

## **White Paper Review: Universalism in the Time of Divisions**

On 30 June 2015, the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) issued a joint statement affirming a shared vision for a universal commitment to social protection globally, in support of the new development agenda aligned to the current process to the new Sustainable Development Goals.

While the ILO has long led the call for universal protection in order to promote human and economic development, and to address poverty and inequality from a platform premised on solidarity and social cohesion, the last half century has witnessed a steady onslaught of these principles. The commitments to universalism that informed the post - World War Two reconstruction of the developed world have been increasingly scaled down to minimalist, targeted approaches that have sought to divide the 'poorest of the poor' from everybody else. This was initially seen in the economic packages adopted by the developing world, under guidance by external economists, but has more recently also been seen emerging in the austerity packages in post 2008 political debates globally.

Why is this important and how does it affect resource allocations and political sustainability in a country such as South Africa?

South Africa is a country as we all know that is characterised by extremely high levels of inequality, despite having a relatively high per capita income. The result of this is that the majority of people in South Africa still face a daily reality of living in poverty, being forced to make zero- sum gain choices about the allocation of scarce resources and with little or no hope of ever seeing an emergence from the inter-generational poverty into which they and their families are born.

Despite the wide-spread prevalence of poverty, mainstream sentiment has been forged along an ideological bent that seems to think that providing safety nets for people - who for generations were the objects of Apartheid's deliberate policies to create a dependency on a hostile and extractive state - represents an anathema for right-minded (middle class and privileged) people.

Arguments in favour of expanding and increasing the value of the current minimalist social wage provided by government are met with rebuttals that people should be made to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The fact that they have not been able to do so yet is, it is implied, suggestive of the poors' inherent failings and weaknesses. Little consideration is paid to the historic economic model that was created on and sustained by, extremely extractive and exploitative practices in South Africa. The existence of a growing sector of the working poor is further indicative of this mind set as employers seek to maximise the extraction of labour value for as low returns as possible.

We need to question why, when global rhetoric supported the adoption of the MDGs which were meant to draw people out of poverty and into productive economic activity, they were not successful? Inherent to this is that the policies adopted to attain these goals were seen specifically as being policies designed for the poor. And policies designed for the poor, as the saying goes, are always poor policies.

The renewed commitment to universal social protection does not amount to a commitment to provide everybody with handouts. As the preamble to the ILO's Social Protection Floors Recommendation 202 states, the move to formal employment and the establishment of sustainable social security systems are not mutually exclusive at all, but instead thrive on a mutually beneficial reinforcing dynamic.

This is especially important at this point in time in South Africa, as the Welfare White Paper of 1997 is being subjected to a national review in order to align the principles of social protection to the vision of development set out in the National Development Plan 2030. The National Development Plan affirms the notion of a Social Floor that provides a level below which no one should fall. However, an interrogation of the suggested interventions and modalities set out to achieve this goal suggests that current policy is still rooted in an assumption that social security is predominantly for vulnerable groups. Poor people live in poor households, and given the recent findings on rising food insecurity and food costs in South Africa it is clear that social security income into income-deficient households is increasingly diluted given the lack of income accessed by working age adults.

South Africa's constitution was heralded as an exceptional example of progressive socio-economic rights. Given the bold and visionary commitment by global bodies such as the ILO and the World Bank, we encourage South African leaders to pledge their support for a universal approach to social protection. The 2002 report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System (the Taylor Report) was suitably bold in its recommendation of the introduction of a universal basic income grant to all South Africans as a way of enhancing social and political and economic freedom in South Africa, with the idea that the value would be taxed back from the better off. Sadly, the government of the day were more swayed by the then dominant notions of economic conservatism, and rejected the recommendations of their own experts. Since then we have seen an exponential rise in increasingly violent protests as the poor articulate their frustrations and despair.

Let us hope that the good people who are overseeing the review of the Welfare White Paper will be seized of the importance in South Africa of affirming human solidarity through the adoption of universalist protection for all from the cradle to the grave, and that this will in turn provide a more progressive point of departure to construct a truly developmental social protection floor to flesh out the minimalist National Development Plan.