

Backstopping poverty targeting in the periphery: Embedded external influence and transnationalised actors in social protection expansion in the Philippines and Cambodia

Abstract

The last two decades have seen the expansion of social protection in the Philippines and Cambodia. At the heart of this reform is the adoption and consolidation of conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes and the associated social registry for beneficiary selection. Despite claims by some implementers that CCTs in their respective countries have been adapted to the local context, the Philippines and Cambodia converge not only in the broad design of their CCT programmes, but also in their adherence to a very similar poverty targeting modality. Such a modality relies on a social registry that is centralised and based on proxy means test, and is a means of top-down beneficiary selection, versus beneficiary-driven claims-making.

The observed convergence contrasts to the emphasis of difference commonly made in the literature on policy diffusion and on the politics/political economy of social protection. It also contrasts to the divergence that would be expected of the two countries, given their stark differences in levels of aid dependence, ideological propensity to resist (Western) external influence, and political background and legacies. Starting from this tension, this research reassesses the role of external influence in policy diffusion and social protection expansion in these two countries, and reflects on the systemic implications of adopting CCTs and mainstreaming the social registry.

While external influence is broadly acknowledged in relevant literature, extant analyses tend to underemphasise hard constraints, focusing instead on ideational or discursive mechanisms. Simplistic dichotomies between domestic and external actors are also often advanced, despite that interests, ideologies, or paradigms often coincide, which blurs the line between them. Furthermore, the social protection model that is being disseminated across the global South is rarely challenged in these literatures. This research addresses these gaps through a comparative historical analysis of Philippine and Cambodian experiences in the uptake and consolidation of CCTs and associated social registries, through a combination of key informant interviews and documentary analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in the Philippines between April and August 2017, and between January and March 2018, and in Cambodia from August 2017 to January 2018. The research also draws on insights from critical social policy, dependency, and (historical) institutionalist scholarship.

The finding that external influence, in concert with ‘transnationalised’ domestic policy forces, had driven the uniformity of the Philippines and Cambodia in the sector of social protection was confirmed by the research. External influence occurred through hard constraints, which include the practice of conditionality, and through subtle mechanisms, particularly the deep institutional embeddedness of external actors in domestic policymaking spheres. In this light, I propose the idea of institutional peripherality, as a concomitant or a corollary of the subordinate political-economic position of developing countries on the global stage.

Moreover, the top-down manner and the apparent lack of social mobilisation through which CCTs have been pursued in the country cases reveal a superficial integration of these schemes into domestic political economy dynamics. However, despite this superficiality, the implications are profound in the sense that CCTs and social registries have strengthened and entrenched a particular poverty targeting modality, deepening the poverty-centricity and even segregation in Philippine and Cambodian social protection systems. The assertion that external influence only matters in the adoption stage is thus misplaced. External influence also comes to bear on the systemic implications of CCTs. The adoption was just the starting point for the systemic changes that are unfolding, and the schemes, their conduit.