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The Social Contract Revisited

Crisis and the Welfare State: The Need for a New Distributional Agenda

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Executive Summary

- In the recent decades preceding the current economic crisis, despite the increase in employment rates and continuing high levels of social spending, many welfare states did not succeed in making any further progress in the fight against (relative) income poverty, particularly within the population at working age. This policy brief attempts to explain this by pointing to the following trends:
  - rising employment benefited only partially workless households;
  - minimum income protection for the working age population without work declined significantly in all countries;
  - new Matthew effects emerged in social protection of new social risks;
  - welfare states became less distributive.

- In the current period of rising unemployment, social protection systems act as stabilizers or buffers against poverty, rising inequalities, and social unrest. Through the reforms of social policies in the last decades the welfare states are better equipped to maintain workers in employment, to support activation, and promote re-integration into the labour market. However, in many countries protection levels are inadequate. Not surprisingly, today many countries reinforce the support to people's income through measures including increasing the level of minimum wage, extending the coverage or duration of unemployment benefits, and introducing tax rebates or tax exemptions for specific groups. In spite of fallen revenues, many countries have augmented expenditures.

- These policies are strongly redistributive. However it is probable that in the longer run these policies will appear to be unsustainable. The expenditure levels are in many countries at historically high levels and in the coming decades it will push strongly upwards due to the severe rising costs of old age pensions and health care. This will lead to increasing pressures on government and social transfers.

- An adapted version of the old distributive agenda should again become focal in social policymaking; thereby prioritizing an adequate minimum income protection, the reinforcement of the distributional capacity of social programmes, enforcing efficiency, and improving the incentive structures.

- Contemporary welfare states remain in need of powerful policies aimed at protecting against new social risks, inclusion through work, and more equality in education and the labour market. Clearly, in less stratified societies, such as in Scandinavia, there is less scope for Matthew effects and these social policies are likely to be more effective. However, our analysis suggests that welfare states should take more account of the highly stratified nature of 'new social risks', of the continuing need to protect people against the equally strongly stratified old social risks, and of the unsolved question of how to design and implement institutions that are more effective in creating equal opportunities. Adequate social security and efficient social redistribution are part and parcel of the social investment state.

Crisis and the Welfare State: The Need for a New Distributional Agenda

Trends in inequality and relative income poverty before the crisis

Since the second half of the 1980s, it seems that many welfare states evolved in the direction of greater inequality. The increase in inequalities appeared first in the United States (from the 1970s), followed by the United Kingdom. This trend was attributed to a real drop in the lowest wages, in combination with weak welfare institutions. More recently, different sources point to an increase of inequalities also in the more egalitarian and stronger welfare states in Scandinavia and the European continent. The recent OECD report *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries* (2008) concludes, on the basis of empirical data concerning the evolution of the income redistribution and financial poverty, 'that there has been an increase in income inequality that has gone on since at least the mid-1980s and probably since the mid-1970s. The widening has affected most (but not all) countries' (OECD, 2008: 17).

Turning to the evolution of relative financial poverty (as measured by the 50 or 60% of standardized median income) the OECD study concludes: 'Over the entire period from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, the poverty headcount increased in two-thirds of the OECD countries' (OECD, 2008: 129). Within the working age population specifically it appears that in all the countries poverty increased between 1995 and 2005 or remained stable (see Table 5.4 of the OECD report).

This standstill in inequality and poverty is disquieting because social, economic, and demographic circumstances were, in the period under review, favourable for a successful drive to reduce poverty and social inequalities. As a consequence of the slowdown in the pace of family change (individualization) and the continuing rise in the number of double income families, the potential negative impact of changes in family structures on poverty and income inequality became much less important in the nineties as compared to the previous decades.

Moreover, since the mid-1990s welfare states focused on 'more jobs' in order to increase economic growth and fight poverty. Consequently, employment, especially among women, has risen everywhere, albeit to varying degrees. Poverty is typically one-third higher amongst social beneficiaries than among those who are in work. In addition, rising employment in many welfare states was at least partially converted in a decline of the number of workless households. The significant rise in the number of people at work provided ample opportunity to make progress in the eradication of poverty, and should have diminished the need for social security. As overall social expenditure remained high (and underwent a slight increase in the 2000s) the question arises therefore why the levels of poverty and income inequality have not been reduced in the pre-crisis era.

The decreasing distributional capacity of the pre-crisis welfare states

Social policies, taxes, social transfers, and benefits in kind are evidently crucial in shaping the income distribution and as instruments of anti-poverty strategies. There is a fairly strong negative correlation between the level of expenditure on social protection, income inequality, and the risk of poverty. This is reasonably well established on empirical grounds (Cantillon et al., 2003). When trying to understand poverty trends we therefore must consider the levels of social expenditures. On average, social spending increased slightly from 1995 to 2005. Expansion was most pronounced in health care, sickness, and invalidity. Pensions increased slightly. In most countries unemployment spending decreased, while

the picture for the expenditures on family and children is mixed. Even when we exclude health care we find a slight increase in social expenditures since 2000 in many countries.

The OECD report *Growing Unequal?* points to the decreasing distributional capacity of social policies as one of the important reasons why in most developed welfare states income inequality and poverty didn't decrease any more since the nineties (the other being rising wage inequalities). What was going wrong?

Policy re-orientation in the '90s: towards the 'social investment state'

As of the mid-1980s, against budgetary limitations imposed by slower economic growth (and the already high social expenditures) welfare states were confronted first with the 'new social risks' of low levels of education, divorces, and combination of work and family life, and second, with the continuing need for protection against old social risks (unemployment, sickness, old age). This prompted the developed welfare states to seek ways to invest in employment, in education, in new and old social needs and all this, within a tight budgetary framework.

Generally speaking, the ingredients of the policy that most welfare states developed, in order to achieve the three objectives, were the following:

1. focus on employment (making work pay, activation of the recipients of social benefits, and subsidizing low-productive work);
2. cost savings (through privatization and by imposing more stringent eligibility criteria);
3. new social risks (parental leave schemes, childcare, child maintenance funds, care for the elderly, etc.);
4. investing in human capital by reforming the educational system (the focus shifts away from equality of outcomes towards a more explicit striving for equal opportunities).

In most welfare states the focus shifted towards activation and social services. Today, there is growing interest in social interventions in the field of childcare, education, and elderly care with a view to enhancing households' ability to combine work and care. Recent literature refers to an activating welfare state, a 'new' social contract, and a new social agenda behind which we discern a policy shift away from passive social protection and job security to employment security and 'a social investment' agenda aimed at reinforcing the aspect of human capital. Esping-Andersen (1999) has contributed forcefully to an analysis of the investment approach to social policy. He attributes the uniqueness of the welfare state in Sweden to its 'productive' and 'preventive' social policy that invests in education, employment, and family services. The term 'social investment state' was coined by A. Giddens in The Third Way (1998) when he argued for the need to turn welfare states into 'social investment states' geared to 'investment in human capital wherever possible, rather than direct provision of economic maintenance'.

It is following this line of thought that the Lisbon Strategy set out the goal for the European Union, 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Commission 2001b, p.11). Within this framework, investment in social policy plays a critical role as part of a virtuous circle combining adaptability, flexibility, security, and employability (European Commission 2004). This is evident in the European Union's Social Policy Agenda, adopted in 2000, which identifies as its guiding principle strengthening the role of social policy as a productive factor. Social policy is thought to assist in the managing of structural change while minimizing negative social consequences (European Commission 2000).

Today, the continental welfare states spend almost as much on active labour market policies as the Scandinavian countries, so that we can rightly speak of a catch-up drive since the 1980s. Until recently, most employment indicators displayed important rising trends almost everywhere. Expenditure on family support schemes rose everywhere, and while it is still most substantial in the Scandinavian countries, many other welfare states are not far behind. Many instruments are deployed, ranging from traditional

child benefit schemes and tax credits to child day-care provisions, parental leave schemes, care insurance etc. There is thus strong evidence that policies in the rich, developed welfare states moved in the same direction, with a focus on work and new social risks.

The aim of 'social investment' is to move beyond redistributive social welfare centred on benefits. In this framework, inequality and relative income poverty are less of an issue. Many authors have been more or less explicit on this (see Giddens, Esping-Andersen). However, it can be expected that successful social policies aiming at equal opportunities, more jobs, and a better work–life balance should at least not be detrimental to equality and poverty. Moreover, if the 'returns on investment' are appropriate, social expenditures should become more adequate and more efficient. So, why has the distributional capacity of welfare states declined in most countries?

Less generous protection against 'old social risks'

By focusing on the levels of social assistance benefits, we consider first what happened with the generosity of the traditional 'passive' income support. In many countries it appears that during the course of the 1990s, social assistance benefits for the working age population were losing ground. In the most developed welfares states in Europe for instance, they decreased by 10-20% and more compared to the average wages. The decline did not only appear in countries where the level of protection was initially relatively high (Sweden and the Netherlands) but also in countries with relatively low benefits (Germany and Belgium) (Van Mechelen et al., 2007).

To what extent are these trends relevant to our reflection? The level of minimum benefits is obviously an important factor where financial poverty is concerned. By far the most vulnerable groups in all welfare states are the non-employed at working age: poverty rates for workless households are particular high in all countries, especially when they rely on the lowest social safety nets.

However, it should be pointed out that the generosity of assistance benefits appears to be only moderately correlated to the number of persons below the poverty line (Cantillon et al., 2008). This is explained partly by non-take-up, partly by the fact that assistance plays only a marginal role in reducing poverty, especially in the developed welfare states on the European continent and in the Scandinavian countries (Nelson, 2007; Van Mechelen, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that the downward trend of the assistance minima did not cause a significant negative impact on the poverty figures. This is even more so because in many countries the levels of the benefits were already below the poverty threshold at the beginning of the period.

It can be expected though that trends in minimum benefits affect (or are the result of) broader trends in minimum wages and social security transfers. OECD figures on the evolution of replacement rates of social benefits (in particular unemployment benefits) suggest indeed a downward trend since the nineties in many nations.

To what extent were the downward trends of minimum incomes related to the employment strategies developed within the framework of the 'active welfare state'? Overall, it has been shown extensively that there does not exist an a priori trade-off between work and generosity in social protection.

Although a variety of instruments is implemented in order to get more people into work, making work pay by fighting unemployment traps has been an important policy aim everywhere. This can be done in two ways: by lowering the benefits or by making employment more rewarding. Most countries attempted to employ both strategies. However, it is clear that the dependency traps were diminished at least in part at the expense of a fairly substantial erosion of the minimum benefits (Cantillon et al., 2008). Recent policies attempted to offset this erosion by increases in the social benefits. However, in most countries, this increase was only moderate. The fight against unemployment traps has been an

important driving force. Thus it seems that we can at least suppose that the focus on employment has weakened the protection against the 'old risks'. Here we touch on a *first ambiguity of the so-called 'social investment state'*. On the one hand 'activation' aims at social and economic inclusion of people who face difficulties in finding their way to the labour market. To do so, they are assisted by a broad range of policy instruments, ranging from in-work benefits, reductions of taxes and job subsidies, to individual counselling, working time flexibility, and childcare. On the other hand, 'activation' also implies to a greater or lesser extent financial exclusion of those who are, or cannot be, activated. Arguably, new risks policies have driven out old risk policy.

New social risks and Matthew effects

In the previous years, budgets for 'new social risks' increased dramatically in all welfare states, but would appear to have generated Matthew effects, meaning that even though social benefits are seemingly universal, less well-off groups enjoy fewer social benefits than well-off groups. The budgets for the new social risk-policies indeed tend to flow, more than cash transfer, to the higher income groups.

Because protection against 'new social risks' makes welfare states more service oriented, it is generally assumed that services are less redistributive than cash transfers. More importantly, the services that were developed in the nineties are typically directed to the work–family balance and thus differ strongly from old ones such as health care or education. They are also heavily weighted towards the role of women and its social stratification. Insofar as the speed of emancipation differs according to social class and educational background new social risks may indeed affect more middle- and high-income families.

For highly educated women emancipation has indeed been almost completely accomplished. The lower the education level, however, the lower women's participation in the labour market and the greater the gender inequality. Regardless of the type of welfare state, almost all highly skilled women participate, even if they have children. The picture of low-skilled women is completely different, as their employment rate is significantly lower, mainly if they have children. This means that the public resources employed to facilitate the combination of working and family life (such as childcare) tend to flow to higher income groups; these groups are mainly double-income families with a higher educational level (Cantillon et al., 2001).

In all countries the employment rate for low-skilled mothers with a child under the age of three is significantly lower than for high-skilled mothers: differences range from 28 per cent in France and Germany, 50 per cent in Belgium, and (more surprisingly) 40 per cent in Denmark and Sweden (Table 1).

Table 1: **Employment rate for women with a child under the age of three, according to education level (%) and the difference with employment rates according to educational level for all women (20-49)**

Country	Educational level					
	Low		Medium		High	
France	48.8	(-19.0)	58.7	(-13.2)	77.2	(-1.3)
Denmark	33.1	(-32.7)	65.6	(-4.5)	74.3	(-5.7)
Sweden	32.6	(-28.4)	76.5	(-0.7)	78.4	(-4.6)
Belgium	29.4	(-17.7)	67.3	(-1.7)	85.7	(+1.8)
Germany	21.0	(-29.9)	35.2	(-40.1)	49.1	(-36.2)
United Kingdom	20.4	(-27.7)	49.6	(-23.5)	56.2	(-23.5)
Austria	19.8	(-33.2)	18.9	(-48.6)	36.6	(-39.1)

Note: Sorted by the employment rate of low-skilled women with a young child.
Source: Ghysels and Van Lancker, 2009.

What does that mean in terms of the use of childcare services and the distribution of social expenditures? Public expenditures for childcare are directed more to higher income families than, for example, compulsory education or unemployment and sickness benefits. Although this should be investigated, there are indications that the same is probably true for different types of parental leave schemes. Estimations of the impact of the expansion of the Canadian paid family leave showed, for instance, that the changes were concentrated among economically advantaged groups of women (Hanratty and Trzcinski, 2009). Likewise, take-up of paid leave in Flanders is strongly stratified.

We conclude that the social stratification of 'new social risks' can at least partially explain why the redistributing power of welfare states has decreased in the recent past. Here lies *a second ambiguity of the social investment state.* If one wishes to support the emancipation process by increasing women's labour force participation, then a policy must be employed to facilitate a combination of work and family life. Obviously, this policy will first benefit those who already participate in the labour process, in the hope that the others will follow. However, after more than thirty years of the women's liberation movement, activity rates of low-skilled mothers remain significantly below that of their high-skilled counterparts. This is also the case in the Scandinavian countries, undeniably the forerunners of the emancipation process. Insofar as women's role remains highly socially stratified and as long as there is no adequate support for those for whom the combination of work and family life is (temporarily) not an option (for example, mothers and fathers with a disabled child, single mothers with difficult teenagers, unemployed, sick or disabled parents) the new risk policy is bound to generate Matthew effects. More generally, focusing on 'new' social risk while disregarding social class is detrimental to the distributional capacity of social policy.

Standstill in equal opportunities

Never before in history were education and life opportunities so inextricably linked as today. Consequently, the development of talent is one of the most important tasks of contemporary welfare states, both for social reasons (to reinforce upward social mobility) and for economic reasons, since the nurturing of talent through education is increasingly important in the ageing, knowledge-based economy.

Against this background, it is no wonder that the question of 'equal opportunities' (previously called the 'democratization of education') became a strong focal point in the policy agendas of international organizations and of individual countries and regions.

However, as had been shown by the seminal comparative work of Erikson and Goldthorpe, in most countries the expansion of education in the post-war period is not accompanied with a reduction of the social inequality in education participation. More generally, cross-national variations in social mobility led these authors to conclude that there is a high degree of constancy in patterns of social mobility in the industrialized world (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). They ascertained that, 'of late, a number of studies have indicated that the part that is played in mediating intergenerational class mobility by educational attainment is if anything *declining*' (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2002).

This means, and this is the *third ambiguity of the social investment state*, that an increase in expenditure on non-compulsory education, even if this increase is aimed at an equal opportunity policy, has a negative impact on the redistributing effect of social expenditures, at least in as far as these policies fail to meet their egalitarian goals.

Social impact of the crisis and policy responses

The financial and economic crisis has severely eroded families' financial wealth, has shrunk the GDP, and caused a significant rise in unemployment. Some of these effects will be relatively long-lasting: greater risk aversion, slower economic growth, and substantial deterioration of public finances.
The impact of rising unemployment on poverty critically depends on the levels of income support for those who lose their jobs, and on the availability of other incomes within the households hit by

unemployment. As a consequence of the generalization of dual earnership, the number of jobless households will probably be much lower than in the crisis of the 1970s. However, statistics tell that the categories of workers that are on the front line of the crisis, include the young, the low-skilled, employees holding temporary contracts, migrants, and the elderly. Within these groups an overrepresentation of jobless households is likely.

As capital is unevenly distributed among the population the impression exists that the financial crisis predominantly affects the higher income groups. However, people with smaller savings have also been affected. The consequences of the financial crisis for elderly people in particular should not be underestimated, as pensions remain inadequate in many countries. This is particularly the case where pensions are of the defined-contribution kind. Within the European Union, Member States have taken action to reinforce the support to people's income through measures that include increasing the level of minimum income or minimum wages, extending the coverage or duration of unemployment benefits, and reinforcing other social benefits. According to the European Commission:

> *Members States reacted promptly to the crisis by taking measures in four main areas: i) labour market; ii) income support; iii) measures to mitigate the direct impact of the financial crisis on households; iv) investments in social and health infrastructure. Member States are also considering ways to address the long-term impacts that the crisis is expected to have on the major social security schemes.* (European Commission, 2009)

A recent International Labour Organization (ILO) study concluded for a larger number of countries that:

> *in spite of fallen revenue, many countries have augmented social expenditures. Social protection measures, discretionary and non-discretionary, are acting as a key stabilizer of aggregate demand. The preferred options have been expansion of duration and coverage of unemployment benefit, extensions of old age pensions and expansion of health insurance and child benefits. Targeted cash transfers have played a particularly useful function in several countries.* (ILO, 2009)

In a first reaction to the financial crisis it appears that many welfare states have improved the protection of the unemployed and their families, thereby reinforcing the protection against the 'old social risks'. While it remains unclear how important these efforts are, it would seem, however, that this policy route as such is unsustainable in the long run. Already there are signs of consolidation measures. First, one should take into account that unemployment will be rising for quite a long period to come. Accordingly, expenses will keep on rising for quite some time. Second, in many countries social expenditures are already at a very high level. The increase in expenditures of the '70s that arose as a consequence of the unemployment hikes of that time cannot be repeated: compared to the '70s social security today is typically more than 10 per cent more expensive.

Third, the current crisis coincides with the start of the big increase in expenditure due to population ageing. Whereas before the crisis, projected increases in these expenditures could be called 'serious but not dramatic', they are now threatening, and should be added to the cost of unemployment expenditures and, crucially, to the sharply risen costs of the public debt (according to the European Commission, the rise is from 2.3% of GDP in 2008 to 6% in 2009). These factors will lead to increasing pressures on government expenditures and social transfers.

The economic crisis makes clear that:

1. the old social risks didn't disappear;
2. investment states need direct provisions of adequate income maintenance especially when confronted with unexpected adversity;
3. a new distributional agenda is necessary in order to avoid increased poverty and income inequalities as social expenditure increases.

Conclusion

In the recent decades preceding the current economic crisis, despite the increase in employment rates and prevailing high levels of social spending, many welfare states did not succeed in making any further progress in the fight against (relative) income poverty, particularly within the population at working age. We showed that at that time:

- rising employment benefited only partially workless households;
- minimum income protection for the working age population without work declined significantly in all countries;
- new Matthew effects emerged in social protection of new social risks;
- welfare states became less distributive.

In the current period of rising unemployment, social protection systems act as stabilizers and more or less strong buffers against poverty, rising inequalities, and social unrest. Arguably, these policies are strongly redistributive. However it is probable that in the longer term these policies will appear to be unsustainable. The conclusion is that an adapted version of the old distributive agenda should again become central to social policymaking; thereby prioritizing an adequate minimum income protection, the reinforcement of the distributional capacity of social programmes, enforcing efficiency, and improving the incentive structures.

Additionally, welfare states should take more account of the highly stratified nature of 'new social risks', of the continuing need to protect people against the equally strongly stratified old social risks and of the unsolved question of how to design and implement institutions that are more effective in creating equal opportunities. Adequate social security and efficient social redistribution are part and parcel of the social investment state.

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