

# Developing Policy Planning and Research Capabilities in the Asia Pacific

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# **DEVELOPING POLICY PLANNING AND RESEARCH CAPABILITIES IN THE ASIA PACIFIC**

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by Peter Saunders

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Tony Eardley  
Editor

## **Abstract**

The paper begins by summarising some of the economic, demographic and social trends that form the backdrop against which social security policies are operating. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the role of research in policy planning in the social security field. Specific issues addressed include the alternative forms and impacts of research on policy, research inputs, the utilisation of research and alternative models of research funding. Some of the discussion draws upon aspects of the SPRC's own experience in conducting policy relevant research within a University environment. The paper finishes with a series of proposals for developing research capability within social security organisations in the Asia and Pacific region.

# **1 Introduction and Overview**

Throughout the world, governments are striving to balance the achievement of economic and social development within the parameters set by the global market place. Economic growth - the key to growing material prosperity - requires domestic production to adjust to the demands of the global economy, while rapid technological change is radically altering the nature and organisation of economic activity. Deregulation of the global marketplace has paved the way for capital (financial and physical) and labour to move freely within and between nations, presenting a challenge to the notion of the nation state itself.

While the new world economic order has improved the material rewards of economic success, it has also increased the social costs of failure. To quote from the Declaration issued following the World Summit for Social Development in 1995; 'the global transformations of the world economy are profoundly changing the parameters of social development in all countries' (United Nations, 1995: 5). The key feature of current economic development is globalisation, a situation described by US Secretary for Labor, Robert Reich, as one in which factors of production move effortlessly across borders as corporations and investors scour the world for profitable opportunities, becoming in the process disconnected from their home nations (Reich, 1993: 8).

The economic transformations now taking place are producing pressures on the values, customs and traditions that define national cultures and underpin national identity. Will economic forces sweep away these differences in belief and custom that lie at the heart of our national identities? As one commentator has put it:

how can a society become master of its own needs in an open international economy? The domain of polity is the nation; the domain of the economy, the world. How can a polity be sovereign over its economy in such conditions? (Ignatieff, 1994: 22)

These concerns have shifted the focus away from economics itself toward the social and institutional structures within which markets operate. The forces of competition offer new opportunities for achieving social goals

efficiently, but also place constraints on how these can be realised and the degree of political support they are likely to receive. In this context, social policy - in its broadest sense to mean the pursuit of collective goals which maximise the well-being of society and its citizens - has assumed a growing significance.

The view that economic and social development are largely incompatible goals has been shown to be simplistic and short-sighted. Experience in many countries over the last two decades provides many examples of how a comprehensive social safety net can facilitate economic transformation and protect the victims of structural change. Without the safety net - of which social security is an important component - engineering economic change would have been more, not less difficult.

Notwithstanding this, the challenges faced by systems of social protection - economic, budgetary, social and political - remain at the forefront of public policy deliberation in all countries. Although only part of a broader social policy canvas, social security must adjust to the new economic environment in ways which do not detract from its core task of providing assistance to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Establishing effective, affordable and sustainable social security provisions can thus support the ability of governments to compete internationally while offering certainty and protection domestically. This leaves open the question of what form social security should take so as to complement existing support structures without impeding the underlying processes of economic transformation. Whatever choices are finally made, there is a need for all countries to improve their capability to undertake the necessary research and policy planning tasks. What this will involve is the subject matter of this overview paper.

## **2 Setting the Context for Social Security**

### **Defining Social Security**

Social security refers to the design and implementation or encouragement of activities intended to meet the basic needs of vulnerable individuals and groups in society by guaranteeing their physical survival and by protecting them against unforeseen risks against which they are unable to

protect themselves. Implicit in this definition are three basic ideas: first, that it is possible to identify needs in a consistent and unproblematic way; second, that it is possible to identify where needs are not being met, in relation to the needs themselves (e.g. for food, shelter or credit) and in relation to their distribution among social classes (e.g. the urban unemployed, the rural poor); and finally, that it is possible to design, legislate, implement and deliver (or otherwise encourage) social security arrangements to meet those needs.

Social security experts in the Asia Pacific region have argued that for the concept of social security to have meaning and practical relevance for developing countries, it must be interpreted flexibly to cover a variety of different *needs* (for income and services), must recognise that these needs can be achieved through different *instruments* (formal, informal and traditional) and be directed at different *social groups* (urban and rural residents, rich and poor, families with children and older inactive people) (Getubig, 1992).

The most important feature of alternative strategies for achieving social security is that *social security is an end rather than a means*; a goal to be identified and achieved, not a particular strategy or path for getting there. Equally important is the idea that social security will reflect national characteristics and thus exhibit differences between nations. Thus: 'As long as societies differ in their cultures and values, it is unlikely that social welfare provisions in any two countries will be the same, either in form or in spirit' (Chow, 1987: 39).

Within industrial countries, social security has been achieved through the implementation of formal systems which direct financial assistance to specific groups such as the elderly, the disabled or the unemployed who are unable to earn an income that is adequate for their needs. It is this conception that underlies the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition of social security as encapsulated in ILO Convention No. 102. Within this framework, social security has come to be seen as a *means* of achieving a specific goal - the provision of an adequate minimum income safety net - rather than the broader *goal* to which the system is directed.

As a consequence, the social security experience of industrial countries is often of only marginal relevance to the concerns of developing countries.

Despite some similarity in the economic and demographic experience currently shaping welfare systems, there are also many differences.

The Western model of social protection is based on the institutionalised expression of entitlements or rights through a set of interconnected legislative actions comprising 'the welfare state'. In contrast, countries in the Asia Pacific region are wary of following this path towards social security and actively resist following the Western social welfare model (Goodman and Peng, 1995). Instead there is a strong preference for a 'welfare society' model of social protection based on notions of filial piety and familial obligation where the roles of family and the voluntary sector are reasserted, along with the importance of self-sufficiency and self-help (Goodman and Peng, 1995: 39).

Social security mechanisms (formal and informal) have also evolved in different ways in different countries and past history both shapes the current and places limits on possibilities for the future. What may have been economically, socially and politically possible in Europe, North America or Australia immediately after the second world war has little relevance to what is either desirable or achievable in many Asian countries today (Guhan, 1994: 37).

This is partly a matter of values and partly a question of opportunities. In relation to *values*, many Asian countries do not recognise the notions of rights and justice that underpin the welfare state. In relation to *opportunities*, a key factor is that formal social security systems are being considered at a far earlier stage in the development process in Asia currently than was the case in Western nations earlier this century. This points to the somewhat limited extent to which the experience of industrial countries can provide guidance to the social policy dilemmas currently confronting many countries in Asia.

It follows that the factors that are relevant to the development of social security in developing countries today cannot be narrowed down to the design and implementation of formal social security programs as they have evolved in industrial countries. Instead, the starting point for countries in the Asia Pacific region must be the *goals of social security*, how these are articulated, how they are expressed and legitimised



politically, how they can best be attained and sustained, and what role governments can play in the process.

### **Social Security in the Asia Pacific**

The most significant feature of existing social security arrangements in the Asia Pacific region is their diversity. Even among those countries with a relatively long history of formalised social security, a number of different schemes currently exist. These differences relate not only to how benefits are paid, to whom and on what basis, but also to how programs are administered, delivered and financed, and the extent to which the state is involved, either as a direct provider of welfare or as a monitor, regulator and facilitator of the welfare activity of others.

The overall shape of social security reflects the influence which the competing claims of core social groups is able to secure in the political process. The scope and generosity of formal social security generally are relatively low in most Asia Pacific countries, where a fragmented array of schemes for specific groups is supported by the encouragement of self/mutual help and a general rejection of notions of state dependency and that state-sponsored welfare should aim to reduce existing inequalities in society (White, Goodman and Kwon, 1997). Instead, social security in many parts of Asia has been seen as a vehicle for redistributing income over the life cycle of individuals, rather than as a means of vertical redistribution between rich and poor, or horizontal redistribution between different social classes.

There has also been much less reliance on social insurance and social assistance schemes, and more emphasis given to provident fund schemes with membership linked to employment status. The (compulsory) savings generated by these schemes have often been used to finance national infrastructure projects, thus achieving a consistency between social protection and economic development. The other distinguishing feature of social security arrangements in these countries is the active encouragement of care and support provided within the extended family, assisted by an extensive network of decentralised voluntary non-government organisations (NGOs).

These features of social security arrangements in the Asia Pacific region reflect values that are deeply embedded in social values and cultural traditions, specifically the role of the family in providing support when individual family members cannot provide for themselves. In Singapore, for example, the welfare ideology of the government translates into a policy approach based on a sequential model which sees self-care as the first option, followed by family care and community care, with state care offered only as a final resort on a limited and tightly controlled basis (Liang, 1997).

A similar approach is common in many other Asian countries, where social security seeks to enhance, not diminish the contribution of the family in meeting both material and non-material needs (Chow, 1994). While elements of formal social security exist, they generally operate alongside other informal support mechanisms. Social security as it currently exists in many parts of the Asia Pacific region can thus be seen as

dependent in the last resort not on governments but on families and communities; on voluntary action, both formal and informal; on traditions revived and reinforced in many aspects by Western example. (Jones, 1993: 213)

### **3 The Challenges Facing Social Security**

The structural economic changes summarised above, in conjunction with the social changes that are in part being driven by them, present a formidable challenge to social security as it is evolving in the Asia Pacific, in part because they give rise to increased uncertainty about economic prospects, but also because they require a far more complex and flexible policy response. Accompanying this growing complexity is the need for social security to be integrated with other institutional structures, including labour and capital markets, and the family and community structures that shape people's lives.

This is affecting both formal and informal social security systems. Where formal schemes have developed an extensive network of programs to cope with disruptions to earnings, the concern is whether

these programs can be reformed to make them more consistent with, and responsive to, the needs of a more diverse and flexible workforce. Where social security arrangements are less formal, a contradiction is emerging between the demands placed on individuals as workers and the family and community roles and responsibilities that traditional social values expect of them.

Adding considerably to the need to respond to these challenges is the fact that the pace of economic change is likely to become more, rather than less rapid, and more rather than less profound in its impact.

This economic transformation is being accompanied by a process of demographic change that is raising issues for the nature and *sustainability* of social security mechanisms. Some of the factors underlying this demographic transition have implications for how social security should be organised and delivered. A basic issue here is whether the changing costs of social security - financial, economic *and* social - can be managed in a way that can achieve *fairness* in the distribution of resources and opportunities between different social classes, regions and industries, as well as between current and future generations.

This brings in the issue of *manageability*, which in turn raises questions associated with governance: the ability of governments to achieve their objectives in an efficient and orderly manner. This is also giving rise to concerns that span national borders and political systems. In a world in which economic forces are placing families under stress and threatening the continued viability of communities, how can governments set achievable social goals and motivate public support behind them? In the field of social security, where the conflicts between individual self-interest and collective responsibility are more acute and visible, the issue is of particular importance.

An important feature of the changing economic and social environment within which social security has to operate is its commonality. Globalisation and demographic change are occurring in different countries at different rates, but they are present everywhere, and give rise to similar pressures and concerns. That commonality provides the impetus for meetings like this to identify areas where experience can be pooled for mutual benefit.

## **Economic Change**

The high rates of economic growth experienced throughout the Asia Pacific over the last two decades have made it one of the most dynamic regions in the world. That growth has delivered rising living standards, which have in turn contributed to increased levels of wealth in many parts of Asia. The 'new middle class' that is the chief beneficiary of these improvements has rising expectations that feed into increasing demands for education and other services such as health care in which the state is expected to play a leading role. There is also an important cohort effect operating, whereby members of the newly-affluent middle class have grown up with no memories of poverty and different attitudes to work than previous generations (Goodman and Peng, 1995). Growing material affluence is also linked to demands for more democratic structures as emerging economic freedom feeds into rising demand for other freedoms, notably of expression and political association.

Responding to these issues is all the more difficult in the context of globalisation, which is increasing the need for compensatory social policies to offset the adverse consequences of economic deregulation whilst simultaneously denying the social welfare sector the financial and ideological resources it needs to play a constructive role (Mishra, 1995). The key issue for government is how to mobilise the political support for social programs that can protect the losers from economic change without impeding the economic forces that are themselves the agents of change.

At the same time, the process of globalisation is widening existing inequalities and creating new ones. This is occurring in many different dimensions, including in the labour market (where earnings differentials are increasing, even within groups with fixed education and skill levels) and in capital markets (where speculative activity is generating enormous gains to the few while the majority are denied access) and in the geography of development in which urbanisation is creating social divisions between an affluent urban middle class and the rural poor.

What role can social security play in moderating these increases in inequality, particularly where entitlements are employment-related? Is

there an increasing role for means-tested benefits and if so how can their coverage be expanded, at least within the formal sector?

The current and prospective changes in the nature of economic activity prompted the International Social Security Association (ISSA), in its latest review of social security developments, to describe social security in many parts of the world as 'approaching a historic set of crossroads' (ISSA, 1996: 5). From a social development perspective, the central issue on the current policy agenda is how to manage the newly-emerging economic forces and the values and tensions they encourage so as to achieve improved social outcomes. This means accepting that 'economic growth is a two edged sword. It provides many with a means for better lives. But at the same time it delivers hardship and suffering' (MacPherson, 1995: 220). Social security must be responsive to economic change, but improved economic performance alone is not the solution to social security's problems.

### **Demographic Change**

According to the World Bank, the global population aged 60 and over will more than treble to 1.4 billion between 1990 and 2030. Over half of this growth will take place in Asia, a quarter of it in China alone. Over the period, the percentage of the population over 60 will rise from nine per cent to 22 per cent in China, from 17 per cent to 33 per cent in Japan, and from seven per cent to 13 per cent in the rest of Asia. These figures highlight the fact that while all Asia Pacific countries are ageing, they are doing so at different rates and from very different starting points.

The speed of the demographic transition, like the economic transformations described above, is also occurring at a more rapid pace than ever before. While it took more than 80 years for the size of the population over 60 to double in many European countries, a similar doubling is projected to take only 34 years in China and just 21 years in Singapore (World Bank, 1994). Once again, this suggests that the past experience of industrial countries may provide few lessons for the future experience of Asian countries.

Although population ageing is the single most significant feature of projected demographic change, it is not the only one that has relevance

for social security. It will give rise to further concerns, specifically those relating to the particular needs of older women (who are outliving males everywhere) and to the needs of very frail old people living alone or in isolated areas. These trends require a policy response, but the burden of adjustment cannot be left entirely to social security. The ageing of the population has important implications for policy in other areas, notably housing, health and community care and raises issues of coordination and integration across social programs.

Improved education and increased access to contraceptive techniques are having a profound effect on fertility rates in all countries. The traditional segmentation of the life course into four distinct stages representing childhood, education, work and retirement is becoming less relevant. So too is the gender dimension of this segmentation, as more married women are choosing to enter the labour force, making the 'male breadwinner' model of the family as an economic unit increasingly defunct.

These patterns have been changing in response to the changing demands of the economy and as a result of revised social attitudes to gender roles and responsibilities. Economic change is challenging the notion that, once educated and trained, most workers can expect career employment with a single employer, or at least in a single occupation. The result is that the typical life course now comprises many different stages: childhood, primary and secondary education, tertiary education, work experience, training, work, re-training (all increasingly likely to be punctuated by periods of unemployment), early (enforced) retirement and official retirement.

Household living arrangements are also changing, as the nuclear family is becoming increasingly common. The decline of the three- or four-generation family operating as a single social and economic unit throughout Asia has many important consequences for the structure and viability of traditional support systems for the elderly. How far can these changes be accommodated within revised family values and reformulated attitudes to the role of the state in the provision of social support?

Irwanto and Tan (1997) report that in Indonesia almost 78 per cent of men and 73 per cent of women aged over 60 live with other family

members. A study of living arrangements among the elderly in selected Asian countries undertaken at the Population Studies Centre at the University of Michigan reveals that the percentage of persons aged 60 and over living with people other than their spouse was over 75 per cent in Taiwan, around 80 per cent in Thailand and the Philippines and over 90 per cent in Singapore (Casterline et al., 1991). The corresponding figure for Australia is around 25 per cent and it is lower than that in many other industrial countries (OECD, 1996).

The increased incidence of single-parent families is also impacting upon living arrangement patterns. This trend is giving rise to concern in many countries, and while it requires a social security response, the extent to which more generous social security provision for single-parent families has contributed to increased family breakup is a topic of intense debate. Improvements in health care services and medical technology have added considerably to life expectancy, but populations now contain more people with disabilities who require social security and other support.

These demographic changes have important implications for the structure of social security, partly because they affect the aggregate cost of funding a specific set of entitlements, and partly because the legitimacy of social security depends on its consistency with prevailing social customs and practices. In countries where formal social security is well developed, demographic change alters its underlying assumptions and generally raises costs. In those countries where formal social security is less well developed, demographic change poses a threat to the traditional informal family-based support systems that perform a social protection role.

As the World Bank has observed:

Economic development weakens [these] informal arrangements. Families become smaller and more dispersed. Opportunities for market employment open up for the young. The value of time contributed by old people diminishes... The challenge is to move toward formal systems of income maintenance without speeding the breakup of informal systems, without shifting too much responsibility to

government, and without repeating the mistakes of other countries. (World Bank, 1994: 5 and 34)

Implicit in this assessment is the view that there is a need for an expanded role for formal social security in developing countries - as long as this is introduced in a manner that is supportive of broader economic and social changes.

### **Changing Values and Attitudes**

The value systems that shape attitudes towards social security provide the motivation that underlies informal support, as well as the social solidarity and legitimacy on which public programs rest. Research in industrial countries has highlighted the role played by 'social capital' - reflected in the degree of trust in individuals and institutions, and the extent of engagement in communal activity - in building the kinds of strong interactive and mutually supportive communities that make effective government possible (Putnam, 1993).

Social capital is one of the conditions which allows public policies to flourish, although public policy itself is the outcome of a political process which both reflects and shapes the values of the population. Notions of social justice are fundamental in this context: what it means, how it can be achieved and with what instruments. Government has a crucial role to play here, not necessarily as an instrument of social justice but at least as a vehicle through which competing notions of fairness can be articulated and contested. Social values are deeply embedded in the historical experience of specific societies and their expression is played out in the political arena. It is thus in this arena that social security must gain its legitimacy.

A key issue for many Asian countries focuses on the need to *manage the transition* from a command system of governance characterised by strong central state authority and control to a more market-based system. How can the hierarchical structures that have developed under the command model be transformed to suit the changing circumstances of state and economy and what role can social security mechanisms play in facilitating this transition?



These issues are all the more important in the current context where, as ISSA (1996) has argued, change is both inevitable and necessary in relation to the coverage, organisation and delivery of social protection mechanisms. Setting an agenda for change involves articulating goals and thinking strategically about how to attain them. The development of appropriate policies and administrative and delivery mechanisms is also essential for the achievement of politically condoned goals.

### **Issues for Discussion**

- Is there agreement that the economic and social forces described above are having the most important consequences for social security policy planning in any specific country? If not, what additional factors should be added to those described?
- In what specific national forms is global economic transformation impacting upon the evolution of social security policies and programs in each country?
- Are there examples of how these economic pressures are affecting existing social security arrangements, and specific areas where policy reform has been successful in alleviating those pressures?
- Are current social security provisions more vulnerable to economic changes or to changes in demographic structure?
- Are current social security arrangements sustainable in the face of the changes described and if not, where are the pressures for change strongest?
- Can social security withstand the changes in 'traditional family values' or are these a product of Western thinking that have relatively little practical relevance in the Asia Pacific region?
- What single change in the prevailing national mindset on social security issues would do most to ease the current problems confronting social security policy?
- Does it make sense to envisage a single over-riding model of social security for the entire population as a long-run goal, or

should the aim be to design separate social security schemes for separate sectors or social groups?

- What role is envisaged for social assistance as a medium-term goal of social security policy?
- What are the key issues for social security in supporting the transition to a more market-oriented economic system?

## **4 The Role of Research in Policy Planning**

The foregoing discussion of the broad context that is shaping the current evolution of social security throughout the world attempts to place specific national and local concerns within a broader international framework of development and change. The discussion provides a background for considering research and policy planning by showing that all forms of social security in the region are being driven by global economic changes and the priorities associated with them.

There is a need for a policy response that brings social security more into line with economic and demographic trends through reforms that improve efficiency and effectiveness. At the same time, these responses need to be practical, in the sense that benefits can be delivered to those for whom they are intended, while the reforms themselves must receive support in the community and thus political legitimacy. These issues exist irrespective of whether social security forms part of a rights-based 'welfare state' or where the state acts primarily to reinforce social values and otherwise encourage family-based welfare provision under the umbrella of the 'welfare society'.

Identifying appropriate policy planning responses can only be achieved if social security is the subject of systematic research directed at identifying current problems, designing policies which address them, and monitoring progress towards the attainment of agreed targets. This will in turn require the development of an appropriate skills base on which the research effort can build. There is much to be gained from approaching these issues with 'the three Cs' in mind: complementarity, cooperation and collaboration.

It is worth making the point that not only should efforts at capability enhancement be directed at improving efficiency and effectiveness of the social security system itself, but also that social security organisations themselves should reflect these goals. Market competition is accompanied by organisational competition, which requires successful organisations to operate efficiently and effectively or risk disappearing. That is more likely where there is a degree of sharing of information and experience: analytical, technical and practical.

Building an effective planning and research capability is also needed to allow the social security administration to argue its case for new programs and in defence of existing ones before the central coordinating agencies of government. The growing influence of Finance Ministries reflects the strategic approach they have taken to improving their own analytical and research capabilities. This extends not only to policies and programs initiated within the social security administration itself, but also to the social security consequences of policy reforms in other areas.

Tax reform, for example, a major issue in Australia and many other countries in the region, has major consequences for social security which need to be identified and analysed if social security needs and priorities are to influence the course of the debate. Developing such capability needs to be undertaken strategically if the concerns of social security, like the social security administration itself, are to prevent themselves from being seen as part of the 'Cinderella syndrome' in the broader policy debate arena.

One of the conclusions to emerge from the available cross-national comparative research is that Western experience offers developing countries 'warnings of the most dramatic kind' (MacPherson, 1987) which call for new approaches reflecting national culture and historical experience. The model of social security that has informed debate in industrial countries has limited relevance to the social security needs of developing countries (Guhan, 1994). The World Bank has also cautioned developing countries against repeating the policy mistakes made by industrial countries in the aged care context.

Nevertheless, comparative research among industrial countries has been extremely useful for interpreting national experience within a broader

frame of reference, but also as a way of documenting systematically what individual countries are doing in policy terms, and with what impact. There is a role for this kind of research in the Asia Pacific, although many preliminary steps are required before it can become a reality. These include developing conceptual, analytical and policy frameworks and databases that can be applied consistently across different countries and documenting policies and their actual effects in ways that are accessible to others. Currently, even the basic terminology of social security (including the meaning of the term itself) is different in different countries.

A review of Western social security experience undertaken by two leading social security experts recently concluded that:

The policy instruments which need to be developed to protect vulnerable groups in developing countries are therefore quite different from those that have been found useful in developed countries. The shaping of social-security systems in developing countries needs to be responsive to their specific circumstances, relating... to the nature of contingencies to be covered... informational constraints... political influences.... and incentive structures. (Atkinson and Hills, 1991: 104)

At the same time, however, the authors argued that while there may be little of benefit that developing countries can learn from the *specific forms* that social security schemes have taken in the West, there are useful lessons to be learnt from the *methods of analysis* that have been employed to study social security.

This is an important message which reinforces the view that while the social security research capability of some countries in the region may be relatively underdeveloped, there is a large body of existing research methods, analytical techniques and policy planning capabilities on which to build. Although there are substantial differences in the value systems and instruments of social security policy in much of the Asia Pacific, basic questions concerning questions of incentives, equity, dependency and administration cross national jurisdictions. There is a

vast stock of knowledge on many of these issues already available which, if used sensitively, can provide a very valuable starting point.

## **Forms of Research**

Before considering explicitly the role of research in the policy planning process, it is instructive to reflect on the nature of the research process itself and the ways in which research can influence policy. Research analysts have distinguished between five categories of social science research, each of which has a role to play in the social security policy planning process. These five forms are: basic research; strategic research; specific problem-solving research; action research; and research that involves monitoring and intelligence (Bulmer, 1986).

Each has a role to play at a different point in the policy process. Basic and strategic research generally take place before programs are implemented. Action and problem-solving research are more likely to form part of the implementation process itself, or the lead-up to it. Monitoring may occur both before and after implementation, and is likely to form part of the evaluation process. In the policy context, evaluation is critical in helping to establish what the *actual*, as opposed to the *intended*, consequences of policy initiatives are and why they differ. This can often be facilitated through the implementation of *pilot programs*, although these need to be structured and designed carefully to be effective as an input into the final shape of programs.

Much of the research which informs social security decision-making focuses on identifying the social and economic changes that influence the development of social security programs and with the economic and social effects of those programs. Trying to answer many of the relevant conceptual and practical questions requires input from a range of research conducted by a variety of researchers working in different institutional contexts.

For example, it is often claimed that social security programs serve to undermine traditional family values and create a 'culture of dependency' that will ultimately be harmful, both to society and to its economic functioning. How can the validity of such claims *in an Asia Pacific context* be assessed? This involves understanding how families currently

operate, what changes they are experiencing, whether they see these as desirable or not, who is expected to win and lose from them and what role different forms of social security provision can play in supporting the positive aspects without causing adverse side effects. This requires input from a range of perspectives, including labour and consumer economics, the sociology and psychology of the family, in addition to social security analysis itself.

The perspectives that the various researchers bring to their work will depend upon whether they are located in the academic research community, within the social security management system, or form part of the political decision-making process itself. This will affect the way that ‘problems’ are identified and the scope and nature of the ‘solutions’ that are explored.

Development of a *diverse research base* is important to ensure that a variety of different views and perspectives can emerge. This may lead initially to some tension among those responsible for social security programs, but is in the longer-run interests of achieving better policy outcomes. But *developing the appropriate skill base in a range of different areas is an essential component of effective and sustainable capability enhancement.*

## **Research Inputs**

Conducting effective research requires codified information that allows the ‘facts’ to be identified and subjected to scrutiny and interpretation. In light of the complex nature of modern society, the conduct of research will involve highly-trained and skilled analysts and require appropriate supporting computing and other relevant infrastructure. Ensuring that the relevant data are available is no easy task. It is often difficult to predict which data will be needed and thus to plan for their availability, while the absence of ‘controlled experiments’ in social science research provides greater scope for alternative interpretations of the information that does exist.

One particular form of data that can be useful for social security research purposes is that which is collected routinely as part of the administrative process of program operation and accountability. These administrative

data are collected primarily for accountability and budgetary purposes and are thus often not available in a form that allows them to be used productively for research purposes. However, *there is much to be gained from developing administrative data sets with research and policy capability needs in mind.* It is acknowledged that there are legitimate confidentiality issues that also need to be given careful consideration, but an extra question or two added to existing forms may provide invaluable information for research and policy planning purposes.

Generating a ‘critical mass’ of research personnel and analytical expertise involves appropriate educational planning at all levels, particularly in the tertiary sector. As noted earlier, the variety of skills needed to undertake social security research requires training across a range of disciplines, including economics, statistical methods, sociology and political science, reinforced in some cases by history, anthropology and psychology. Development of the generic analytical and policy skills needs to be accompanied by more specific training programs targeted to the needs of social security research. Such training should be directed at social security officials as well as to those working in the non-government sector, particularly where NGOs are expected to play an active role in program delivery.

Building up research and policy development capability is not cheap. Nor can it be achieved quickly. Developing the necessary research infrastructure and policy-making capability will take both time and money. It is all too common for research to be seen as an ‘expendable luxury’ and not part of core business. And when the needs of the poor are acute and resources are severely stretched, these arguments become particularly compelling. The point is that research and service delivery are complementary not substitutes, so that devoting more resources to the former will, in the longer-term, improve the quality of the latter.

It is interesting to note in this context that about a decade ago, ISSA convened a conference on The Role of Research in Social Security and undertook a survey of ISSA member institutions to discover the extent of their interest in research. The survey results suggested a tendency for social security institutions in Asia to be more involved in research than those in other regions, but also for developing countries generally to

engage in in-house research rather than funding research by external organisations (ISSA, 1988: 1-22).

Equally significant was the fact that one of the dominant themes to emerge from that conference was the need for *good communications* in the development of research. This needs to occur on a regular and on-going basis between the three key research groups, social scientists, social security managers and political decision makers, a point which remains equally relevant today (Hennessy, 1988). Given the changes in the world economy described earlier, such communication links clearly need to extend both nationally and internationally.

### **Research Utilisation**

Identifying alternative forms of research and establishing the conditions that allow good research to be conducted will not guarantee that research findings will actually influence policy. There is no single route through which research can be used as part of policy planning and development. As many as seven alternative meanings of research utilisation have been identified (Weiss, 1986). These are worth spelling out because they illustrate the various ways in which research can impact on policy planning.

The first, *research as knowledge*, corresponds to the most familiar understanding of a scientific model of research in which basic research leads to applied research, to development and finally to application. The second meaning emphasises *research as solutions to problems* and although this is probably the dominant image of research utilisation, in practice the particular combination of circumstances required for problem-solving research to influence policy occurs only rarely. A third meaning is based on a more complex and haphazard process which provides decision-makers with *research as knowledge and opinion* in the policy area.

A fourth meaning is of *research as political ammunition* for those who find its conclusions appealing because they support their policy position (although this in itself does not make the research itself any less valuable). Research is often employed *as a tactic*, in which what matters is that the research is being done rather than its actual content: the fact



that research is underway is often provided as proof of responsiveness, whatever its ultimate destiny. Next comes *research as enlightenment*, the rather ill-defined and unplanned process through which the accumulation of theoretical and empirical research findings permeate the consciousness of policy-makers in their analysis of policies, old and new. Finally, there is the meaning of *research as part of the broader intellectual pursuit of society*. Again, the impact of research on this view is largely unplanned and unpredictable, but no less important.

Each of these alternative meanings of research utilisation adopts a different model of the research process and how knowledge influences policy decisions. Underlying each of them is the view that, in the right conjunction of circumstances, research:

...can have very important and far-reaching effects that can drastically revise the way that policy-makers define issues... In the long run, along with other influences, it often redefines the policy agenda. (Weiss, 1986: 38)

However, while research *can* be a very powerful force for change in the social security sphere, there is no guarantee that it *will* actually have an impact.

For this to occur, there needs to be agreement that a particular social condition is seen as a pressing problem, as well as some agreement over the parameters of potential action. This implies that attempts to conduct or encourage research must also be accompanied by moves to make the decision-making environment more receptive to research. Improved effectiveness in this latter area can be more productive than generating more research that is not being used. Strategic issues surrounding *how to make better use of the existing research* in the context of policy planning are thus worthy of serious consideration.

### **An Example**

An example from Australia may help to bring some life to these notions by illustrating the range of research that is needed to inform policy in one specific area. For the last 15 years, Australia has been gradually moving

away from a universal family benefit payable to all families with children to a more targeted system. This shift has been partly motivated by budgetary considerations (targeted schemes are cheaper) but also by changing notions of what is equitable in the field of family support, by the need to maintain incentives to work, and by a wish to make social security consistent with labour market changes. Research has informed the policy shift at several points and in several ways.

Initially, poverty research identified the existence of high rates of poverty among larger families, providing the impetus to raise benefits to low-income larger families. Such research was used to pressure the government by groups who were advocating on behalf of the poor, thus setting up a context for reform. Labour market research was documenting changes in the labour market, specifically the increased participation rate of married women and the shift towards part-time work, both of which had implications for the structure of social security support for families. At the same time, research was revealing how income-tested benefits were causing both a 'poverty trap' (due to the high benefit taper) and, in combination with declines in low wages, leading to high 'replacement rates' for many low-income families.

A number of policy trade-offs were highlighted by this research. Raising the level of family benefits to alleviate poverty would increase replacement rates, leading to disincentive effects on the labour supply of parents. Offsetting this by further targeting of benefits would worsen the poverty trap problem. How important these effects were likely to be in practice depended upon the size of the labour supply responses and which groups were most affected by them. Were the effects likely to be greatest among men or women, single people or members of couples, full-time or part-time workers, low-paid or high-paid groups? How would these impact upon fairness? Would the changes accelerate or impede the adjustments that were already taking place in the labour market?

These issues gave rise to additional questions concerning whether the groups affected by any policy changes had sufficient *knowledge* about the detailed operation of the social security system and raised the issue of what impact, if any, does the way that benefits are administered and delivered have on the nature of the behavioural response. Furthermore,

to what extent could workers choose how many hours to work each week, or were hours of work determined by employers? Finally, if there is a significant labour supply response, what other reforms would be needed (e.g. in the areas of child care or regional policy) to facilitate it?

The example illustrates the range and complexity of the issues involved in designing social security reform in just one area. Designing a reform package that could improve the adequacy of the family payment system and enhance its incentive structures involved research on the design and impact (on equity and incentives) of the social security system, the extent of knowledge of how the system operates in practice and how this might be changed, as well as how social security interacts with the wage system and the labour market generally.

The fact that a good deal of research was available on many of the key issues reflects planning decisions and skill capabilities that had already been set in place, partly within the social security administration, but also in the general research and welfare communities that were debating the issues and advocating reform. A key issue in the whole debate concerned the need to provide families with more choice over how to balance their economic and family roles and responsibilities. Social values about the nature of work and the role of women were changing, but without the research base it would not have been technically possible to design a reform package that could respond to those value changes in a way that also responded positively to structural changes in the economy.

## **Research Funding**

Given the state's role in the provision, funding, regulation and planning of social security, it is to be expected that governments will play the major role in funding social security research. There are areas where private employers have a direct interest in research outcomes (e.g. in relation to the design and impact of employment-related injury schemes), but even here their active participation in research often has to be encouraged by tax concessions funded from the public purse.

This situation is beginning to change in response to the shifting balance between the state, business and the individual in the provision of social security, and this change is generating a greater interest in funding

research among elements of the corporate sector, as well as encouraging the economic research institutes to begin to study some of the social implications of economic and policy trends.

Exploring ways in which to encourage an expanded role for private sector research capability would be valuable. This could take many forms, including exchange of data and expertise between the private and public sectors, as well as through encouraging a dialogue designed to identify common concerns and objectives. This is an area where there is a good deal of expertise and experience in the Asia Pacific, specifically in relation to research on the design and impact of provident fund schemes that are a form of common venture between the state and the private sector. What lessons have emerged from that experience with research funding from which others in the region can benefit?

There are three main ways through which the government can fund research on social security. The first is through *developing an in-house research capability* within the Department of Social Welfare or its equivalent. This approach has the advantage that the research effort can be closely aligned with policy and can more easily utilise administrative data without encountering confidentiality problems. Development of the research agenda and release of research findings can also be subject to some control, although this means that research findings are less open to scrutiny and thus less authoritative (although this does not reduce the value of the research). The danger is that research can become defensive rather than strategic; a vehicle for justifying what is *already being done* rather than a means of identifying what *needs to be done*.

A second approach involves *commissioning external agencies to conduct research* on aspects of social security of interest to policy-makers. This may include sponsoring research on topics of general interest (e.g. the impact of social security on work incentives and/or competitiveness), or in more closely defined areas (e.g. testing the impact of a new policy initiative on particular client groups), or through engaging consultants to undertake research designed to answer specific questions of policy interest (e.g. the impact of administrative changes on clients in a particular local area, or development of a template for the design of a new database and associated analytical capacity).

Finally, there is the possibility of *funding independent research organisations to develop their own capability to undertake social security research*. This model is quite common in industrial countries, where research centres, operating independently or semi-independently of government, receive government funding to undertake research on social security and related issues. There are already a number of such organisations in the Asia Pacific region, with both a generic policy focus (e.g. the Asian and Pacific Development Centre in Malaysia and the Social Development Research Institute in Japan) or focusing on more specific social security issues (e.g. the National Pension Research Centre in Korea).

In Australia, the Federal Government established the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales in 1980. The charter of the Centre requires it to undertake research on a broad range of social security and related social policy issues, to organise conferences and seminars of research and policy interest, to arrange for the publication of research findings and to facilitate postgraduate study of social policy. Since 1990, a proportion (currently 20 per cent) of the Centre's core grant has been allocated to research on social security topics negotiated between the Centre and the Department of Social Security (DSS). These projects are designed to both meet current policy needs and to fit within the Centre's own research agenda.

My experience as Director of the SPRC for the last ten years has led me to the view that this arrangement serves well the rather diverse interests of professional researchers, government policy-makers, those involved in delivering social security and related programs and the broader academic and (NGO) welfare sectors. The seminars and publications produced by the Centre serve as a focus for research and policy issues, and raise public awareness and understanding of them. This is important if public support is to be mobilised behind the need for reform.

The Centre's overall level of funding is sufficient to achieve a 'critical mass' of researchers (a minimum of around a dozen professional researchers with necessary support infrastructure) combining practical knowledge and research expertise from a range of academic disciplines. It has been able to attract and develop a strong pool of research expertise in social security, an area which would otherwise be relatively under-

resourced, falling as it does between conventional disciplinary boundaries and requiring considerable investment in understanding the details of the system.

The dialogue between SPRC researchers and policy analysts within DSS that has developed has resulted in a more mature appreciation of the role of research in policy planning on both sides. Those in the Centre have gained a better understanding of some of the practical constraints that are important in influencing the success of specific programs, while DSS has become more aware of the value of rigour in research methodology and planning (and of the limitations and qualifications that so often apply to research findings), and of the value that can be gained from a systematic but *independent* analysis of administrative data.

All three of these approaches to research funding have a role to play in developing knowledge and research and policy planning capability. But other steps are also needed. The most important of these is development of the appropriate skills base. Until the relevant technical, analytical, interpretive and design skills are present, the full potential of research to influence the practical outcomes that affect people's lives will not be realised. There is a need to ensure that the development of research capability and the skills base proceed in parallel.

## **5 Where to From Here?**

The aims of the opening Session of this meeting are to set the broad scene within which more detailed discussion of research and policy planning capability can take place, to explain why the task itself is important, and to canvas some broad suggestions designed to provide a broad 'template for action' within which more specific proposals can be formulated.

My opening proposition is that despite the variety of social security provisions in place in the Asia Pacific region, in relation to their underlying principles, their evolution and maturity, and the extent to which they are integrated with other support systems, *there is value in adopting a regional perspective to developing policy planning and research capability*. The rationale for this rests in part on the fact that there are common pressures on social security in all countries in the

region, reinforced by the view that a collaborative approach can more effectively promote stronger regional engagement with social policy issues.

The first step forward thus involves identifying areas of policy or administration where common pressures are strongest and where the need for information and advice is greatest.

Any collaboration of this form must build upon what already exists. There is nothing to be gained by 're-inventing the wheel'. Furthermore, any new research or planning activity should complement existing knowledge, not duplicate work already being undertaken by others, including the main international agencies or national bodies working in the field of social security.

This suggests that there may be value in establishing a database (or modifying one already in existence) which describes the scope of existing social security research and the extent of policy design and analytical capability already present in the region, along with an information network for updating and circulating it.

For regional collaboration to be of greatest value, it must address the right issues. One valuable input from this Meeting should be to attempt to prioritise current research and policy planning issues. Recent work undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) provides a useful starting point. Included amongst the issues they have identified for further study are considering ways of expanding the scope of the social safety net in ways that are consistent with the fundamentals of the development strategy, developing a comprehensive strategy for mapping the needs of vulnerable groups whilst catering to the special needs of the self-employed and informal sectors, devising ways to increase the role of NGOs in social security provision, and designing methods to assist those in absolute poverty without creating a 'poverty trap' (Gunatilleke and Perera, 1996).

The recent ESCAP Expert Group Report on *Enhancement of Social Security for the Poor* also identified the need for further work on the impact of macro-economic policies on poverty, the targeting of social

security programs and the design and evaluation of social security schemes (ESCAP, 1996).

In determining an agenda for future collaboration, it may be useful to consider the relative merits of focusing on the *pressures facing social security* (e.g. economic transformation; demographic change; technological change), on *social security design issues* (e.g. the structure of entitlements and funding mechanisms; targeting and means-testing; administration and benefit delivery systems; compliance and appeal mechanisms) or on *specific needs and target groups* (e.g. older women; the unemployed; the rural poor).

This Meeting is concerned with the *capability* to undertake research and policy planning, not just with the *content* of such activity. The fact that there are different degrees of social security experience in the region implies that there is already considerable potential for intra-regional skills transfer and training initiatives. How can the existing skill base and policy experience be identified and mobilised as part of this effort?

A crucial aspect of any collaborative effort should involve the design and implementation of *training programs* which can assist in the process of turning improved research and planning capability into a reality. How has each country gone about this task, and what lessons can they pass on to others? What are the perceived benefits of cross-national training workshops as compared with national efforts?

Addressing such issues is the first step in deciding what to do about them. This paper has attempted to provide a context for further detailed discussion by placing current social security issues in the broader economic and social context. *Its main message is that in all Asia Pacific countries, social security will have to respond to an increasingly complex and interacting set of pressures and demands.* This is true whatever the current stage of maturity of formal social security arrangements, and irrespective of the role of family and other informal mechanisms. Doing nothing until these pressures ease is simply not an option.

It follows that efficient and effective responses are called for, at both organisational and policy levels. This will require a strategic response in



which research will play a key role in the development of policy planning. Improving the capability to support this effort is crucial, but there is much to be gained from adopting a cooperative and collaborative approach. The details of what this will involve will emerge from further discussion.

Capability development is a process that will take time. It needs to be approached strategically by asking where social security is heading and identifying the research and policy needs that are required to get there. Improving the ability to respond to the challenges facing social security as the end of the century approaches is essential for the long-term viability of a system which is becoming increasingly important.

The organisation of this Meeting holds the promise of a bright future for the planning of social security policy in the Asia Pacific region. That opportunity must not be allowed to pass.

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