Re-discussing targeting in times of Covid-19

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Let me start this time with the topic of this issue’s Forum: targeting. Are we revisiting a discourse from the past? Far from that! The World Bank (Grosh et al., 2022) just published a new report entitled ‘Revisiting Targeting in Social Assistance: A New Look at Old Dilemmas’. In this issue’s Forum section, the authors of that report showcase the report’s main findings and arguments. This is critically discussed by Razavi et al., a team from the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The discussion is opened and framed by an introduction written by part of the editors of this journal, and the two Forum pieces show different connotations and perspectives on targeting in social protection.

Even though not explicitly and purposefully, some of the articles in this issue challenge certain core arguments made in the debate on targeting indirectly or add complexity to it. Those concern the articles by Künzler on Middle Africa, among other things regarding the limits of cash transfers; Greener and Yeo’s critique of East-Asian developmentalism; and Bruzelius and Shutes claim of including concepts of mobility in social policy research.

Künzler focuses on a group of African countries (Middle Africa) characterised by authoritarian regimes. By means of paired comparisons, he seeks to identify patterns in the provision of social services among these countries. One interesting aspect related to targeting is that Künzler finds, countries of the region in which regional elites were included (thus not a focus only on the poor and vulnerable groups of the population) in social services performed better – why? The elites were more willing to politically support to such programmes if they also benefitted themselves. At the same time, as the author shows, social policies did not appear as important electoral issues.

Looking at a completely different group of countries – East-Asian ‘developmentalist’ welfare states – Greener and Yeo focus on reproduction, discipline and inequality illustrated with Singapore’s Central Provident Fund. This Fund uses a ‘forced savings’ approach for social provision in housing, healthcare, education and retirement. Eligibility criteria are tied to ‘desired social behaviour’ related to heteronormative familial
responsibilisation, labour market activation and class reproduction. The authors show that the Fund reproduces material inequalities and fashions behaviours in accordance with the dominant accumulation strategy. This could also serve as another critical stance on implications of targeting as far as the definition of criteria of access to social services and benefits is involved. Moving beyond the individual’s focus, the implication of universal inclusion but targeted provision make a powerful means to imposing particular ideologies through systems of social protection.

From yet another perspective, Bruzelius and Shutes add further complexity when they show how systems of social provision and mobility/immobility shape each other. Systems of social protection may facilitate, promote, but also prevent the movement of people. The authors draw on interdisciplinary mobilities theory, and empirically apply a mobility perspective, and make a case for a better understanding of how social policies can reduce or reinforce the inequalities of mobility. In doing so they show that it can be access to social provision, the quality of provision and social policies that may facilitate mobility and immobility. For example, the design of cash transfer programmes can either lead to mobility by reducing related costs; or immobility by tying support to local activities. The discussion on targeting, particularly in relation to outcomes, efficiency and design of social policies, needs to engage with this mobility perspective.

On labour rights in the context of global supply chains, Sack and Sarter develop a novel analytical framework of public procurement as a tool to regulate labour. The authors suggest a distinction between commitment-focused and compliance-based enforcement strategies, and show the importance of a procedural and collaborative enforcement strategy for public procurement and workers’ rights in global supply chains.

The other articles in this issue make contributions to the stream of GSP literature on the role of international organisations and more generally policy diffusion on national social policies. Malinar examines the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in relation to Croatia’s reforms of the healthcare financing model, and Müller and ten Brink provide evidence for the diffusion of international models in China’s Urban Employees’ Social Insurance.

Malinar’s article tells an interesting story of Croatia’s 2002 health financing reform and finds regarding the impact of global actors that it has been mainly non-coercive instruments (e.g. dissemination of ideas, technical assistance and consultations with the recipient government) that mattered. The impact of coercion and conditionalities attached to international aid is shown to be limited. For the side of international organisations, the article argues that they are willing to bargain and make trade-offs with the recipient government.

Müller and ten Brink focus on China and are particularly interested in potential policy learning by China when developing the Urban Employees’ Social Insurance in the country. By distinguishing between the branches within the scheme, they are able to provide a nuanced picture of the adoption of mainstream models in unemployment, pension and work accident insurance; but fringe models in health and maternity insurance.

Building on Special Issue 21 (3) on social policy responses to Covid-19, the article by Lari and Al-Thani contributes to that literature by looking at patterns of compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures in Qatar and Kuwait. We learn that in general individuals were well-informed about the pandemic, but less effectively convinced about the
measures to control the pandemic. Two of the authors that contributed to the GSP special issue, Ulrich Becker and Anika Seemann (2022), now also edited ‘Protecting Livelihoods’ – a collection of case studies on different countries looking at welfare states from a legal perspective concerning their social policy responses. 

I hope you enjoy reading the articles in this issue and look forward to receiving your submissions for future issues!

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Reference

Becker U and Seemann A (eds) (2022) Protecting Livelihoods – A Global Comparison of Social Law Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

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