

The Politics of Pro-Poor Policies in the Global South

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Abstract

This thematic issue on the politics of pro-poor policies in the Global South brings together 13 articles that centre on the importance of institutionalist analysis. We emphasise several institutional dimensions that are particularly important in relation to pro-poor policies: processes of social ordering and social reproduction, the exercise of power, mechanisms of rule, and notions and practices of citizenship and rights. Accordingly, in our call for papers, we identified four major sub-themes within this broader framing that hold particular importance for pro-poor policies and the outcomes of those policies: (a) different types of legal mechanisms, (b) the power, interests, and ideologies of rivalling political actors, (c) the constraints and potential solutions of institutional configurations, and (d) the evolution and diffusion of the pro-poor agenda. In working off these sub-themes, the collection of articles reveal several recurrent insights, such as the dysfunctionalities of targeting systems in most of the Global South; the fragmentation and incoherence that is typical of social protection and related policies and programmes; the tensions involved in donor promotion, oversight, and monitoring of social protection programmes; related to this, the contestations between popular universalistic aspirations versus the narrow residualism of programmes promoted by donors; and the fundamentally political ways that “pro-poor” policy is envisaged.

Keywords

employment generation; Global South; poverty reduction; pro-poor policy; social protection

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by the United Nations in 2015, include emphasis on fighting poverty, reducing inequalities, and promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. This issue of *Politics and Governance* brings together articles that assess how legal, political, and economic mechanisms

and processes in countries of the Global South contribute to or hinder the implementation of pro-poor policies, as well as how “pro-poor” policies are understood and enacted in practice. We start with a recognition that the meaning of pro-poor policies has a contentious history even among major international organisations that have deployed the term. When the term became a standard reference in international organisations in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a notable tension between the World Bank and parts of the UN, such as the UNDP or ILO. The World Bank framed anything that reduces absolute poverty as “pro-poor” and promoted poverty targeting, whereas the UN has typically emphasized inequality reduction and more universalistic approaches to social provisioning. Notably, this tension carried over into concepts of inclusive growth or inclusive development (see Fischer, 2018, for a discussion). Even more recently, the World Bank has expanded its conception of inclusive growth into a notion of “shared prosperity” (e.g., see World Bank, 2024), although maintaining this emphasis on the poor. These tensions expose the underlying politicised contestation over conceptions and practices about how poverty should be addressed within development policy. The key policy areas that have come to dominate the imagination of pro-poor policies in this regard generally focus on social protection policies, labour policies for employment generation, and various income generation or support programmes, including such things as agricultural extension policies. These serve as the primary focus of this thematic issue.

Regarding the politics of pro-poor policies, scholars in the fields of political science, governance, and political economy have pointed out the centrality of institutions for a proper understanding of the pro-poor effects of policies and programmes—i.e, the formal and informal rules, norms, and practices that guide policy making and its implementation (e.g., see Hickey et al., 2019). Also drawing from the field of social policy, we would emphasise a particular attention to processes of social ordering and social reproduction, the exercise of power, mechanisms of rule, and notions and practices of citizenship and rights. Accordingly, in our call for papers, we identified four major sub-themes within this broader framing: (a) the clout of different types of legal mechanisms in generating pro-poor outcomes, (b) the power, interests, and ideologies of rivalling political actors with influence over the shape and outcomes of pro-poor policies (including national governments, international donor agencies, civil society, and private sector actors), (c) the constraints and potential solutions that various institutional configurations offer to improve or undermine the articulations and outcomes of pro-poor policies, and (d) the evolution and diffusion of the pro-poor agenda and its contribution to the understanding of pro-poor policymaking and the rethinking of the poverty reduction challenge.

2. Overview of the Articles in This Issue

The 13 articles in this issue are arranged in four sections, with five articles focusing on a variety of countries in Africa, four articles on Latin America, two on Asia, and two articles with a more general approach to social protection policies.

The first cluster of articles focuses on aspects of pro-poor policies in Africa. El Assal’s (2026) article concerns a case study of Uganda’s Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment programme. El Assal examines the social accountability mechanisms in this cash transfer programme and whether it has strengthened citizens’ rights claims and held the state and service providers accountable when things go wrong. The article points out that various political features have undermined the effectiveness of the accountability mechanisms, relating to the incoherence of targeting mechanisms, the hampering of state capacity by austerity, and the clientelist nature

of the political system. However, it also shows how individuals navigate these complex landscapes of both fear and empowerment, thereby shaping their own, more nuanced understandings of citizenship.

Maschhaupt (2026) discusses the influence of international actors on social protection policies in Southern Africa through a comparison of social protection reforms in Malawi and Zambia. Maschhaupt's analysis focuses on the dynamics of the interaction between agricultural input subsidies and social cash transfers, which are the main instruments of social protection in the two countries. The article finds that donor agencies exert similar influence in Malawi and Zambia through their loan conditions and the transfer of policy ideas, but also that domestic political economy factors shape the social policy programmes in the two countries differently, leading to stagnation in the case of Malawi and expansion in Zambia.

O'Donnell's (2026) article is a case study of the push by donors in Kenya, particularly the World Bank, to develop a social registry system to implement various social protection programmes, with a particular focus on the Older Persons Cash Transfer (OPCT) programme in Kenya. O'Donnell focuses on the nature of the social registry, in particular, the technocratic pretences embedded in the attempt to set up the system. Because the social registry is grounded in a residualistic notion of social policy, the implementation of the system lays bare a range of political conflicts over the nature of social policy in Kenya, particularly the tension between a more universalist aspiration in the OPCT versus the advocacy of poverty targeting by the World Bank, and how this renders the social registry essentially inoperable.

Among-Lutz (2026) makes a socio-legal comparison between the social protection systems in South Africa and Uganda, focusing on issues of fragmentation and coherence in the systems. She asks how the interactions between domestic and international actors contribute to or diminish coherence. By reframing coherence as the outcome of relational governance practices across several dimensions, from administrative to policy and legal on one hand, and from nano and micro to meso and macro, on the other, Among-Lutz shows the various ways that multilateral and bilateral donors understand and intervene on issues of coherence, and in ways that are not necessarily coherent. The conclusion of the article is that the domestic political economy and domestic legal characteristics of South Africa and Uganda create different levels of coherence in the respective social protection systems.

Wandeto (2026) focuses on the dramatic re-organisation of agricultural extension policies in Kenya through the spread of agri-tech innovations, which have led to a restructuring of the agrarian political economy and the implications of this on pro-poor development. Using a socio-technical innovation systems lens combined with critical agrarian studies, the author produces a typology of five emerging models through which the form, function, and substance of agricultural extension have shifted, resulting in the restructuring of access, expectations, roles, and relative agency. Wandeto argues that this has produced a social contract characterized by a managerial rather than a deliberative logic behind the renegotiation of state-society relations, the erosion of unconditional citizenship-based rights, as well as a simultaneous strengthening and weakening of the state. As a result, the unfolding technological transformation is producing an underlying transition from a nominally unconditional agrarian social contract to a stratified, limited-access order, with a commercializability imperative that determines access, agency, and value distribution between farmers of varying economic profiles and the custodians of digital infrastructures.

The second cluster of articles relates to social policies and pro-poor governance in a variety of Latin American countries. Phillips (2026) provides a case study of Brazil's Bolsa Família conditional cash transfer programme. He analyses Bolsa Família's paradoxical success in poorer municipalities with relatively low state capacity. Phillips argues that the financial incentives that were provided to local governments led to a rapid build-up of implementation capacity that supported cash transfer to the poor. The case of Bolsa Família thus serves to cast doubt on conventional understandings of pro-poor governance.

Badillo (2026) analyses the *Pensión Alimentaria*, a Paraguayan non-contributory social protection programme targeted at people over 65 years of age who are living in poverty. Badillo argues that the programme was the outcome of social mobilisation by organisations of the elderly and the political calculations of opposition political parties in Paraguay, who aimed to assert control over social policy provisioning against the ruling left-wing president Lugo. The *Pensión Alimentaria* was, thereby, an instrument of traditional political parties to counter the conditional cash transfer programme *Tekoporã*, which was propagated by President Lugo after he unexpectedly won the 2008 presidential elections. The case shows how social protection expansion can be driven even under limited state capacity, stringent fiscal constraints, and clientelism, and adds a strategic, rivalry-constraining mechanism to debates on political competition and social policymaking.

Logiudice and Patroni (2026) discuss the libertarian transformation in Argentina that has been ongoing since the election of Javier Milei to the presidency and that has resulted in a drastic reform of the country's social policy. Patroni argues that the policy reversal meant an attack on the position of organised informal workers, whose actions had led to the creation of a social infrastructure consisting of, among others, day care, healthcare, housing, and soup kitchens. They conclude that Milei's libertarian austerity policies have resulted in a re-marketisation of social services and protection. While the Milei government has undertaken a major overhaul of collectivist programmes, it retained and expanded individualist social protection through conditional cash transfers.

Cuevas Valenzuela and Cortés Morales (2026) present a case study of social protection in Chile from the 1990s to the 2020s. The article focuses on the political and discursive construction of poverty and argues that instruments to measure poverty serve to depoliticise structural problems of inequality in the country. Cuevas Valenzuela and Cortés Morales use the case of Coronel, where the coal mines were closed in the 1990s, to illustrate the limits of Chile's pro-poor social policies, as the city remains characterised by precarious employment, dependence on extractive activities, and uneven development.

The third cluster of two articles analyses pro-poor policies in India and Cambodia. Kahya's (2026) article examines two schemes implemented by the Modi government in India that aimed at financial inclusion of the poor into the country's economy. Kahya argues the PMJDY and PMMY, which were portrayed as instruments of universal banking and entrepreneurial empowerment, are not redistributive measures, but rather aim to integrate marginalised populations into the financial system as debt-bearing citizens. The article concludes that the two programmes, as they are being used by an authoritarian populist government, likely lead to a transformation of the idea of welfare away from a foundation of rights and social justice to one of markets and individual financial responsibility. Dadap-Cantal (2026) analyses the Identification of Poor Households (IDPoor) programme in Cambodia. Like the social registry in Kenya discussed by O'Donnell (2026), the IDPoor is a social registry designed and used for poverty targeting and has been institutionalised with strong support from donors. Dadap-Cantal argues that the politics of IDPoor

is characterised by top-down and technocratic decision making that reflects more the interests of donors and international institutions rather than those of the poor, labour groups, or grassroots programme implementers. The author concludes that the implementation of IDPoor is problematic, as the social registry is ineffective in addressing poverty and reinforces the fragmentation of the social protection system in Cambodia.

The final cluster consists of two contributions that address more general topics in social protection. Kaltenborn and Dogu (2026) is a short note that addresses the “leave no one behind” principle adopted in the Sustainable Development Goals. The note focuses on the legal requirement for states to protect Indigenous peoples and minorities from poverty. Kaltenborn and Dogu argue that these groups are often more vulnerable and exposed to a higher risk of poverty than the population at large and that a rights-based approach calls for the establishment of a legal social protection framework to benefit Indigenous peoples and minorities. Fischer (2026) focuses on the paradox that official development assistance (ODA) that is earmarked for funding social protection does not actually fund these programmes, given that it is provided in foreign currency, whereas social protection programmes, such as cash transfer programmes, use domestic currencies. Fischer refers to this as a monetary transfer dilemma and argues that it generates heightened political tensions between donors and recipient governments, given the balancing act that the latter must perform between addressing foreign currency needs and complying with donor expectations. Drawing from a research project on this issue, he synthesises these tensions along three themes: the reliance on conditions rather than direct funding in donor support for cash transfers; how this has tended to associate the social protection agenda with politics of austerity and reform agendas of international financial institutions; and the gulf of understanding between governments and donors on such issues. Fischer concludes with a call for donors to return to an understanding that the purpose of their ODA is to help recipient countries to overcome foreign exchange constraints, not necessarily to intervene in the sovereign space of domestic policy making.

Overall, all the articles share a common message of the importance of examining the politics surrounding the design and implementation of pro-poor policies. Certain themes were recurrent across most of the articles, such as the dysfunctionalities of targeting systems; the fragmentation and incoherence that is often typical of social protection and related policy areas in the Global South; the tensions involved in donor involvement in promoting, overseeing, and monitoring social protection programmes; related to this, the contestations between popular universalistic aspirations versus the narrow residualism of programmes promoted by donors; and the ways that “pro-poor” policy is envisaged in itself; having also a fundamentally political core that is expressed from the outset of the different conceptions of rights, legal frameworks, social policy, the role of states, and the nature of state-society relations. In essence, questions of how to define what should be pro-poor and how it should be designed and implemented invariably implicate—in the name of the poor but not always for them—fundamentally ideological and political struggles over meaning, power, and resources.

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Conflict of Interests

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