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**Reclaiming Social Policy:  
Social Spending in Low Income Countries Reconsidered**

**Arjan de Haan<sup>1</sup>**

Social spending in low-income countries has received surprisingly little attention in the academic literature. The reasons for this are varied, and of importance for the main theme of this proposed paper. Comparable data are hardly available, with major international agencies having paid little attention to data collection. And of course there have been serious disagreements on the issues, which on the whole have *not* stimulated in-depth scholarly debate (recent work at UNRISD being an exception). Against this relative gap in the global social policy literature, this paper will explore three aspects of social spending in low-income countries: levels and trends and how these can be explained, the orientation of welfare spending, as highlighted in writings on for example East Asian welfare regimes, and the political processes behind social spending. It is recognised that the category low-income countries is far from homogeneous: based on the work presented in my forthcoming book I will attempt to bring categorizations around the variable of orientation of social spending.

First, as noted, we know little – too little – about levels and trends in social spending in low-income countries. This first section will present and analyse the most reliable existing comparable data, with a description of trends in a selected number of countries. This will show the enormous variety at similar levels of GDP for example, the high volatility in trends possibly particularly in aid-dependent countries – the academic literature so far has failed to construct a convincing narrative or explanatory framework. The section will include an analysis of possible links between countries social spending and income inequality, suggesting that in low-income countries the reverse of the correlation observed in OECD countries may exist: in the South, more unequal countries tend to have higher public and social spending.

The second section will explore different ‘orientations’ of public spending. The OECD welfare state debate, and work by Thandika Mkandawire for example have stressed how in different contexts different concepts of links between social and economic policies have been articulated. Notably, Scandinavian approaches have emphasised the importance of social spending as an integral part of economic growth and modernisation, while Anglo-Saxon approaches have tended to be of a ‘residual’ nature (targeting approaches only partly overlap with these differences). East Asian approaches again have

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<sup>1</sup> Arjan de Haan is currently Social Development Adviser at the UK Department for International Development, based in Beijing. The research on which this paper is based has been undertaken while practitioner at DFID since 1998, and as Visiting Professor at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada (2005-06). The working title for this paper is from the title of the forthcoming book (publ Palgrave) which should be available by the time of the conference).

had a strong 'productivist' orientation, whereas many African and South Asian countries have been much more strongly influenced by welfarist approaches (by and large, it seems, through colonial links). The argument put forward is that a social policy categorisation might usefully use these orientations as starting points, and that these are closely intertwined with approaches to economic policies (but cutting across sides in debates on neo-liberal models).

The third main section looks at the politics behind social spending. These politics are greatly 'globalised', but global forces are manifold. First, as in the OECD, there is clear evidence of policy learning across country (with models from China for example rapidly gaining popularity, and actively promoted alongside Chinese global investments and China's (re-)entry on global political scenes. Second, there are clear cases of dominance of global financial institutions, and how these have promoted certain models (unsuccessfully, often, but arguably under-mining articulation of national social policy tradition). But as much as World Bank and IMF have been responsible for forcing policy models in aid-dependent countries, international NGOs have had a very big impact on patterns of social spending (eg articulated through PRSP approaches, with very high levels of debt relief and additional funding going to social sectors, while trends had shown clear declines in spending in agriculture and infrastructure). Finally, these global forces have not contributed to and possibly undermined structures of accountability in public policy and spending at national levels (a key ingredient in Lindert's analysis around the welfare state as a 'free-lunch').

The conclusion will highlight some priorities for research, and articulate what in my view an agenda for 'reclaiming social policy' implies.