

Restoring the Right to Life and a Life of Dignity for All - The Campaign for Transformative Social Protection in Asia

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THE world is in crises. The global economy is in shambles; the financial system in chaos. Energy supply is rapidly dwindling. There is food scarcity in many parts of the globe, and over a fourth of the world's population is starving. Climatic patterns are changing, bringing havoc to agriculture and unleashing typhoons and floods as well as severe drought that have devastated both cities and rural communities.

We are at a critical juncture of history. The crises are striking hard at the affluent countries of the North, causing indebtedness, joblessness and insecurity. Its effects are harsher still in poorer countries of the South, exacerbating the chronic poverty and inequality that has been rampant in these parts of the world even before the present crises. Social polarization has aggravated as well, widening the already staggering gap between the haves and the have-nots.

But the states' response to the crises is a continuing and even stronger commitment to free trade and the market. Their austerity policies are dismantling public utilities, withdrawing subsidies, diminishing social safety nets, massive lay-offs, the destruction of decent jobs in favor of part-time precarious work, and other harsh measures of transferring the crises from financial institutions onto the people.

States' actions have sparked massive resistance. Expressed in the "Occupy" movements in the US and Canada, in the "indignados" mobilizations in Europe, the anti-regime uprisings in the Arab world, and the social and economic justice movements in Asia, peoples in all regions of the world are up in protest against their governments and rulers who seem to be oblivious to their suffering. The peoples of the North, on one hand, are rising in defense of their quality of life. The peoples of the South, on the other hand, are asserting a more fundamental right—the right to life, a life of dignity for all.

Restoring the right to life and a life of dignity in Asia

Thirty years of neo-liberal economic restructuring in Asia have only resulted in producing two-thirds of the world's poor and hungry—more than 900 million of them living in abject poverty. Despite claims by governments of positive economic growth, over 70 percent of Asia's work force is being pushed to the informal zone where they endure precarious work, poverty wages, and sub-human living conditions. And with the environmental crisis, Asia's poor have all the more become vulnerable as their lives and livelihoods, as well as food security and habitats, are imperiled by the effects of global warming.

Faced with these challenges, Asian activists have banded together in the Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP) to initiate a militant campaign to restore the right to life and human dignity. They are calling for transformative social protection, pressing on governments in all countries to unconditionally guarantee all people the following fundamental economic and social rights:

- The right to work, including a guarantee of living wages, full employment or livelihood opportunity and decent work conditions;
- The right to food, which means full access to adequate food and subsidized prices of staple food items;
- The right to essential services, including quality health care and education, as well as water and electricity; and,
- The right to social security, including pensions for the elderly and disabled, insurance against risks of unemployment, illness and agricultural calamities.

Asian activists reject the ceaseless commodification of all essential goods and services. They oppose the relinquishing by governments of their prime responsibility to provide the people quality health care and education, clean potable water and electricity, and other goods and services so vital to life, to the caprices of the market. They are fighting for the de-commodification of these essential goods and services by demanding from governments that these be provided for free or at highly subsidized prices, to all people. This struggle acknowledges that people have the right to live a life free from want and deprivation. People's entitlement to these rights and to social protection is enshrined in international human rights covenants and laws, e.g. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The NTSP puts the poor and the powerless at the forefront of this struggle, being the overwhelming majority in the region. Thus, it is transformative; the poor in this struggle are conscious agents of change, desiring to lift their own selves from poverty and participating in this effort to improve the quality of life of their community, sector and society as a whole.

Campaigning for transformative social protection is a significant social redistribution measure. But it is also a movement to empower the poor, to propel them into more inspired actions, into building their confidence and realizing their collective strength, into expanding spaces for political participation thereby strengthening the movement from below for a truly democratic societal transformation.

Affordability and doability

The NTSP believes that universal social protection, even in developing countries, is affordable and doable. Both the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO) are in fact spearheading a global advocacy for a social protection floor.

This initiative includes the following: basic income security, e.g. pensions for the elderly and disabled, child benefits, income support and/or employment guarantees for working poor; affordable access to essential social services, e.g. health, water, education, food security, housing, and others.

Costing studies of the ILO in Africa and Asia clearly show that domestic resources can be generated to cover the social protection floor programs and would cost no more than four percent of the countries' national income. [1] A key requisite to realize this, however, is the exercise of the states' political will and determination.

- Progressive economists highlight the following steps:
- Putting in place an effective tax collection and administration system;
- Realigning social priorities by doing away with non-essential expenditures such as capital outlay for the military and perks of state officials;

Instituting progressive taxation programs by shifting the tax burden to the local elite and big corporations through, for instance, higher corporate and income taxes and VAT on non-essential goods; and,

Embarking on a debt moratorium and cancellation of illegitimate debts. Debt servicing has significantly contributed to budget deficits and depressed rate of growth. These debt payments can be channeled to social and ecological programs. [2]

But while the UN and ILO's social protection floor is an outstanding initiative, it remains a policy of targeting and does not go beyond poverty reduction and its ultimate elimination. Activists should, however, capitalize on it, taking it as an opportunity to develop a broader and more transformative concept of social protection. [3]

Network beginnings

The NTSP was formed in 2008 at the sidelines of the 7th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) in Beijing. At that time, the financial crisis was just beginning to unravel and the social movements and NGOs within the AEPF inter-regional network appealed to the heads of states of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to place at the center of the ASEM agenda "people, planet and community" over "profit, capital and market." (This call has since become a slogan bannered by protesters to expose corporate greed and state complicity.)

Network members representing poor people's movements in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and India saw the crises as an opportunity for the poor and the most affected to come forward and assert the right to decent work and decent life. At its founding conference in Manila, the Network resolved to pursue transformative social protection programs in their respective countries and at regional and international bodies like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), European Union (EU), and ASEM. [4]

The Network agreed to first focus on public information and education as well as capacity-building activities to elevate the transformative social protection agenda at the center of policy debates in member-countries and affirm its importance as an anti-poverty instrument. It also emphasized the need for a broad coalition of social movements, trade unions, sectoral networks and NGOs that are actively engaging governments at the local, national, and international arenas so the movement can move forward.

A powerful and commanding level of assertion and pressure from below from a mighty coalition led by grassroots organizations is deemed essential to claim these entitlements. Based on the experiences of Costa Rica, Mauritius and the state of Kerala in India, widely considered the “welfare states of the South,” nationwide campaigns that move people to collective participation and action had to be waged before effective social protection systems with wide coverage and institutionalized by the state could be achieved. [5]

In Costa Rica, for instance, peasants and small coffee producers worked together and pushed for institutionalization of social and economic rights. In Mauritius, farmers groups collaborated with the Agricultural Laborers Association and urban trade unions to spearhead social reforms. In the state of Kerala, anti-caste and land reform movements, with trade union federations and informal sector workers pushed the state to universalize social protection. In these three countries, pro-labor and socialist-oriented parties actively cooperated with people’s movements to advance the campaign for social protection. [6]

Immediate agenda

The NTSP’s immediate agenda is to oblige the states in Asia to have a strong role in institutionalizing and legislating a national-level system of universal social protection. To be universal means that social protection should be provided by governments unconditionally to all their citizens and residents, i.e. migrant workers and refugees. States should take the leading role in the delivery of basic services and infrastructure, and therefore assume the key responsibilities of financing, administering and regulating social protection programs and institutions. [7]

These programs should include social assistance such as the social protection floor, social insurances and pensions, social services like water and electricity, health and education, as well as labor laws that ensure living wages, decent work and full employment. Certainly all of these cannot be realized and provided all at once, but it is important for the states to have a broad strategy to achieve all these universally and ensuring their legislative or constitutional framework. [8]

The above agenda is in contrast to the neoliberal policy framework to social protection, promoted by the World Bank and adopted by most states in Asia. The Bank regards markets as the best solution to the vulnerabilities of the poor and relies on targeted safety nets to alleviate the adverse consequences of the economic and other crises. By extension, it perceives the role of the State as limited to being a provider of safety nets when market responses are insufficient. [9]

But according to the United Nation’s Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the Asian Financial crisis of 1997-98 exposed the failure of safety net responses in poverty reduction and social redistribution. The institute reveals that the neoliberal approach to social protection, which started in the 1980s and combined privatization of essential social services and targeted public provision, has resulted in a “lost decade of development” in many parts of the world. It asserts further that in countries where large sectors of the population are poor, the targeting method entails high administrative costs and substantial errors of under-coverage while stigmatizing the beneficiaries. [10]

Strategic agenda

In the long-term, the NTSP will highlight the transformative aspect of social protection. Its struggle shall address the structural causes of poverty by pressing governments to implement alternative national development strategies that bring about social justice, equity and ecological sustainability. The universalization of social protection cannot stand alone and should be made an integral part of these strategies. [11] A central pre-condition to the implementation of alternative national development strategies therefore is for progressive forces to reclaim the State and to transform it into a pro-active and people-centered agent of development.

When the structural adjustment programs were imposed in Asia in the 1980s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, many states were pressured into supporting the infrastructure needs of big corporations, opening up their markets to international trade, allowing market forces to dictate the direction of the economy, and privatizing public resources and services. But as most countries in the Asian region took on these neo-liberal structures over the years, their local industries were shattered and their agricultural capacities crushed. This seriously undermined their capacity for food production. [12]

From this experience, Asian activists see the utmost importance of conjuring a different kind of State, one which regulates and disciplines the market and subordinates the interests of corporations and the elite on behalf of the poor majority and the common good. More than social assistance and redistribution, the State must address power imbalances and develop mechanisms for the participation of the poor and marginalized not only during elections but at all levels of decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Under the present crises, states in Asia should campaign for alternative national development strategies that will overturn the failed strategies formulated by international financing institutions. These should replace the current neoliberal policies on trade and investment liberalization, deregulation, privatization and export-led growth. [13]

Developing countries must strengthen their domestic markets to serve as the main stimulus of economic growth. They should increase the purchasing power of their poor through income and asset redistribution measures like reforming land ownership, providing living wages to workers, full employment and universal social protection programs. Also crucial is regulating every country's relationship with the global economy to protect its market from unfair competition while still in the process of strengthening the capacity of its domestic agriculture and industry. [14]

In this regard, the developing economies should set a policy for the strategic use of tariffs and other trade mechanisms not only to protect the domestic market from unfair competition but, more importantly, to let it grow in depth and breadth. Agriculture should become the focal point of the economy, ensuring food sufficiency. To give agricultural development impetus, a thorough-going land reform program should be implemented and state subsidies provided farmers. Industries should be made to support agriculture, especially in developing sustainable agro-technologies that are benign to the environment. [15]

These alternative strategies will forge closer linkages between agricultural and industrial growth and between rising incomes and their equitable distribution. These strategies can also set limits to economic growth in the face of pressing environmental concerns.

Priorities at the regional and global level

The NTSP, in cooperation with Forum-Asia (a regional network of major human rights organizations in the region) and progressive Asian parliamentarians, plan to actively lobby in regional bodies like the ASEAN for the adoption of a Social Agenda. [16]. The Social Agenda will include the universalisation of social protection as well as the de-privatization in the region of essential goods and services vital to human life. The creation of a Regional Social Protection Fund is also envisioned by Asian activists, financed from funds generated through the introduction of a financial transaction tax. This tax covers currency transactions and all transactions involving financial assets like equity bonds and treasury bills. Additionally, the Network will engage ASEAN governments to abolish their respective bank secrecy laws and dismantle their tax havens to generate additional funds for the proposed regional fund. The reduction of military budgets is also a strategic issue that activists can demand from their governments and regional bodies and redirect such expenditures to social protection programs. [17]

At the global level, the NTSP, as part of an international alliance of civil society organizations, seeks universal social protection and innovative financing through the financial transaction tax. This alliance also includes the networks of the World Social Forum on Health and Social Security, Global Social Justice, Action Aid, the Asia Europe People's Forum and South-South People's Solidarity Network. The UNRISD provides the research and knowledge support for the alliance.

NTSP is also supporting the initiative of progressive international NGOs, for a "UN Charter on the Common Goods of Humankind." This proposed Charter holds that "common goods" should not be subjected to commodification and trade in capitalist markets. It aims to reclaim the commons, which means the seas, water, air, forests, as well as all essential goods and services. It believes that if these commons stay in the hands of individuals and corporations as commodities that can just be transacted in the markets, they will fall outside the realm of democratic control. At the rate the world's natural resources are plundered by these few individuals and corporations, the sustainability of these commons, and therefore the right to a decent life for both present and future generations, cannot not be ensured. [18]

Asian activists believe that this new UN Charter, which is envisioned to parallel the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is much-needed today. This can be an eminent framework, as well as an ethical and legal basis to which activists can refer. They can cite it in support of major advocacies for the well-being of humankind under this crises: for universal social protection globally, and for the radical call of establishing at the international level a general law on the de-privatization of "common goods" through the public monopoly of strategic goods, services and utilities. This will include not only basic goods and services to survive, but also natural resources, transportation, information, finance and banking system, energy sources, among others.

Conclusion

After plunging the world into untold suffering, capitalism is now at its worst crisis. But progressive forces have failed to seize this moment to challenge it with bold, workable alternatives. The problem lies not on the dearth of new paths to replace the failed and discredited dominant system. Alternative paradigms, based on social justice, equity, environmental sustainability and participatory democracy, that aim to restore humanity's relationship with nature and solidarity among peoples has been there for some time, presented by renowned activists and scholars

The key problem lies in the failure of the Left to translate their vision and values into doable and

transformative alternatives to address, in all fronts, the urgent needs of peoples affected by the crisis. The challenge therefore is to put forward these alternatives, forge them into unifying advocacies and make them flourish into global movements that would converge the struggles of peoples of the South with the struggles of peoples of the North.

The transformative social protection campaign is one such alternative. It is a movement to restore the right to life and restore a life of dignity for all humankind.

Poor peoples' networks in Asia, together with civil society organizations, are pursuing this campaign to actively confront the pervasive insecurity and deprivation brought about by capitalist globalization that is now heightened by the current crises. They know from their years of activism that the power of collective mobilization and struggle can challenge the limits of exploitative systems and press on to open new pathways that will allow people to live freely—free from insecurity, free from deprivation and want, free to live a life of dignity, and free to explore their full potential as human beings.

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Footnotes

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