Causal mechanisms in the analysis of transnational social policy dynamics: Evidence from the global south

Johanna Kuhlmann | Tobias ten Brink

Abstract
The aim of this Regional Issue is to generate new findings on social policy dynamics in the Global South and on the transnational factors that shape them. It suggests that the concept of causal mechanisms is particularly well suited for analyzing these dynamics. This introduction presents the concept of causal mechanisms, as well as different approaches to analyzing mechanisms in transnational social policy dynamics. It then summarizes the key findings of the individual articles, which utilize a plurality of mechanism-based approaches to enable a fine-grained analysis and explanation through in-depth case studies, covering the fields of pensions, health, vocational education, long-term care, immigrant welfare rights, and food subsidies. Finally, the introduction reflects on the implications of the findings for the study of transnational social policy dynamics, and how the study of causal mechanisms can enrich our understanding of these processes.

KEYWORDS
causal mechanisms, global south, process tracing, transnational social policy

1 | INTRODUCTION

For some time now, the field of social policy research has been seeing a growing number of studies on welfare arrangements in the Global South. While there have always been exceptions to the prevailing focus on social policy...
arrangements in Western countries (e.g., Dixon, 1987; Dixon & Kim, 1985; Mesa-Lago, 1978; Midgley, 1984), particularly since the 1990s, a change of focus has been observed. Against the backdrop of an expansion of public social policy in the Global South—albeit still leaving countries there with a low level of protection—an increasing number of scholars turned their attention to social policy dynamics beyond the West. This includes reviews and analyses of general social policy dynamics in developing countries (Mares & Carnes, 2009; Surender & Walker, 2013), questions of socio-economic development, democracy, and the welfare state (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Huber & Stephens, 2012; Segura-Ubiergo, 2007), discussions of welfare regimes (Barrientos & Hulme, 2010; Gough et al., 2004; Rudra, 2008), and immigrant rights (Ford, 2019). To date, studies have examined different policy sectors and instruments, such as the spread of conditional cash transfers and social assistance transfers in non-OECD countries (Barrientos, 2013; Leisering, 2019; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017), labor and education/vocational training systems (Schneider, 2013), pensions (Brooks, 2005; Hujo, 2014), public health (Wong, 2004), or “social policy by other means” (Seelkopf & Starke, 2019). Such studies have frequently focused on specific regions in the Global South (for Regional Issues of this journal on social policy in Asia and Latin America, see Mok, Kühner, & Yeates, 2017; Arza & Greve, 2018; for a recent review, see Dorlach, 2020).

Since the late 19th century, the initial social policy dynamics in what was later called the Global South² have been influenced by transnational factors. First and foremost, this applies to different forms of (typically European) imperialism which bequeathed strong legacies to their respective colonies (Schmitt, 2015). Other factors include wars, economic dependencies and growing trade and capital movements, nation states bound by the rules of international organizations (IOs), transnational migration, and the exchange of ideas and norms. These interdependencies only increased over time, although their relative significance might have shifted under “post-colonialism” after 1945 and with the new power asymmetries after 1989. Since the 1990s, in particular, authors have observed the introduction of state-led social policies in the Global South that cannot be fully understood purely in terms of national policy-making. These developments also reflect close interdependencies with other countries as well as IOs (Béland & Orenstein, 2013), for instance when it comes to trade (Seelkopf, Lierse, & Schmitt, 2016), migration (Hennebry, 2014; Römer, 2017), or international agreements, including the circulation of knowledge and ideas through epistemic communities (Leisering, 2019). A whole “Global Social Policy” research community has now emerged which repudiates a purely domestic understanding of social policy and acknowledges that social policy-making is increasingly global in scope (Deacon, Hulse, & Stubbs, 1997; Kaasch & Martens, 2015; Yeates, 2014).

The transnational dynamics of social policy take various forms. They include “horizontal” exchanges between nation-states and their societies (and also between “strong” and “weak” nation-states) as well as “vertical” relationships between nation-states and IOs, which in turn reflect different power relations. Some cases in point are the models of German and British vocational training traveling southward and eastward (Hyland, 1998), and the role of the World Bank in propagating its three-pillar model of pension reform in Latin America and Eastern Europe (Orenstein, 2008), respectively. Moreover, studies on conditional cash transfer, participatory budgeting, and the Brasilian Bolsa Família program present evidence for how social policies diffuse from Southern countries to both other Southern and Northern countries (Peck & Theodore, 2010; Porto de Oliveira, Osorio Gonnet, Montero, & Kerches da Silva Leite, 2019).

In terms of the outcomes of these transnational social policy dynamics, one key finding in the literature is that rather than seeing a unifying convergence in welfare state trajectories, a wide array of national, regional, and sub-regional welfare settings prevails (see e.g. for Asia: Mok et al., 2017; for Central and Eastern Europe: Cerami & Vanhuysse, 2009; for Latin America: Arza & Greve, 2018). How can this be elucidated? Generally speaking, these discrepancies should be explored by taking into account both transnational dynamics and national/local development patterns and their contingencies. In fact, in comparative welfare state research, it is increasingly acknowledged that welfare states are not isolated entities, but are embedded in transnational relationships, which have a decisive influence on the social policies those states adopt. For instance, both national and international “drivers” of the spread of social cash transfers need to be taken into consideration (Leisering, 2019). We argue that these complex and multi-directional interdependencies can seriously alter our understanding of social policy-making, which more often than not is still very much centered on the national level.

With a view to identifying appropriate concepts and methods to analyze and explain these complex transnational social policy dynamics, and in order to move beyond “methodological nationalism” in much traditional
comparative welfare state research, this Regional Issue strives to contribute to longer-term trends in the broader social sciences that are moving toward “mechanism-based explanations”. In particular, the aim here is to provide explanations of social policy developments through case-oriented policy analysis that determines the process that occurs between initial causes/conditions and a political effect/outcome in transnational settings. The articles in this Regional Issue thus add to analyses of causal mechanisms in comparative social policy research by describing in detail the causal mechanisms that shed light on the role of transnational dynamics in the Global South (see e.g. Kuhlmann & Nullmeier, forthcoming; Leisering, 2019; Orenstein, 2008; Porto De Oliveira et al., 2019).

The main research question we address is: Which causal mechanisms can capture the transnational dynamics of social policy in the Global South? Through in-depth case studies of social policy dynamics in different countries and regions in the Global South as well as different fields such as pensions and health, vocational education, long-term care, immigrant welfare rights, and food subsidies, we aim to flesh out the causal mechanisms that are at play when transnational social policy dynamics unfold. Against this backdrop, we bring together a variety of mechanism-based analyses that are suitable for comparative social policy, and which are rooted in concepts and approaches from the existing literature on the transnational influence of ideas and policies, as well as established approaches from comparative public policy. While the theoretical approaches adopted in the different contributions differ, all articles share an understanding of actors as the key “entities” of the mechanism(s) analyzed, and they also all focus on the interplay of national and transnational actors when it comes to social policy-making.

The remainder of this introduction is structured as follows: The second section presents the concept of causal mechanisms in the social sciences, and reviews different approaches to analyzing mechanisms in transnational social policy dynamics. The third section summarizes the key findings of the individual contributions to this Regional Issue. The final section then reflects on the implications of the findings for the study of transnational social policy dynamics in the Global South, and how the study of causal mechanisms can enrich our understanding of these processes.

2 TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL POLICY DYNAMICS AND THE STUDY OF CAUSAL MECHANISMS

2.1 The concept of causal mechanisms in the social sciences

How to arrive at an explanation of a social phenomenon is a fundamental question in the social sciences (e.g. Elster, 2015; Hedström & Swedberg, 1996; Mayntz, 2020; Parsons, 2007). Yet, existing approaches have often been found to be inadequate to fulfill this task. To begin with, although being highly prominent in the discipline, correlational approaches have been criticized for being unable to provide explanations, since the way independent and dependent variables are causally related remains unclear (Mahoney, 2001; Mayntz, 2004). Also, the explanatory power of covering-law models as introduced by Hempel and Oppenheimer has been questioned. In this model, an explanation states the general law and the conditions under which this law can be applied in a particular case (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996). However, it has been argued that covering-law models only provide the causal factors and not the causal processes that bring about the phenomenon in question, which ultimately makes these explanations “black-boxed” as well (Mayntz, 2004). Against this backdrop, more and more social scientists share the view that “to explain we must always posit and seek evidence for causal mechanisms” (Parsons, 2007, p. 23; for an advanced introduction into different types of explanation of political action, also see Parsons, 2007).

In fact, recent decades have seen a burgeoning literature on mechanisms and mechanism-based explanations. Notably, in the social sciences, this focus on mechanisms developed in diverse research traditions (for a broader overview see Ylikoski, 2018; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Nullmeier, forthcoming). In critical realism, for instance, explanations based on generative mechanisms emerged to criticize then dominant deductive covering-law models. Scholars such as Roy Bhaskar were particularly influential here (Bhaskar, 1975). Contrary to structure-based explanations, but equally opposed to functionalist argumentation, analytical Marxists such as Jon Elster also advocated a
mechanism-based perspective (Elster, 1989). Elster’s argument was crucial for establishing another research strand concerned with mechanisms: the analytical sociology of the 1990s and beyond. Building on analytical philosophy and behavioral economics, this analytical approach considered causal mechanisms to be essential for explanations that are “precise, abstract, realistic and action-based” (Hedström, 2005, p. 1; Hedström & Swedberg, 1998).

Moreover, a growing interest in the mechanisms driving political processes also emerged in historical and political sociology (see Tilly, 2001) and in political science (for actor-centered institutionalists employing mechanism-based explanation, see Scharpf, 1997; see also Streeck & Thelen, 2005 on institutional change). Generally, however, political scientists often discussed causal mechanisms in methodological debates to promote explanations based on such mechanisms as a way of remedying the perceived weaknesses of both correlational, quantitative approaches (Mahoney, 2001) and qualitative research—the latter often being criticized as descriptive “story-telling” and therefore providing no causal explanation at all (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; George & Bennett, 2005).

Yet, how exactly to define a causal mechanism in the social sciences remains highly contested (see e.g. Mahoney, 2001). What is generally acknowledged, however, is that the key feature of mechanism-based approaches is a clear focus on the process between causes and outcomes: “mechanisms are not causes, but are causal processes that are triggered by causes and that link them with outcomes in a productive relationship” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 3). Particular attention needs to be paid to the “entities (or parts) whose activities and interactions are organized so as to be responsible for the phenomenon” (Glennan & Illari, 2018, p. 2; see also Machamer, Darden, & Craver, 2000). In a nutshell, mechanisms thus “tell us how things happen” (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1147). Furthermore, mechanisms always operate in a certain context, which shapes how they are triggered and how they unfold (Falleti & Lynch, 2009).

The ability to unpack causal mechanisms requires a detailed understanding of the crucial elements of the process that occurred between the cause and the outcome, and the causal relationship between these elements, as well as the contexts within which the mechanisms unfold. That is why much research in political science has focused on “process tracing” as the most suitable method for identifying causal mechanisms in “real-world cases” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 2; see also George & Bennett, 2005; Trampusch & Palier, 2016). Process tracing approaches can be roughly classified into four types (Beach & Pedersen, 2019): In theory-testing process tracing, a causal mechanism is conceptualized from the existing literature and then put to the test in empirical research. In contrast, theory-building process tracing starts from the empirical case, and conceptualizes a causal mechanism based on empirical research that is supposed to be generalizable to other cases as well. Theoretical-revision process tracing focuses on so-called deviant cases in which in contrast to theoretical expectations, a mechanism did not work. The aim of this variant of process tracing is to then study the conditions under which the causal mechanism unfolds. While all these three variants of process tracing have a theoretical focus, the analytical focus of explaining-outcome process tracing is more on the specific case, aiming to understand the processes that caused a “particular historical outcome” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 11).

2.2 Causal mechanisms in the analysis of transnational social policy dynamics

Different approaches are suitable for analyzing the role of causal mechanisms when it comes to transnational social policy dynamics. Research on policy diffusion features prominently here. It both captures the role of transnational influences in national (social) policy-making and utilizes the concept of mechanisms. Diffusion scholars have relied on a four-element typology of diffusion mechanisms consisting of competition, emulation, learning, and coercion (Dobbin, Simmons, & Garrett, 2007; Obinger, Schmitt, & Starke, 2013). In research practice, however, several difficulties with this typology arise, and scholars have pointed out that these mechanisms require further analytical refinement, especially when it comes to their explanatory power (Gilardi, Shipan, & Wuest, 2021; Kuhlmann, González de Reufels, Schlichte, & Nullmeier, 2020; Osorio Gonnet, 2019). In fact, given that the analysis of diffusion mechanisms
is mostly based on large-n studies, it often remains rather general and abstract, and therefore falls short when it comes to providing profound insights into how processes of diffusion exactly unfold.

These shortcomings are addressed in the individual articles of this Regional Issue. While, taken together, these articles do not provide a new typology of mechanisms, they do offer a variety of insightful causal mechanisms and fruitful approaches to studying these. Some use insights from the policy transfer and lesson drawing literature. This strand of research developed relatively independently of the policy diffusion literature and mostly uses small-n samples to study in detail how policies change (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Rose, 1993; Stone, Porto de Oliveira, & Pal, 2020). It provides in-depth analyses of how processes of transnational influence unfold by highlighting ideas and policies and focusing on the role of actors in these processes.

Besides the literature on policy diffusion and transfer, some authors of this Regional Issue utilize theoretical frameworks from the field of public policy analysis that were originally designed to capture national policy-making, but which are also suitable for analyzing transnational social policy dynamics. Examples include the multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 1984; Lovell, 2016) and actor-centered institutionalism (Scharpf, 1997). Many of these frameworks from public policy have been identified as well suited for analyses of causal mechanisms (van der Heijden, Kuhlmann, Lindquist, & Wellstead, 2021). More recently, scholars of public policy have also focused on the concept of causal mechanisms when analyzing policy design. Here, causal mechanisms have been used to show how policymakers can design effective policies (Capano, Howlett, Ramesh, & Virani, 2019). Finally, there are approaches that glean causal mechanisms from inductive empirical research. However, these identified mechanisms do not evolve in a theoretical vacuum either, but are inspired by existing concepts, which often are rooted in public policy analysis as well, such as epistemic communities (Haas, 1992; Löblová, 2018) or policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984).

3 | THE ARTICLES IN THIS REGIONAL ISSUE

As mentioned above, the articles in this Regional Issue refer to a variety of analytical frameworks and concepts in order to capture the causal mechanisms of transnational social policy dynamics. While the Regional Issue aims to bring together a variety of approaches, what all contributions share is their focus on actors as the key entities of the mechanism(s) studied, and an attempt to look more closely into processes, strategies, and patterns of action.

The study by Müller (2021), Bureaucratic conflict between transnational actor coalitions: The diffusion of British National Vocational Qualifications to China, puts vocational education and training center stage. The study asks why, in the 1990s, the People’s Republic of China introduced a system of vocational qualification certificates similar to British National Vocational Qualifications rather than German-style dual vocational apprenticeships. It illustrates how a mechanism of bureaucratic conflict mediated policy learning, and thereby explains the diffusion and non-diffusion of different policy options. The World Bank attempted to play the role of a neutral international principal, but could only do so to a very limited extent and insofar as its preferences were compatible with those of the leadership of the party-state. Instead, competing ministerial actors in China formed coalitions with different organizations from abroad to push through their preferred policy options. The dynamics observed point to a complex interplay between governments’ degree of autonomy, domestic actors’ understanding of policy problems and solutions, and the dynamics of socio-economic and political development. Furthermore, the article highlights doubts regarding the mechanism of coercion, which remained largely ineffective.

The contribution by Kuhlmann and Nullmeier (2021), A mechanism-based approach to the comparison of national pension systems in Vietnam and Sri Lanka, focuses on the development of different types of contribution-based pension systems. Vietnam established a social insurance scheme in the 1990s, while Sri Lanka’s national provident fund already stems from the 1950s. Importantly, in both countries, the pension systems are being maintained or even expanded, although they are plagued by considerable implementation problems. To explain this outcome, the authors identify three causal mechanisms. The policy-areas-interdependence mechanism explains the maintenance of policies, notwithstanding their ongoing problems, with the crucial role they play for other policy areas. The evasion
mechanism explains how national policy actors appear to be following the proposals of IOs (here, the ILO), but actually pursue policies that follow national priorities. The limited-compliance mechanism dives into the rationales of different actors to not follow policies once adopted, resulting in implementation problems.

The article by Thyen and Karadag (2021), *Between affordable welfare and affordable food: Internationalized food subsidy reforms in Egypt and Tunisia*, focuses on food subsidies in Northern Africa. Here, despite a growing transnational critique on general food subsidies, subsidy reforms have remained heavily contested from below. To explain why some governments adopted reforms while others did not, the article identifies the causal mechanisms linking cases of international pressure to reform in countries with similar economic conditions to divergent reform outcomes, thereby focusing on three mechanisms of conflict. Before the Arab uprisings of 2010/11, brokerage played an important role, indicating that national governments mediated between domestic opponents and international advocates of subsidy reform and partially implemented international reform recommendations. After the latest regime transitions, however, reform pathways diverged. In Egypt, closure created a dense reform alliance that enabled national governments to conduct subsidy reforms that fully incorporated transnational ideas. In Tunisia, a mechanism of polarization led to failed reform alliances and inhibited the implementation of recommended reforms.

The next contributions explore issues in health reform. In their article, *Changing the healthcare financing paradigm: Domestic actors and international organizations in the agenda setting for diffusion of social health insurance in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe*, Kaminska, Druga, Stupele, and Malinar (2021) provide evidence against the view that IOs unilaterally shaped social policies in post-communist countries by stepping into a policy vacuum. In what they call a “nothing like the old regime” causal mechanism, they demonstrate why the negative experience of communism precluded healthcare financing reforms that bore too close a resemblance to the previous system. It defined the domestic actors’ perception of social health insurance as the only acceptable policy option because of its dissimilarity to the old system and led to the rejection of the World Bank’s suggestion to keep tax-based healthcare financing. Moreover, the authors find an influential role for transnational cooperation between medical professionals and German and French experts.

Focusing on development aid for health reform in Central Asia, the contribution by Isabekova and Pleines (2021), *Integrating development aid into social policy: Lessons on cooperation and its challenges learned from the example of health care in Kyrgyzstan*, utilizes the concept of causal mechanisms with a focus on the design and actual implementation of the so-called Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp). The SWAp for development aid to healthcare in Kyrgyzstan, currently regarded as a best practice model by the international expert community, is first re-conceptualized as an ideal-type causal mechanism leading from improved coordination to efficient project implementation. Based on a case study of the second phase (2012–2018) of this SWAp, the authors then identify critical junctures in the implementation. By revealing multiple deviations from its “ideal” form, Isabekova and Pleines refine concepts for the analysis of development aid.

The article by Safuta (2021), *When policy entrepreneurs fail: Explaining the failure of long-term care reforms in Poland*, analyzes two unsuccessful long-term care reforms in Poland, thereby illuminating a hybrid case in the Global North/Global South dichotomy. Despite several attempts to reform long-term care in Poland, inspired by policy models from different countries, policy reforms have still not taken place. The article depicts the “outsider policy entrepreneur” mechanism that produces this policy inertia. Safuta highlights the crucial role of policy entrepreneurs in pushing for reforms in long-term care, and their efforts to mobilize epistemic communities. The article then goes on to explain how these efforts have not been successful due to the unwillingness of domestic policy actors to conduct the reforms. Importantly, for understanding the reform failure, Safuta points to the importance of both an institutional setting that precludes party cooperation, and an ideational context that does not favor “foreign” ideas and transnational expertise.

Finally, the topical issue of immigrant welfare rights in the Global South is addressed in the article *Choose your battles: How civil society organizations choose context-specific goals and activities to fight for immigrant welfare rights in Malaysia and Argentina*, by Henninger and Römer (2021). The authors compare the different goals and activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) to lobby for immigrant welfare rights in Argentina and Malaysia. They identify a mechanism of civil society engagement, which resulted in different outcomes in the two countries due to differences
in political regime type. In democratic Argentina, CSOs referred to norms of equal treatment to push for immigrant access to several social policy programs, including non-contributory programs. In contrast, CSOs in electoral-authoritarian Malaysia argued for including immigrants in contributory schemes on the basis of minimum standards. This rationale was not so much based on equality considerations, but rather on the basis of equity—stressing immigrants’ deservingness due to their contributions to society—and need.

4 | SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The aim of this Regional Issue is to generate new findings on social policy dynamics in the Global South and on the transnational factors that shape them. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are research gaps that this Regional Issue is unable to explore. The cases studied here do not fully picture the diversity of the Global South, for instance. Related to this, we are unable to study different kinds of interdependencies between regions or countries beyond the already well-known North–South direction in a more systematic manner, that is, South–South and South–North interdependencies. Also, in this Regional Issue, it is not possible to address questions related to systematic differences of mechanisms across policy actors, policy sectors, or national settings, as well as across different regional spaces. Yet, despite the variety of national settings and causal mechanisms that have been identified in the different articles, we would like to summarize some observations, which we believe also represent promising avenues for future research. We focus on three issues: the need to accentuate the interaction of transnational and national factors; the necessity to advance mechanism-based explanations for the study of these phenomena and process tracing as a fitting methodology; and the need to delve deeper into additional research areas.

First, the articles in this Regional Issue show that explanations of social policy-making in the Global South will remain incomplete unless transnational factors are taken into account. These can take various forms. They can include international norms (Henninger & Römer, 2021), policies from other countries that are perceived as successful (Müller, 2021; Safuta, 2021), and the role of transnational actors, particularly IOs. The evidence suggests that IOs play a crucial role at different stages of the policy process, ranging from problem definition to agenda-setting, and, in one instance, to policy implementation (Isabekova & Pleines, 2021).

However, this does not mean that national factors are no longer important. Instead, the findings of this Regional Issue suggest that when it comes to actual social policy decision-making, national institutional settings and actors are key. The power of nation-states, national legacies, and intra-bureaucracy conflict are not only relevant variables for the analysis of highly developed economies in the Global North. Thus, globally, to acquire a thorough understanding of social policy dynamics requires us to take the domestic level seriously. As Kaminska et al. (2021) argue, the limited ideational influence of IOs on healthcare financing reforms challenges the idea that there is a social policy vacuum in non-OECD countries that simply has to be filled with foreign ideas. In fact, IOs are more frequently confronted with strong social policy legacies, for example food subsidies, which have been described as a key component of social policy in Northern Africa (Thyen & Karadag, 2021), or provident funds for retirement savings in former British colonies (Kuhlmann & Nullmeier, 2021). In other cases, national actors have their own ideas on how their social policy system should be reformed or maintained (Müller, 2021; Safuta, 2021). This finding is in line with some earlier literature from social policy research that focuses on transnational factors (Brooks, 2005; Leisering, Liu, & ten Brink, 2017; Orenstein, 2008).

A clear-cut dichotomy between transnational and national factors is unquestionably also problematic. National actors are often deeply embedded in transnational policy networks or epistemic communities, as the example of trade unions shows (Henninger & Römer, 2021). Against this background, distinguishing between “national” and “transnational” actors can become extremely difficult in empirical research (see also Orenstein, 2008). This emphasizes the fact that future research aiming to illuminate the role of transnational factors in social policy-making needs to pay careful attention to the interplay and reciprocity of national and transnational dynamics.

Second, the articles in this Regional Issue suggest that mechanism-based approaches are particularly well suited for analyzing these dynamics, from a plurality of perspectives. All articles illustrate how analyzing causal mechanisms
allows for a detailed depiction of the causally relevant steps of social policy processes, highlighting the key actors involved, as well as their activities and interactions. By making use of mechanism-based research, we can plausibly trace the interplay between transnational and national actors and its impact on shaping social policy outcomes. Notably, the articles in this Regional Issue identify a variety of causal mechanisms that can capture this interplay. Examples include the mechanism of bureaucratic conflict between transnational actor coalitions that focuses on vocational training reform in China (Müller, 2021), the mechanism of civil society engagement that takes into account the role of universal norms in shaping immigrant welfare rights in authoritarian and democratic settings (Henninger & Römer, 2021), and the “outsider policy entrepreneur” mechanism that explains why policy reforms stemming from transnational ideas on long-term care failed in Central and Eastern Europe (Safuta, 2021). More research is needed to achieve theoretical generalization here, including inquiries into whether (or not) these causal mechanisms can be identified elsewhere, which would also help explain similarities and differences between countries and regions.

Notably, one possible contribution to paving the way for such generalization and comparability is presented in some of the articles in this Regional Issue. These plausibly suggest that distinguishing between mechanisms at different stages of the policy process can help to furnish us with a more profound and theoretically informed understanding of transnational social policy dynamics (also see Kuhlmann et al., 2020). More specifically, these comprise mechanisms of perception and translation, mechanisms of cooperation and conflict, mechanisms of collective decision-making, and mechanisms of implementation. First, at the perception and translation stage, the focus is on mechanisms that explain how national actors acknowledge international interdependence, gain knowledge of social policies from abroad, and translate these into their own social policy legacies. Second, at the cooperation and conflict stage, the emphasis is on mechanisms that explain how social policy proposals are negotiated in the national arena. Third, at the collective decision-making stage, the analysis is centered on mechanisms that explain how the actual decision for a social policy proposal takes place. In line with heuristics of the policy process, these three stages can be complemented with a fourth stage of implementation, which highlights the actors and dynamics that are at play when policies are put into practice. Notably, at all stages of the policy process, transnational actors can (and often do) play a role. Likewise, Thyen and Karadag (2021) in particular depict a number of mechanisms at play throughout the different stages of the policy process, and argue that combining these mechanisms into a causal chain can help to explain contemporary social policy dynamics such as food subsidy reform in Northern Africa. What partly follows from this is that the output of social policy-making is complex and can often not be explained by a single mechanism. Rather, examining the combination and possible interaction of several causal mechanisms can provide more in-depth explanations (Kuhlmann & Nullmeier, 2021).

Moreover, the articles in this Regional Issue shed light on the potential of the methodology of process tracing for analyzing transnational social policy dynamics. Safuta (2021), for instance, shows how to conduct explaining-outcome process tracing, paying particular attention to the role of the scope conditions under which a mechanism unfolds. The methodological debate on causal mechanisms has often focused on strengthening causal inferences in single case studies. Several articles in this Regional Issue however show how the concept of causal mechanisms can also be applied in comparative analyses (Henninger & Römer, 2021; Kaminska et al., 2021; Thyen & Karadag, 2021) and how mechanisms can be traced inductively in one case and then be applied to another case, thereby linking theory-building and theory-testing process tracing (Kuhlmann & Nullmeier, 2021).

Third, some findings of the articles point to additional research areas beyond the initial scope of this Regional Issue. While much research on social policy-making in the Global South has focused on the role of transnational influences when it comes to introducing social policies, more research is needed on the question to what extent these factors also shape the inclusion or exclusion of different groups, as well as the generosity of social benefits. Also, the role of informality and of discrepancies between social policy in practice and on paper loom large in some articles (Kuhlmann & Nullmeier, 2021; see also Niedzwiecki, 2018). Another issue is the role of regime types in social policy-making. While the history and expansion of the welfare state have often been portrayed as closely linked to liberal democracy, the articles in this Regional Issue remind us that the relationship between democracy and the
welfare state is less clear-cut (see also Eibl, 2020). Are we even witnessing the rise of authoritarian, illiberal welfare states, with transnational repercussions? The question of whether and how exactly social policy and political regimes are connected, and which causal mechanisms can explain the transnational dynamics at play here, should feature prominently on the agenda of future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Projektnummer 374666841 – SFB 1342. The authors would like to thank Lutz Leisering, Frank Nullmeier, their colleagues from the Collaborative Research Centre 1342, Global Dynamics of Social Policy (https://socialpolicydynamics.de/en/), funded by the German Research Foundation DFG, and all authors of this Regional Issue for their valuable input on earlier versions of this article at the two author workshops for the preparation of this Regional Issue in October 2019 and February 2020 at the University of Bremen.

ORCID
Johanna Kuhlmann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0970-0260
Tobias ten Brink https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2892-3742

ENDNOTES
1 Johanna Kuhlmann and Tobias ten Brink contributed equally to this article.
2 Note that our usage of the term Global South is broad, comprising a diverse range of countries from Northern Africa, Asia, South America, and Central and Eastern Europe, which are mostly not considered to be part of the core of so-called established welfare states. As illustrated in the respective articles of this Regional Issue, the countries under scrutiny have all been shaped by powerful external influences such as hegemonic Western ideas, an asymmetric division of labor, and/or unequal financial resources.

REFERENCES
Arza, C., & Greve, B. (2018). Editorial introduction: Social policy in Latin America - old and new directions. Social Policy and Administration, 52(6), 1177–1180. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12439
Barrientos, A. (2013). Social assistance in developing countries. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Barrientos, A., & Hulme, D. (2010). Social protection for the poor and poorest: Concepts, policies and politics. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2019). Process-tracing methods: Foundations and guidelines (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
Béland, D., & Orenstein, M. A. (2013). International organisations as policy actors: An ideational approach. Global Social Policy, 13(2), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181134848608
Bhaskar, R. (1975). A realist theory of science. Leeds: Leeds Books.
Brooks, S. M. (2005). Interdependent and domestic foundations of policy change: The diffusion of pension privatization around the world. International Studies Quarterly, 49(2), 273–294.
Capano, G., Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., & Virani, A. (Eds.). (2019). Making policies work. First- and second-order mechanisms in policy design. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
Cerami, A., & Vanhuysse, P. (Eds.). (2009). Post-communist welfare pathways. Theorizing social policy transformations in Central and Eastern Europe. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Deacon, B., Hulse, M., & Stubbs, P. (1997). Global social policy: International organisations and the future of welfare. London: Sage.
Dixon, J. E. (1987). Social welfare in Africa. London: Taylor & Francis (2016 Routledge Revivals: Comparative Social Welfare).
Dixon, J. E., & Kim, H. S. (1985). Social welfare in Asia. London: Taylor & Francis (2016 Routledge Revivals: Comparative Social Welfare).
Dobbin, F., Simmons, B., & Garrett, G. (2007). The global diffusion of public policies: Social construction, coercion, competition, or learning? Annual Review of Sociology, 33, 449–472. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.090106.142507
Dolowitz, D. P., & Marsh, D. (2000). Learning from abroad: The role of policy transfer in contemporary policy-making. Governance, 13(1), 5–23.
Lovell, H. (2016). The role of international policy transfer within the multiple streams approach: The case of smart electricity metering in Australia. *Public Administration*, 94(3), 754–768. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12259

Machamer, P., Darden, L., & Craver, C. F. (2000). Thinking about mechanisms. *Philosophy of Science*, 67(1), 1–25.

Mahoney, J. (2001). Beyond correlational analysis: Recent innovations in theory and method. *Sociological Forum*, 16(3), 575–593. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011912816997

Mares, I., & Carnes, M. E. (2009). Social policy in developing countries. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 93–113. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.071207.093504

Mayntz, R. (2004). Mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 34(2), 237–259. https://doi.org/10.11177/0048393103262552

Mayntz, R. (2020). Causal mechanism and explanation in social science. Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies. MPIfG Discussion Paper, 20/7.

Mesa-Lago, C. (1978). *Social security in Latin America: Pressure groups, stratification, and inequality*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Midgley, J. (1984). *Social security, inequality and the third world*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Mok, K. H., Kühner, S., & Yeates, N. (2017). Introduction - managing welfare expectations and social change: Policy responses in Asia. *Social Policy and Administration*, 51(6), 845–856. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12335

Morais de Sá e Silva, M. (2017). Poverty reduction, education, and the global diffusion of conditional cash transfers. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Müller, A. (2021). Bureaucratic conflict between transnational actor coalitions: The diffusion of British national vocational qualifications to China. *Social Policy and Administration*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12689

Niedzwiecki, S. (2018). *Uneven social policies. The politics of subnational variation in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nullmeier, F. (forthcoming). *Kausale Mechanismen und Process Tracing. Perspektiven der qualitativen Politikforschung*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Obinger, H., Schmitt, C., & Starke, P. (2013). Policy diffusion and policy transfer in comparative welfare state research. *Social Policy and Administration*, 47(1), 111–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12003

Orenstein, M. A. (2008). Privatizing pensions: The transnational campaign for social security reform. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Osorio Gonnet, C. (2019). How are conditional cash transfer programs disseminated and adopted in Latin America? A proposal for the mechanisms of diffusion. In O. Porto de Oliveira, C. Osorio Gonnet, S. Montero, & C. K. da Silva Leite (Eds.), *Latin America and policy diffusion. From import to export* (pp. 25–44). New York: Routledge.

Parsons, C. (2007). *How to map arguments in political science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). Recombinant workfare, across the Americas: Transnationalizing “fast” social policy. *Geoforum*, 41(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2010.01.001

Porto de Oliveira, O., Osorio Gonnet, C., Montero, S., & Kerches da Silva Leite, C. (Eds.). (2019). *Latin America and policy diffusion. From import to export*. New York: Routledge.

Römer, F. (2017). Generous to all or ‘insiders only’? The relationship between welfare state generosity and immigrant welfare rights. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 27(2), 173–196. https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287177696441

Rose, R. (1993). *Lesson-drawing in public policy. A guide to learning across space and time*. New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers.

Rudra, N. (2008). *Globalization and the race to the bottom in developing countries: Who really gets hurt?*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Safata, A. (2021). When policy entrepreneurs fail: Explaining the failure of long-term care reforms in Poland. *Social Policy and Administration*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12714

Scharpf, F. W. (1997). *Games real actors play*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Schmitt, C. (2015). Social security development and the colonial legacy. *World Development*, 70, 332–342. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.02.006

Schneider, B. R. (2013). *Hierarchical capitalism in Latin America: Business, labor, and the challenges of equitable development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seelkopf, L., Lierse, H., & Schmitt, C. (2016). Trade liberalization and the global expansion of modern taxes. *Review of International Political Economy*, 23(2), 208–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2015.1125937

Seelkopf, L., & Starke, P. (2019). Social policy by other means: Theorizing unconventional forms of welfare production. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 21(3), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2019.1574089

Segura-Ubiergo, A. (2007). *The political economy of the welfare state in Latin America: Globalization, democracy, and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Stone, D., Porto de Oliveira, O., & Pal, L. (2020). Transnational policy transfer: The circulation of ideas, power and development models. *Policy and Society, 39*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2019.1619325

Streeck, W., & Thelen, K. (2005). Introduction: Institutional change in advanced political economies. In W. Streeck & K. Thelen (Eds.), *Beyond continuity. Institutional change in advanced political economies* (pp. 1–39). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Surender, R., & Walker, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Social policy in a developing world*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Thyen, K., & Karadag, R. (2021). Between affordable welfare and affordable food: Internationalized food subsidy reforms in Egypt and Tunisia. *Social Policy and Administration*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12710

Tilly, C. (2001). Mechanisms in political processes. *Annual Review of Political Science, 4*, 21–41. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.21

Trampusch, C., & Palier, B. (2016). Between X and Y: How process tracing contributes to opening the black box of causality. *New Political Economy, 21*(5), 437–454. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2015.1134465

van der Heijden, J., Kuhlmann, J., Lindquist, E., & Wellstead, A. (2021). Have policy process scholars embraced causal mechanisms? A review of five popular frameworks. *Public Policy and Administration, 36*(2), 163–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076718814894

Wong, J. (2004). *Healthy democracies. Welfare politics in Taiwan and South Korea*. Ithaga; London: Cornell University Press.

Yeates, N. (Ed.). (2014). *Understanding global social policy* (2nd ed.). Bristol: The Policy Press.

Ylikoski, P. (2018). Social mechanisms. In S. Glennan & P. Illari (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of mechanisms and mechanical philosophy* (pp. 401–412). London, New York: Routledge.

---

**How to cite this article:** Kuhlmann J, ten Brink T. Causal mechanisms in the analysis of transnational social policy dynamics: Evidence from the global south. *Soc Policy Adm.* 2021;1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12725