutions to collective problems<sup>4</sup>.

In both cases, a failure to achieve results can be attributed by social enterprises to inadequate aid or by Public Administration to a lack of effort by the social enterprise. In conclusion, these schemes are not very effective in providing results.

The problem lies with increasing responsibility on the two fronts, funding agency and social enterprise, by increasing accountability to citizens. In other words, it is important to clarify responsibilities, provide suitable incentives and measure the progress made using suitable indicators. With this in mind, the experiences of social policies implemented in emerging and developing countries can provide some interesting solutions.

One innovation includes contractual forms which only guarantee benefits if certain targets are met. In this way, competition is created between the social enterprises concerning outcomes and transparency. The basic idea behind the Cash on Delivery scheme may serve this purpose. It is a contract that can be applied to transfers between foundations and local governments and between central government and local governments. However, it may also be used for transfers by local governments and foundations to social enterprises. The advantage of COD contracts is that they give full autonomy to resource beneficiaries and also encourage accountability and a search for organisational innovation in order to achieve objectives based on a shared agreement.

Obviously, the progress made on the set targets must be assessed by a third party which is independent of the contracting parties, an organisation which reviews the

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<sup>3</sup> In Italy this risk is particularly high in Southern regions. Consider, for example, application of the Legislative Decree 155/2006 which governs social enterprises: Campania currently ranks first in Italy for the number of social enterprises registered with the Chambers of Commerce (49.36% of the total), followed by Lombardia (7.05%), Lazio (6.49%), Piemonte and Sardegna (6.33%) (Bronzetti et al, 2010). This data should point to the need to identify new incentives that correct the use of forms of enterprise in the non-profit sector for reasons and objectives that deviate from the typical behaviour of social enterprises.

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of "social innovations" and its contents, see Borzaga (2009).

performance of the social enterprise using effectiveness as well as efficiency indicators. Another advantage of using these procedures is the gradual collection of information on the results attained by the funded social enterprises.

Even social vouchers (which already exist but are still uncommon in Italy) and Conditional Cash Transfers are managed by involving social enterprises. Note that in many countries with a medium or low-income, the State or international organisations make extensive use of Non-Governmental Organisations and other non-profit sectors to provide social services and aid to the population so that cross-checking can be performed when innovative pilot projects are implemented. If these experiences were to be transferred to Italy, the social enterprises could be a crucial factor in the management of vouchers and Conditional Cash Transfers which perform two additional functions as well as providing services: cross-checking and collecting data needed for project assessment work.

The subject of assessment brings us to the question of governance or coordination of the various social policy actions in the area. An issue which is often examined in the international literature on development is that of schemes which should be adopted to effectively put together efforts dispersed among governments, local NGOs, international bodies. Of the proposed solutions, the setting up of an independent, technical agency that can perform a coordinating role in resource allocation, information management, learning feedback and assessment is particularly interesting (Bold, Collier and Zeitlin, 2009).

It is also extremely relevant to the situation in Italy where there is no systematic collection of data on the results of social policies and there are no autonomous bodies that assess policies and the quality of services. An independent technical assessment agency, set up on a regional basis but adopting standards defined by the State, could significantly improve the distribution of public resources and stimulate competition based on quality among the social enterprises.

In conclusion, best practices which have been successfully used in the past must be carefully examined so that innovations that open up social economy perspectives can be introduced. Generally speaking, these good practices come from advanced countries. However, international experience shows that social innovations should also be "imported" from emerging and developing countries.

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