

Social Justice as a Right:

Closing Remarks, 20th Development Policy Research Month Kick-Off Forum, September 2022¹

Good morning to the speakers and participants of today's forum. It is always a pleasure to be part of the annual celebration of the *Development Policy Research Month*.

Where we are now. As pointed out by our speakers this morning, these are the facts that we are faced with as we approach the three-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Our economy is showing some signs of recovery.
- Many individuals and families have not yet recovered from lost jobs, decreased incomes, plummeted standards of living, lost educational opportunities, and even poorer health.
- The pandemic merely exposed and then, worsened the already existing inequalities in our society.
- The pandemic is not yet over.

A hub for the wheel of recovery. We came to this forum bearing the analyses, policies, programs, and evidence-backed recommendations in our collective arsenal. The abundance of these ammunitions notwithstanding, we need a strong tenet with which to piece them together. If inequalities worsened the effects of the pandemic, addressing these inequalities would have to be part of the solution. Backed by what our Constitution professes, we advocated that it is social justice that should unify our proposed solutions. Social justice should be the hub that not only will get the wheel of our recovery moving but also get it to move faster.

More than achieving targets, a framework of rights. More than merely meeting targets, such as increased incomes, higher enrolment rates, and lower mortality rates, social justice situates needs in a framework of rights. Concomitant to rights are freedom, equality, and accountability. This means that those who are entitled should be heard and have their needs met, and those whose responsibility it is to meet these needs, notably public institutions, should be held accountable. Initially espoused by the economist Amartya Sen, you will recognize this thinking, as, in a nutshell, the basis of the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs, the predecessor of the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs. (Maxwell, 2008)

Maxwell illustrates that, “*having a right to education means not only being able to go to school, it also means having recourse, through the administration of courts, if a school is not provided. In other words, somebody, somewhere, is accountable.*” Impliedly, social justice imposes what is referred to by David Miller (as cited by Maxwell) as a “social minimum”, which in turn, can prompt corresponding policy reforms and public investments.

Intersecting inequalities. Working towards social justice within a framework of rights inevitably means confronting what is referred to as “intersecting inequalities”. Arauco *et al.* (2014) describes intersecting inequalities as economic deficits that coincide with identity-based inequalities, especially those arising

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from race, ethnicity, and geography. Intersecting inequalities thus imply discrimination and exclusion and by their nature, have become deeply rooted having been carried over many generations.

How should intersecting inequalities be addressed? Arauco *et al.* forwards that while appropriate policies are important, strong political will, transformed cultural values, and supportive social norms are critical. They do not only defeat inequalities and promote rights, they also develop inclusiveness.

Some practical implementation aspects. What should political will and policy measures work on? The following are some notable practical measures (Arauco *et al.*, 2014; Watkins, 2014; Bocarro and Stodolska, 2013).

1. Allow the principle of *No One Left Behind* to underlie policy measures when identifying goals and targets, especially in key areas, such as health, education, and social protection. Targets should be deemed met only when they have been achieved for all pertinent groups, such as those based on income and social class.
2. Identify disadvantaged groups in a way that will render as meaningful, the narrowing of disparities. This may mean grouping by region, wealth, income, ethnicity, and social factors. Identify groups with multiple disadvantages. Access to interventions should be based on entitlement rather than patronage.
3. Consult affected groups and local leaders when crafting development plans.
4. Plans and targets should be accompanied by monitoring and evaluation or M&E systems with carefully formulated indicators.
5. Planning, documentation, and research should be supported by good data in terms of quality and disaggregation.

Role of research. We do not need to extol the usefulness of research – or our profession, for that matter – to the pursuit of social injustice, in general, and to accelerating post-pandemic recovery, in particular. It begs to be said, however, that research is only as good as the extent to which it is actually used to advocate for and work towards social justice. All health, economic, and social crises affect the already marginalized and disadvantaged. Thus, research problems and methods should be recast so as to directly inquire into these crises, minimize disparities, and promote social justice.

Bocarro and Stodolska (2013) speak of translational research, which asks the question, “So what”? So what if that research has been completed, published, and presented? Will it translate to sound policy? Will lives improve because this research was conducted? They suggest exploring avenues for results dissemination in addition to academic journals and fora. Researchers, policy makers, and program implementers do not have to live in separate worlds.

Thank you for the privilege to close this forum and to be part of your celebration of the *Development Policy Research Month*.

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