SOCIAL PROTECTION AS A FUNDAMENTAL FUNCTION OF HUMAN SOCIETIES

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This issue of Universitas Forum is on the policies and practices of social protection. It contains contributions that address these issues from different perspectives. However, in presenting these different points of view, we want to draw the reader's attention to a fundamental common theme: the social factors that make health care and welfare services difficult for the people who access them. Why are a growing number of people becoming disenfranchised? Why are so many services costly and unsatisfactory? Can we imagine societies that more effectively protect all of their citizens, not by extending their service networks but by greatly reducing the difficulties people face?

In the resolution approved by the UN General Assembly on September 20th, 2005 regarding the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, point 143 makes it clear that societies founded on respect for equal rights and opportunities have a fundamental obligation to guarantee human security for all. In this document we find the following affirmations: "We emphasize that human beings have the right to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. We believe that all people, especially the most vulnerable, have the right to live free from fear and want and must have the opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their potential in conditions of equality. "

These statements only reaffirm, in this era of globalization, the purpose of all human societies, which is to protect all its citizens from risks to survival, well-being and safety.

In referring to human security, the UN resolution underlines the modern desire for equal rights and opportunities, knowing full well that societies perform their duty to protect citizens in very uneven ways. They provide, in effect, an excess of protection to those at the top of the social pyramid and haphazard, insufficient or non-existent protection to those who are at the bottom. In doing so, they reveal not only selective ideologies and the dynamics of exclusion that underlie them, but also a distortion of the forces of solidarity that enliven living beings in any society. We often forget, in fact, that these forces, before being cultural, ethical or political, are enshrined in the laws of nature, in the gene pools of living beings and moving them to live in a society to protect themselves from countless hazards in the environment and to better meet their needs.

This applies to not only certain but to bees, ants, fish or monkeys as well. The behaviors of some are largely complementary to those of others and together enable and promote the survival, well-being and security of individuals and of the species. The forces of natural

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solidarity push everyone to assume their role in a system of mutual dependence that ensure the common good of organized individuals. In short, natural solidarity precedes and grounds all types of cultural solidarity and also makes it possible for us to become the unique and creative people we aspire to be.

In smaller societies, where humans lived for the first two million years after creative thinking learned to change the laws of nature, feelings of solidarity, rooted in the genetic heritage of individuals, united all members of societies and were certainly stronger than selfish feelings. Individuals who endangered society with their behavioral abnormalities could be expelled to preserve the common good.

With complex societies, their division of labor, their fragmentation into specialized groups, and especially their hierarchical stratification of power, the situation has changed. Solidarity within society is fragmented and for about eleven thousand years, we have mostly learned to associate within our family, our group, our clan, our party or our faith group while mistrusting others and society as a whole. Therefore, now our feelings of solidarity separate us more than they unite us and split us into thousands of partial solidarities, competing with each other and unable to provide effective protection for all citizens.

Creative thinking, that which could have helped to include in civilized society even those individuals whom the laws of nature expelled, was used instead to build societies that led to further exclusion at rates of destructive violence never before seen within animal societies.

This distortion of the original protective function of human societies is making this very same function more and more necessary. We often forget that there are natural limits that cannot be exceeded by cultures of exclusion without destroying the very foundation of our societies. Humans can withstand the shrinking of their welfare and security only up to a point. If they do not receive from society the benefits that justify their adherence to rules and their sacrifices (especially after learning to aspire to equal rights and opportunities), they tend to become antisocial and fight against the society that is betraying its natural mandate.

A failure to protect their citizens is bringing more and more societies to their breaking points. The popular movements emerging in several countries, which often aim to remove the powers that be, still have not managed to build better alternatives. Aggressive selfishness continues to prevail over feelings of solidarity that should be able to safeguard the protective functions of societies. The consequences are grave; humans are driven not only to fight amongst themselves, but also to abuse, pollute, and disfigure the environment, destroying the natural resources necessary for the survival of all.

Faced with these imbalances, social protection issues must be radically rethought. Exclusion can no longer be seen as a blip in fundamentally well-functioning societies; it is a structural problem that affects the majority of people, even those who are not poor, who have great capacities, but who cannot access the decision-making processes that guide development.

The common element of the contributions in this issue is the awareness that current forms of protection must change and that it is becoming increasingly necessary to address the political,

economic and cultural aspects of exclusion. We must act - not only to humanize the services that disenfranchised people are accessing, but also to empower them to trace their malaise and suffering back to the structural factors underlying those feelings. Thus, within each of the contributions we can simultaneously witness an engagement in the humanization of services, a recognition of the need to change the dynamics of development, and a belief that the key to change is the active and democratic participation of people.

All the contributions revive feelings of solidarity. Not those that are sterilized by charitable and paternalistic ideologies, but those that are born of the desire to live in societies where equal rights and opportunities are not just a utopic dream. Feelings that, having a natural legitimacy, can form a kind of ethical basis for the individual that might precede all other ethics arising from cultural choices. An ethic that comes to the individual simply because he was born in a society which, without this ethic, could not survive. These are feelings with which social workers are familiar because they live them through the beauty of their human relationships that often accompany their experiences.

 The first contribution from Dolores Limón Domínguez and Fernando Valero Iglesias reflects on the theme of social exclusion and the need to ensure that all citizens have a basic income that would allow them to feel truly protected by society. The opinions of many authors on this issue are reviewed. No one has a ready solution, but the arguments touched upon help us to reflect on the need to build inclusive societies that challenge the root of current exclusionary dynamics.

The contribution of Igor Vinci, Carol Djeddah and May Hani demonstrates the role of rural organizations in national social protection systems. The authors show how the collective practices of these organizations, when recognized, legitimized and supported by institutions, can improve the welfare of their members. The article illustrates the strengths and also the challenges of these experiences, which ensure effective forms of protection using participatory methods and involving local solidarity networks with economic activities capable of reducing exclusion. These are good examples of the strategic superiority of democratic local development over centralized and fragmented traditional policies.

Shauna MacKinnon describes the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples living in the Province of Manitoba, Canada, and shows how the traditional policies for job training are not yielding the expected results in the fight against unemployment. Conversely, research is showing that intermediation in the labor market, in partnership with organizations involved in training and work placement with marginalized people, may produce very promising methods. Again, the fight against the exclusion of victims of colonization and its consequences seems to be much more effective if it is not based on measures of assistance, but rather seeks to reduce economic and cultural factors of marginality and dependence.

Not to be missed is the video on El Salvador and the presentation of Massimo Fortunato – both for his considerations on social cohesion as both an instrument and result of good practice, and for the beauty of the video which needs no words, only images of people who want to live well together and that present a territory otherwise known for its violence in a cheerful and attractive manner.

The article from Eman Sorour and others on the experience of mental health in Egypt articulates the first steps in this country towards a reform which, ideally, would replace traditional psychiatric institutions with community services, mainly through the mobilization of patients and other stakeholders. It is no coincidence that a sensitivity to the rights of abused patients in psychiatric hospitals is developing in the same period during which a desire for equal rights and opportunities has shaken Egypt and is pushing the country towards the changes that many would like to see, in the direction of democratic freedoms and social justice. In the specificity of this experience, we can get a glimpse of a new approach to development that is beginning its difficult journey in the country.

The article by Eric Bidet and Eum Hyungsik addresses key characteristics of and changes to the social protection system in a country like South Korea, which has had tumultuous and unbalanced economic growth. The article reflects on the importance, in this country, of the social enterprises that are beginning to grow, focusing on one of its particularly innovative forms: the medical cooperative. Without a doubt, social enterprises, with their capacity for inclusion and a reduction in the need for traditional protection, are a key component of sustainable development.

The contribution of the planning office team in the Casalecchio di Reno district in the Province of Bologna (Italy) recounts the experience of the social solidarity laboratory. Its working methods were based on the mobilization of social actors and their democratic participation in the programming of services, greatly improving their quality. The municipality has formalized this practice in its local health and welfare plan.

The short contribution from Lynne Fernandez speaks to the ongoing debate on the "living wage" in the Province of Manitoba. This experience suggests that the strategy of a minimum wage, if it is truly tied to the cost of living, helps to narrow the gap between the rich and poor and boost the local economy. Linked to other measures, such as intermediation in the labor market, a living wage can remarkably reduce insecurity and marginality.

This issue, finally, is enriched by the reproduction of other published articles which add depth to these questions of social protection. Happy reading.