

PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD POVERTY: LOCAL PROBLEMS – GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

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Reading Version (do not quote without permission)

I

Thank- you for the invitation to speak at this event, I am reminded that, almost exactly a year ago, in a similar event, I discussed my research work on child poverty and household coping strategies. Today, I want to do something completely different and try to be provocative and utopian by framing some of the issues that will be discussed in the next two days from a rather different perspective. What I want to argue is that, where child poverty is concerned, it is no longer enough to “think globally and act locally”; rather, we need to think and act both locally and globally, and at many points in-between. I rely on work I am doing, with others, on *The Future of the Welfare State in the Western Balkans*, and a recent talk by Minister Mila Carovska, in Dubrovnik where she urged us to think about regional approaches to social policy. I also tap into the vision of my late friend and colleague Bob Deacon, advocating for global social policy, and I borrow from a chapter I just finished entitled ‘Towards a Global Welfare State’.

II

My starting point is that, of course, the lived experience of child poverty, of inequality in life chances, are experienced locally. However, solutions must combine local, national, transnational, regional and global dimensions. Alongside growing, or at least changing, poverty and inequality within and between states and regions, there are three other challenges that are global in scope, transnational in their effects, and increasingly shaping the future of childhood and child poverty in and beyond our region. What is more, they are interlinked, and they are not always adequately discussed in conferences like this. In turn, they are: the changing nature and increasing precariatization of work; the current and impending catastrophe of climate change; and the rapidly growing and changing nature of transnational migration, whether labour migration or forced migration. In short, they are all, at one and the same time, economic, political, social and environmental issues, sometimes seemingly so profound that they can numb us into a kind of fatalistic pessimism but should instead be a wake-up call for the need to be as imaginative globally and regionally as the pioneers of the first welfare states were at a national level.

Separately and together, these giants impact on different groups, in different places, at different times, in very different ways. They affect children, working-age adults and older people differently, of course. Poverty affects households, but children trapped in poverty for any length of time face particular problems in terms of their subsequent development. Inequalities in access to education are of long-term concern and the reframing of education systems to new patterns of work has particular effects on future workers. Questions of

work-life balance affect adults directly but also affect those they care for, or try to care for, including children. In terms of climate change, perhaps we adults needed Greta Thunberg to remind us of the extent of inter-generational injustice that we have created. The impacts of migration on children, whether it is children and/or adult family members who actually migrate, in terms of unaccompanied minors, family separation, yo-yo children, and so on, is also particularly acute and not well addressed.

III

Let us be in no doubt that, in our everyday social politics and policies, the global is already in the local, not least through the army of supranational, transnational, international and regional actors who, at times, rather than contributing to social rights and a conducive regulatory environment, jostle for position in a crowded playground. In addition, they are not neutral players offering purely technical assistance but contain their own ideologies, preferences and biases, whether explicit or implicit. In short, it is not at all the case that, as a Minister I worked with in Croatia in the early 2000s once stated: “every assistance from outside is welcome”. Indeed, as Gordana Matković can testify from her time as a Minister in Serbia, it is only when governments set their own clear agenda and then ask for support from international actors, that progressive change occurs. There is also a crowded playground of strategies, initiatives, frameworks and goals. I am skeptical about these, too, of course, fearing that they fuel a kind of strategy-itis and its associated condition of indicator-itis. Most importantly, perhaps, are the Sustainable Development Goals which, despite having some advantages over the previous MDGs, seem strangely silent on migration issues and face an inevitable funding gap. The Social Protection Floors initiative, albeit watered down to allow for nation state discretion, is also an important step forward in terms of universal rights and the ILO has done important work on how to fund greater social protection that is of relevance beyond the Global South. The problem, however, is that Global Ministries of Finance remain relatively unconvinced of the value of increased social spending or, rather, their operatives on the ground, often appear not to have read the memos from head office or from their research departments. For this, and many other reasons, those of us who are advocates for global social policy insist on radical reform of the United Nations’ system, alongside new forms of global taxation, the Tobin tax for example, to raise new revenues not all of which should go to Development Assistance or paternalistic Global Funds.

IV

In our region and, directly, in Croatia, the role of the European Union, its Open Method of Co-Ordination and, most recently, The European Pillar of Social Rights, loom large. Perhaps ‘social Europe’ is back on the agenda although the fact that the European Semester is “primarily about economics”, the recent legacy of austerity or ‘fiscal consolidation’ as the Commission prefers, and the adding of economic criteria to the Copenhagen political criteria for aspirant member states, do not bode well. The European Social Pillar might be of some value, if it really were about rights and regulation, if it was not optional for those outside the Euro zone, and if it contained more on issues of child rights. What is important is the advocacy work of groups like the European Anti-Poverty Network, campaigning for the social dimension in the semester and in Country Specific Recommendations, and for the Pillar to have real teeth. Recently, Dubravka Šuica, now confirmed as the new Vice President for

Demographics and Democracy, was asked about an EU-wide child benefits scheme and what sources of data, other than Eurostat, might be needed to promote child rights, muttered “Pillar, Pillar, Pillar” and “family-friendly policies” without ever touching on matters of substance.

V

I imagine that the Panel on Income Transfers will discuss so-called Universal Basic Income so I will not say much here and I will ignore complex definitional and operational questions. It is certainly the case that changes in the labour market, the increasing robotization of the workplace, precariatization, and the insecurity and stress that accompany it, have led to calls for UBI from all sides of the political spectrum. It appeals to me because it would break free of the ideology of ‘productivism’ - unless you are doing something and, even better, actually making something (preferably in the formal economy), you are somehow of lesser worth. It would abolish stigmatizing willingness-to-work-tests. UBI experiments have had mixed results although some have found, particularly in economies where formal paid work is the exception not the norm, it has empowered households to plan ahead, get into less debt, eat better and feel more secure, with obvious positive impacts on children. I do think that adults would prefer to be active rather than passive and so Anthony Atkinson’s idea of an ‘activation income’, alongside universal child benefits and a universal social pension, is worth revisiting. Surely generating social value, through looking after the young, the old, the sick and those with disabilities, should be seen as valued. Atkinson was a strong advocate of an EU-wide child benefit scheme and I would also suggest that this could be an important regional social policy measure across the Western Balkans, in a situation where some countries have no child benefit scheme at all and others, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, cannot guarantee whole country coverage.

VI

Whenever I hear a passionate plea for UBI across our region, however, I always cry out “what about services?”. In low-tax – low-wage – low-skills’ economies, UBI seems to me more likely to push wages down and create more poor quality and precarious jobs. In Zamora’s words, a generous UBI could only be paid for by defunding just about everything else. Supporting UBI in this region necessarily involves giving up, hard won, decommodified, accessible, services free at the point of use. These need to be extended across our region, not reduced or marketized. The utopian in me prefers guaranteed work, providing the definition of work is widened, a reduction in working hours, and the extension of socialized spaces, reducing ecological footprints.

VII

This brings me on to climate change, making the point that climate does not respect nation state borders, as the floods and forest fires of recent years have shown, so that transnational and regional responses are needed. Eliminating poverty and respecting planetary boundaries go hand-in-hand and we need to be focusing much more on ‘eco-social policies’, forms of rights, regulation and redistribution (including taxes, benefits and services) that promote new patterns of production, consumption and investment, including in green jobs, renewable energy, public energy-efficient transport, eco-agriculture, localized

food chains, low-carbon activities, sustainable housing, a circular economy and the care economy. Above all, eco-social policies must ensure that climate mitigation does not create ever higher social costs for already vulnerable communities and groups, and such policies cannot be merely 'top-down' but must be combined with community-based programs of adaptation and social mobilization and awareness raising.

VIII

Just as with climate change, this region understands the challenges of migration and yet, responses to the waves of migration from the Middle East has been more policing and tighter borders, with almost no social response beyond willing volunteers trying to make the journey less horrible. In the context of intractable conflicts, growing intra-state inequalities, and climate change, in which, migrants are becoming, more and more, political footballs, the distinction between economic migrants and refugees and asylum seekers is becoming increasingly strained. Migrants are a significant proportion of the estimated 55% of the world's population not entitled to social protection. At the very least, social protection floor schemes need to apply to all who are physically in a state, alongside reciprocal regional arrangements and portable social security schemes. All of these, as well as the development of a strong regional social work response for migrants, are relevant to our region.

IX

Finally, in this regional conference, might we consider what a regional welfare state across the whole of the Western Balkans might entail. When I asked Minister Mila Carovska the same question in Dubrovnik we discussed the importance of a regional-wide poverty line, some regional benefits and services (child benefits and a social pension, perhaps), and a regional social work service. I have already added portability of rights for migrants to this list. But why not a regional social protection floor, with the progress Northern Macedonia has made on universal access to pre-school care and early childhood education, and on deinstitutionalization, serving as a valuable model for the region, as well as its good relationship between the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Finance? Why not make the Western Balkans, with its natural beauty and fragile eco-systems, a leader in regional eco-social policies? Why not think of universal social policies as one way of challenging clientelistic capture and welfare chauvinism? Let us think about building a regional social contract, sharing what we have in common not what divides us, and developing an ethics of welfare and care that builds solidarities, recognizes our interdependence and mutual obligations and not our competitiveness, individualism and productivism.

Thank you.