



Poverty and the Road to Global Social Citizenship // Professor Hartley Dean¹

We are by now familiar with the claim that poverty may be understood as a violation of human rights.² In 2006 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights went so far as to issue a statement of *Principles and Guidelines for a Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies*. But to what extent can freedom from poverty ever be an enforceable right?³ Are the 'free world principles' of the human rights agenda paradoxically at odds with the cause of social justice?⁴ This short Poverty Brief contains some immediate reflections on such questions. It does so by exploring the concept of global social citizenship.⁵

This Poverty Brief:

- Explores the concept of global social citizenship, arguing for the centrality of this concept in a human rights approach to poverty.
- Describes a concept of citizenship that transcends territorial boundaries, is rooted in human solidarity as much as legally constituted state governance, and seeks to optimize human wellbeing through the realization of human fulfilment as much as the satisfaction of material need.
- Argues that this understanding of social citizenship has resonance not only in the global North but for instance in the Islamic principle of Zakat, the Confucian concept of Rén, and the pan-African philosophy of Ubuntu.
- Claims that a human being's needs precede her rights, and that rights are socially constructed through the naming and claiming of human needs in a context of social citizenship.
- Concludes that social citizenship may be globally shaped by a 'politics of needs interpretation' as a central element in poverty reduction strategies.

It is by and large as citizens that we obtain rights that are enforceable. And it was through the development of the modern welfare states of the global North that the concept of social citizenship was born.⁶ Social citizenship encompasses not only civil and political rights (the right to freedom under the law and to democratic participation) but social rights (including, most particularly, the right to an adequate standard of living). The ancient legal dictum that 'necessitous men are not free men' - famously reiterated in the rhetoric of Franklin D. Roosevelt⁷ - not only informed the inclusion of social rights clauses under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but was reflected in the development during the twentieth century of substantive social legislation for the provision of healthcare, education and social security provision in the richer countries of the world. Whether, through the ministrations of the UN and the Committee under the International Covenant on Economic and Social and Cultural Rights, we can in the twenty-first century promote forms of social citizenship in the global South as well as the global North remains a moot point. Clearly, social citizenship in the poorest countries and in rapidly developing middle-income countries (such as Brazil, South Africa, India and China) will not by all accounts, and ought not necessarily to be, the same as in the 'developed' welfare states.

Though several commentators have reflected on the idea of cosmopolitan or global citizenship,⁸ we have yet to see a convincing account of global social citizenship. Any concept of citizenship capable of meaningfully addressing global poverty must encompass a 'social' dimension. This, as I understand it, means a concept of citizenship that:

- **Transcends territorial boundaries.** The term 'citizenship' originally denoted membership of an exclusive, albeit self-

governing, city-dwelling elite. In the course of history the term evolved so as to refer to the status, rights and responsibilities attaching to the lawful inhabitants of a sovereign nation state. More recently, citizenship as a concept has acquired a certain elasticity of meaning such that it can encompass not just a person's nationality and their associated civic status, but a deeper sense of her constitutive identity and her relationship to society at large, whether locally or globally defined; whether constituted with reference to a specific community or humanity as a whole. It is a concept as relevant to human relationships between distant strangers as to relationships between near neighbours. Citizenship is not something bestowed upon us by the various tiers of government to which we are subject, but something that is socially negotiated in a multiplicity of ways and at a multiplicity of sites.⁹

- **Is rooted in human solidarity.** The rights and responsibilities of citizenship may be variously conceived. What has become, arguably, the dominant conception is fundamentally liberal or 'contractarian'. Citizenship is seen as a bargain struck by autonomous individuals with a legally constituted state whereby the individual agrees to obey certain rules, in return for the protection of her freedom from unwarranted interference and her formal equality under the law. The alternative conception of citizenship is more solidaristic. Citizenship is seen as an association between inter-dependent and potentially vulnerable human beings;¹⁰ an association that affords mutual protection; a form of citizenship that embraces social or collective responsibility.

- **Seeks to optimise human wellbeing.** Social citizenship entails 'social rights': an encompassing short-hand term that includes what might also be construed as economic rights associated with the means of livelihood and an adequate standard of living (including access to water, food, clothing and shelter), but also rights to essential human services (such as education, health care and other social services), and rights to participation in the life and culture of the society where one belongs. Just as citizenship itself can be variously conceived, so can the nature of social welfare or human wellbeing. Human wellbeing entails more than the avoidance of starvation; more, even, than the pursuit of personal happiness. It requires the pursuit of human fulfilment; a fulfilment founded in the essential sociality of human existence.¹¹

This is what might be understood by social citizenship. It is sometimes supposed that concepts of citizenship and human rights which are seen to have emanated in the global North are inimical to the cultural traditions of the global South. However, this understanding of social citizenship has resonance, for example, with: the Islamic

principle of *Zakat* (the obligation upon Muslims to share wealth); the ancient Confucian concept of *Rén* (a state of virtue achieved through inter-connectedness); the pan-African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (that holds that a person is only a person through other persons). Social citizenship by its very nature is open to continual reinterpretation and negotiation. This is where its potential lies.

A rights-based approach to poverty reduction may therefore be founded as much upon social practices as upon human rights principles; upon negotiation as much as doctrine. My own contention is that rights by their nature are socially constructed; that social rights are constructed through the naming and claiming of human needs; and that social citizenship provides the conceptual context for the realisation of such rights.¹² Though the idea that needs may be translated into rights has been fiercely contested, if freedom from poverty is our objective it must be acknowledged that a human being's needs precede her rights. Poverty reduction strategies therefore entail an everyday 'politics of needs interpretation'.¹³ It is through such a politics that social citizenship may be globally shaped: not in any prescribed mould, but by a spectrum of means, that may range from the re-interpretation of international covenants, the framing of regional treaties, the making of national laws, through to the negotiation of local customs and practices.

Notes:

- 1) Professor of Social Policy, London School of Economics & Political Science
- 2) e.g. United Nations (1995) *The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action*, New York: UN
- 3) Gearty, C. (2011) 'Against judicial enforcement' in C. Gearty & V. Mantouvalou *Debating Social Rights*, Oxford: Hart Publishing
- 4) Rys, V. (2010) *Reinventing Social Security Worldwide*, Bristol: The Policy Press (see pp. 31-2)
- 5) A concept recently considered by a Co-operation Group, convened during the spring of 2011 at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies (ZiF) in Bielefeld, Germany. The group drew together scholars from law, social policy, sociology, development studies and urban planning. The initial deliberations of the group have had a preliminary airing elsewhere: see Barrientos, A. et al. (2011) *The Road to Global Social Citizenship*, FLOOR Working Paper No. 10 - (downloadable at tinyurl.com/3n9jh5h), from which this briefing, based on my personal contribution, is partly drawn. However, further output from the Group is in preparation
- 6) See Marshall, T.H. (1950) 'Citizenship and social class', in T.H. Marshall & T. Bottomore (1992) *Citizenship and Social Class*, London: Pluto
- 7) Roosevelt, F.D. (1944) State of the Union Address to Congress, 11 January
- 8) Including Gerald Delanty, Richard Falk & David Held - for an overview see Dwyer, P. (2010) *Understanding Social Citizenship*, 2nd edn. Bristol: The Policy Press
- 9) See, for example, Isin, E. (ed.) (2008) *Recasting the Social in Citizenship*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- 10) Turner, B. (2006) *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press
- 11) Dean, H. (2010) *Understanding Human Need*, Bristol: The Policy Press
- 12) Ibid
- 13) See Fraser, N. (1997) *Unruly Practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press