

# The Politics of Social Protection: What do we get from a 'Social Contract' Approach?

## First thoughts...

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**Chronic Poverty**  
Research Centre

## The rise of social contract thinking in international development

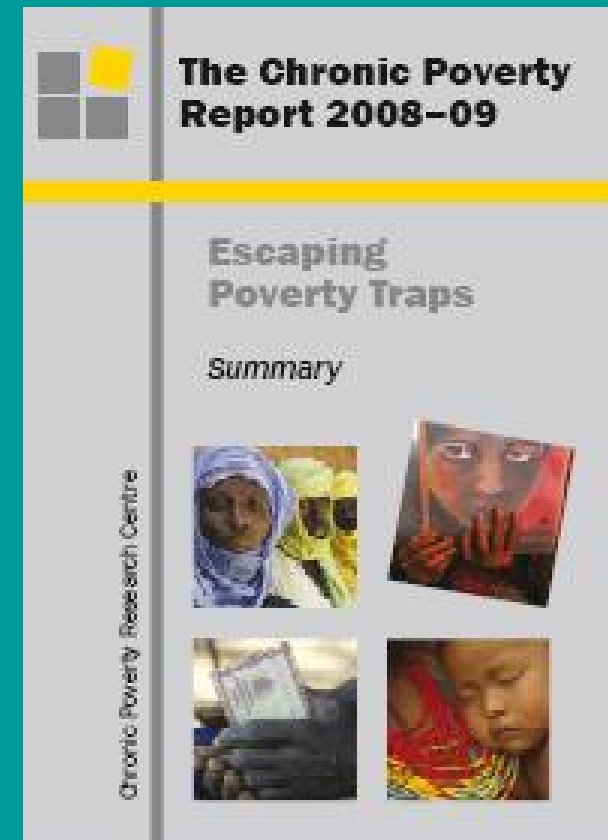
- State fragility as “the rupture of the social contract between state and society” due to “state incapacity or unwillingness to deal with its basic functions” (EU 2007)
- “...acquiring a better understanding of... the factors and processes that produce a social contract between state and society – is critical for all forms of international assistance” (OECD 2008)



## Social contract talk is spreading fast...

- Growth (Haggard)
- Social policy (Haggard and Birdsall)
- Taxation (Moore)
- PRSPs: a debt-related contract
- MDGs: 'the world's biggest promise' (Hulme)

- “...the best way to eradicate chronic poverty is through the creation and maintenance of a just social compact.”  
– CPRC 2008



## Social contracts and social protection

- C19 Poor Law Reforms criticised at the time as a violation of the contract established by predecessor (Himmelfarb 1984)
- “The establishment of permanent social assistance ultimately requires the development of a politically sustainable contract” (Graham 2002)
- “Conditional cash transfers provide money directly to poor families via a “social contract” with the beneficiaries – for example, sending children to school regularly or bringing them to health centers ” (Rawlings and Rubio 2005).



# DU CONTRAT

SOCIAL

OU

PRINCIPES  
DU DROIT  
POLITIQUE

Par J. J. ROUSSEAU, Citoyen  
de Genève.

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Deuxième édition.

Toutefois corrigée.

ANCIEN ST.

Editeur chez Courcier, à Paris, on a ajouté  
une lettre de l'auteur au lecteur qui lui  
reste dans le monde.



A AMSTERDAM,

Chez MARG- MICHEL REY.

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M. DCC. LXXII.

## Social contract theory

- Emerges during a critical time of state formation in western Europe to explain the legitimate basis of political authority
- Can this be applied in the post-colonial world?
- John Rawls (1972): people contract to be ruled and live together insofar as minimal standards of freedom and livelihood are guaranteed for all
- A social contract perspective thus locates social protection within the specific character of state-society relations, and the wider pursuit of social justice

# Different uses of social contract thinking in development

## 1. Explains the politics behind social protection

- Social protection reflects, and emerges in relation to, broader social contracts between states and citizens
- The *historical/process-based* approach

## 2. Defines the basis of delivering social protection

- Social protection offered on a contractual basis
- The *normative/operational* approach

## 3. Defines the political impacts of social protection

- Social protection can help strengthen social contracts between states and citizens (e.g. mobilisation, accountability, nation-building)
- NB: these are not mutually exclusive
- We know a bit more about #1 and #2 than #3



# The politics behind social protection

- Anti-famine protection in India
  - Not just 'democracy': a political promise (de Waal)
- Drought relief in Botswana
  - Administrative ethic, not a right; elite capture, the most destitute are further marginalised
- Social pensions in South Africa
  - 'outstryders', working-class whites, black majority
- Very revealing about the actual forms of politics that drive the establishment and distribution of social protection over time: state-society relations
- Social protection & wider contracts on development?
  - e.g. trade-offs within development strategies
- Could be substituted by alternative concepts

## Delivering social protection from a contractual standpoint

- Claim: social protection should be offered in ways that produces certain types of citizenship
- Two distinct approaches
  - Liberal, interest/merit-based: from Hobbes to Gauthier
  - Social, right/needs-based: from Rousseau to Rawls
- Very different conceptions of agency and justice
- Also a 'third way': the negative-rights approach
  - Locke & property; the existing order is not to be challenged although the excluded should be encouraged to gain the capacities required for access
  - Distinct from the 'positive rights' of Rawls

	<b>Liberal/Interest -based</b>	<b>Right-based (negative)</b>	<b>Right-based (positive)</b>
<b>Key proponents</b>	Hobbes, Nozick, Gauthier	Locke	Rousseau, Rawls
<b>Vision of society</b>	Individualistic, Merit-based justice	Individualistic	Commonwealth Equality-based justice
<b>Development paradigm</b>	Neoliberalism	Inclusive Liberalism	Social democratic development
<b>Key policy actors</b>	Market	State in partnership with private and civic players	State Social movements
<b>Examples of relevant social protection instruments</b>	Basic safety nets Microfinance	Conditional forms of social policy and transfer	Rights-based services & transfers  Anti- discrimination measures

## So, what do we get in theory?

- Social contract-type thinking offers insights into & a unifying perspective on the politics of social protection in Africa:
  - Changing character of state-society relations over time
  - Issues of inclusion, exclusion & citizenship formation
  - Duty-bearing institutions & political commitment
- But it also muddies the waters...
  - Normative sensibilities difficult to relate to post-colonial contexts and largely eschewed in historical-approach
  - Settlements, pacts, coalitions?
- ...and offers a particular approach to social justice
  - Focus on competent contracting adults overlooks important issues of dependence and care (Nussbaum)
  - Social contracts tend to be exclusive, e.g. highly gendered

## And in practice?

- Social protection seems to sustain certain types of contracts
  - Around wider national development strategies
  - Between states & citizens, & between citizens
- In terms of design (and impacts?): an ideological choice
  - The social tendency reflects progressive practice to date
  - A more progressive way forward: engages with causes of poverty, promotes autonomous forms of citizenship and state capacity
  - Other approaches may tend to 'responsibilise' the poor

# Implications for donors

- **States & citizens, not donors, are the key actors here**
- Aid more likely to undermine than strengthen pro-poor social contracts (e.g. rents, accountability, parallel)
- Key issues for donors:
  - ‘Do no harm’ (requires political analysis)
  - Building states, public spheres & citizens
  - Ownership as sovereign control, not commitment to an external policy agenda
  - Building on existing forms of social protection
  - Making social protection politically persuasive to elites
  - Facilitating south-south policy learning
  - From advisors to brokers?