

Global social justice as a new focus for development policy?



Simon Maxwell

‘Concern for social justice is an important driver of progressive development policy – in the UK and also internationally. We have some work to do, however, in thinking through what global social justice might mean in practice.’

Overseas Development Institute

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Douglas Alexander recently described climate change as an issue of ‘global social justice’. How does this concept relate to other values espoused by ministers and by the international community, and what are the implications for policy and programming?

Start with ‘social justice’, as opposed to ‘global social justice’. David Miller, from Nuffield College, Oxford, has identified four ‘principles’ of social justice: equal citizenship; entitlement to a social minimum; equality of opportunity; and fair distribution.

In development, our starting point would probably be the work of Amartya Sen and the human development paradigm his work inspired. The centrality of rights and freedom in Sen’s work links individual entitlements to wider conceptions of justice. In this vision, individuals and collectivities (communities, governments, businesses) share the obligation to deliver human rights.

This shift in thinking is reflected in the Millennium Declaration, agreed by the General Assembly in September 2000. The Declaration is generally remembered for the MDGs, but actually located these in a more general framework of rights and justice, viz freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility.

Similar themes have been picked by David Held and David Mepham, in their book, *Progressive Foreign Policy*. They say that ‘progressives can be thought of as those committed to human rights, social justice, sustainability, democracy, the international rule of law and multilateralism.’

I don’t pretend that we can draw a perfect circle encompassing Miller, Sen, the Millennium Declaration, Held and Mepham. Distributional issues, for example, are treated differently in the different formulations. Nevertheless, these contributions provide a platform for discussion.

Where do UK ministers stand?

Speaking in Washington DC last year, Douglas Alexander said ‘we must now advance the case for change by better articulating the commonly held values around which we must rally the whole international community ... we must be driven by core values, not special interests. Our place in the world depends on us making choices based on values – values like opportunity, responsibility, justice.’

In November 2007, Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke about ‘the timeless values that underpin our policies at home – our belief in the liberty of all, in security and justice for all, in economic opportunity and environmental protection shared by all’. Speaking at the Mansion House in London, he said ‘it is possible for the first time in human history, to contemplate and create a global society that empowers people’.

In the same month, David Miliband told an audience in Bruges that ‘across Europe, people are feeling a divergence between the freedom and control they have in their personal lives, and the sense of powerlessness they face against the great global challenges we face: from preventing conflict and terrorism, to addressing climate change, energy security, and religious extremism. They are confident about personal progress, but pessimistic about societal progress’.

What does this mean for global social justice?

I conclude that concern for social justice is a driver of progressive development policy – domestically and internationally. However, we have some work to do in thinking through what global social justice might mean. It is a challenging enough concept as a rallying-cry for domestic progressive politics, but much more so if tackled globally. Five points:

- First, ‘global social justice’ surely has to mean more than simply ‘achieving income, health

and education targets as defined by the MDGs'. The net is cast much wider in the Millennium Declaration (freedom, equality, solidarity etc. ...), and this is reflected in the current emphasis on ensuring a voice for stakeholders, as well as the accountability of public institutions. These are critical, not just as routes to good government, but also, at least in the case of 'voice', as goods in their own right.

- Second, rights are central – especially economic, social and cultural rights. Having the right to education or health, is about more than access to schooling or treatment. Having a right to education means not only being able to go to school, it also means having recourse, through the administration or the courts, if a school is not provided. In other words, somebody, somewhere, is accountable.
- Third the guarantee of a 'social minimum', in Miller's phrase, implies substantially greater investments in social protection than are currently managed. Internationally, this is a challenging agenda, especially if cast in a rights framework.
- Fourth, and again following Miller, there is the positioning of distribution issues as central to the social justice agenda. This is a fraught topic at national level, as we see in the UK, and also in the international debate on income and assets in the development process. Global distribution is very little discussed, yet we know that the global gini-coefficient (for income) is around

0.65, higher than for any national gini, a level which, if seen in a single country, would pretty well guarantee social unrest. What would those who campaign for global social justice see as a reasonable global gini? And what measures would they recommend, and over what time scale, to achieve it?

- Finally, mutual accountability needs to come to centre stage. Rich countries and poor countries need to be accountable to each other. There are many ways forward, ranging from the Cotonou Convention to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Within the Cotonou Convention, for example, there is provision for a joint Council of Ministers, a joint parliamentary assembly, and also an arbitration procedure in case of disagreement. This is very different to the usual partnership between rich and poor countries.

It is easy to see how a focus on 'global social justice' could provide a framework to think interesting and possibly dangerous thoughts about how to take the international development agenda beyond the relatively instrumental approach of the MDGs. How can such thoughts be translated into action?

Written by Simon Maxwell, ODI Director (s.maxwell@odi.org.uk). A longer version of this Opinion, and an open discussion of the issues, can be found on the ODI blog at <http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2008/02/13/5505.aspx>.



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