

A stylized map of Asia composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific countries or regions.

# Is There an »Asian Welfare State Model«?

## East and South Asian Trajectories and Approaches to the Welfare State

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- Asian developmental welfare state models are a work in progress, and can serve a useful point of reference for the post-2015 development debate.
- The role of the state has been neglected and needs to be revisited, both with a view to a new, holistic, and progressive »development« agenda beyond 2015, and in light of increasingly glaring inequities in and among countries. This discussion needs to be undertaken in a normative mode, and for this purpose, the notion of the welfare state – in the form of a democratic developmental welfare state – is a useful way to frame the issue because of its commitment to both social justice and to democracy.
- Increasingly, the neo-liberal agenda of replacing state functions with the market and the private sector is associated with immense social and economic divides, pointing to the need for a well-functioning, accountable, and properly resourced state to redress the inequities.
- One can distinguish five types of developmental welfare states in Asia, which all have in common a response – however varied – to poverty, vulnerability, social exclusion, demographic challenges, ecological stress, and to a lesser extent to income disparities.
- Despite their stated commitment to welfare state policies, outcome performances across Asia – in terms of human development, poverty eradication, social inclusion, income equality, or social sector expenditures – are mixed.

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## Introduction: Revisiting the Role of the State

There is currently an intense debate about the next development agenda, which is to enhance, or substitute for, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and combine it with sustainable development objectives. These discussions pivot around the most important and pressing areas of local and global concern: poverty, income inequality, gender-based violence, social exclusion, and ecological destruction. Discussions are using the language of rights. They are striving to be holistic, transformative and determined in a genuinely participatory fashion. All of this is a qualitative advance over the content and the processes that underpinned previous development decades, including that of the MDGs. But a major element is missing in the discussions: the role of the state.

There is also a growing concern in the general public and among policymakers over the fact that social and economic injustice are both widespread, and intensifying (Milanovic 2010; UNRISD 2010; OXFAM 2014; UN DESA 2013; UNDP 2014; World Economic Forum 2014). For example, in the course of the 2000s, 40 countries around the world experienced very high levels of vulnerability, defined as income and employment-related insecurities (ILO 2010: 30, 31).<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, the neo-liberal agenda of replacing state functions by the market and the private sector is associated with these social and economic divides, pointing to the need for a well-functioning, accountable, and properly resourced state to redress these inequities (UNRISD 2010).

Both in terms of a search for a more progressive and effectively delivered development agenda, and in response to the concern over rising inequities, it is necessary to revive a seemingly old-fashioned debate: namely, to analytically reassess the role of the state. This brief offers for consideration several hypotheses regarding welfare states, and then looks at the Asian welfare state experience. It uses the notion of the welfare state as an explicitly normative point of departure in sections 2 and 3. Then in sections 4 and 5, the brief examines current welfare state approaches found in Asia and attempts to classify and gauge them.

1. Vulnerability is expressed as a combination of two variables: the poverty rate, measured as a proportion of people living on less than 2 US-Dollar purchasing power parity per person per day, and the extent of informal employment, measured as the share of those not formally employed in the total number of employed (ILO 2010: 30, 31).

## A Brief History of »The« Welfare State

There is a common perception in everyday discussions, political discourse, as well as academic literature that welfare states were invented in Europe. This perception is shaped by the North's welfare state history. For example, in Germany, social policy reforms by Chancellor Bismarck in the 1870s are often portrayed as establishing the first welfare state, although his reforms were undemocratic and driven entirely by nation building and economic development concerns, and were accompanied by a dismantling of trade unions and an undermining of the social democratic movement. The New Deal in the United States (US) is also often identified as an early welfare state. As is well known, in response to the Great Crash and the massive economic depression of 1929 and the years that followed, the US government introduced in the 1930s a broad range of social policies to redress unemployment and poverty. Japan represents an interventionist welfare state in the phase immediately following World War II, when provisions were made for social security and free education, as well as for an organized health system. Also in the post-war era, the United Kingdom (UK) introduced the Beveridge Plan in the early 1950s, with an emphasis on income support and free and universal access to health care services. The British model was deeply influenced by the work of the economist John Maynard Keynes, whose ideas also permeated social policy in Northern and Southern Europe, where different forms of welfare states were put in place in the 1950s. This in turn prompted Gøsta Esping-Andersen to analyse welfare state policies across Europe and systematize them into three archetypes (1990).

For citizens of Europe and North America, these were important developments. But, in fact, welfare states existed in the so-called South long before or in parallel with their introduction in the North (Midgley 1997; Seekings 2012; Wehr et al. 2012). Latin America had welfare state elements as early as the 1910s in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Costa Rica, among others (Sandbrook et al. 2007). In Sri Lanka, a welfare state with three pillars education, health, and welfare – in the sense of poverty alleviation – was launched in the 1930s (Jayasuriya 2014). In newly independent South Asia, the prevailing zeitgeist influenced the formulation of welfare state policies in India, Nepal, and Pakistan in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Koehler 2014b).

The concept of a welfare state has strong normative connotations. It is conceptually associated with a commitment to both democracy and social justice. Democracy – which encompasses human rights, citizens' voice and participatory decision-making power, freedom of information, and many other factors – is a prerequisite to striving for and genuinely accepting social justice. It is also necessary to create the societal and political coalitions necessary to achieve at least acceptable levels of social justice, and at the practical level to finance and accept the institutions, policies, and patterns that enable a welfare state to function.

In terms of its commitment to social justice, the welfare state can be defined as guaranteeing universal access to social services, making provisions for access to employment and decent work, offering a set of social assistance and social security provisions, as well as overseeing regulatory systems to safeguard the environment. In this mix, social protection takes on a role of income smoothing, as well as serving as a tool for income redistribution – via the mechanics of tax policy – but also taking responsibility for the sustainable functioning of the system.

The potential for income redistribution and environmental regulation is an important element with regard to social justice, and has become especially important in the current discourse on gender equality, social inclusion, and intergenerational justice because of the increasing intensity of vulnerability, income and multi-dimensional poverty, employment informality, income inequality, and ecological degradation observed in all countries.

## Defining the Functions of the Welfare State

What then is the welfare state, beyond these – simplifying – fundamentals of democracy and the commitment to social justice? A comprehensive understanding could include five »pillars« of welfare state functions, where the service or provision considered needs to be a public good, a citizen's right, universally accessible, and financed from tax revenue.<sup>2</sup> A basic list might include:

- Education, at least for primary and secondary levels;
- Health access for all, in terms of services and funding mechanisms;
- Social protection in its components of contributory social security and tax-funded social assistance;
- Active labour market policies to generate employment, as well as microcredit and insurance provisions for the enterprise sector; and
- Family policy, such as child-related policies and welfare services.

Recently, environmental policy – policies and measures that address environmental sustainability – has been seen as integral to welfare state policy (UNRISD 2014), so would conceivably constitute a sixth pillar.

The list obviously projects a rather generalized understanding of the welfare state. In a liberal interpretation of these criteria, most countries display some form of welfare state functions, with policies covering the areas of education and health, social protection, labour market schemes, and family policy. Compulsory primary education is now the norm globally, even if it is not free in many countries. Health services delivery and health insurance are being reorganized in several countries with a view to making access more secure and affordable. Social protection measures in the form of direct cash transfers, or school meals, have been introduced or enhanced in at least 50 countries (United Nations 2013: 33).<sup>3</sup> Environmental policies in the areas of water, energy, and conservation are also being mainstreamed. At the same time, governments have been or are increasingly becoming involved in economic development – both in the areas of active labour market policies and also in the form of stimulating economic productivity enhancement and structural change. Many analysts therefore speak of a developmental welfare state.<sup>4</sup>

Each country follows its own trajectory: what, and to what degree, and in which quality any of the welfare state components is addressed by a country's government differs systemically for historical, economic, and

2. Definition by the author, see Koehler (2014a). Also see UNRISD (2010).

3. Estimate based on a sample of 144 countries. On the recent surge in social protection, see Barrientos et al. (2009).

4. For an overview of the schools of thought on the developmental welfare state, see Ehmke (2012) and Koehler (2014a).

political reasons. In some continental European countries, for example, all education is free, including at the university level. In a few countries, such as the UK, access to health services is universal and free. Some countries consider roads to be a public good, whereas most others charge for highway travel. Social assistance of some form is nowadays available in all countries across the globe, and social security is globally available for the privileged. While the aspiration of full employment is formulated as a commitment by most governments, active labour market policies are less common. Family policies with such provisions as child protection, income, or in-kind transfers to ensure family livelihoods are commonplace in industrialized countries, but only just emerging in low-income countries. In the areas of water and sanitation, and energy provision and conservation, the call for public policy and action is increasingly visible, but also increasingly contested.

The specific composition of the welfare state in each country ultimately differs as a function of power politics. Its characteristics vary as an outcome of negotiations – visible, in the form of protest, collective action, or parliamentary decisions, or invisible in the form of pressure on the state from grass-roots representatives, the general public, the middle class, or elites. Thus, the motivation for acting or performing as a welfare state has a wide range of rationales and forms. Some welfare states are primarily instrumental, and serve the purpose of nation building, economic growth, or social appeasement – or a combination of these. In other settings, the welfare state appears as a progressive entity, having evolved as an outcome of pressure from the action of formal sector trade unions, or from the informal sector – groups such as rural cooperatives, women’s movements, or social or faith-based civil society organizations. There are many rationales for welfare states (see Table 1).

Table 1: Welfare State Politics: Welfare States’ Rationales

Typ	Rationale	Explanation
Instrumental	Nation Building	To create the notion of a common country, supported by its citizens, and aiming for political and social cohesion
	Demographic Factors	To address population dynamics, such as a high proportion of youth, or of ageing populations
	Economic Progress	To speed up economic growth and restructuring via state-led institutions, infrastructure, or investment
	Productivity Enhancement	To ensure higher productivity by making education, training and health services available, or providing reliable economic infrastructure
	Enhancing the Domestic Market	To ensure incomes and alleviate the impacts of crises
	Economic Compensation	To provide a minimum income to guard against extreme poverty
	Political Co-optation	To ensure the compliance of subordinate classes by the ruling elites
	Guilt or Security Concerns of the Elites	To address social and political justice via a progressive, and possibly democratic welfare state
	Political Stability	To address social and political justice
Competitive	Peer Competition	To provide welfare state outcomes equal or superior to those of neighbouring countries, or those in the same economic or human development ranking
	Copy-cattling	To build on welfare state models that appear attractive or efficient
Progressive	Political Pressure and Collective Action of Trade Union, Peasant, Women, or »Grass-roots« Movements	To respond to pressures from organized interests, interest groups, subordinated, disadvantaged classes and communities
	Economic Justice	To address and redress poverty and income or wealth inequalities
	Socio-cultural Values	To accommodate normative perceptions and aspirations for gender justice, social inclusion, or more broadly: an inclusive, progressive, democratic developmental welfare state committed to equality of outcomes

Source: Author, compiled from the literature on welfare states

At first glance, these rationales appear either mutually exclusive, or a gradual progression, but in reality, a closer analysis of the evolution of welfare state modalities would probably reveal a combination of formats, driving forces, and of rationales. One can posit that all countries are driven, in their welfare state approaches, by a combination of instrumentalist, progressive, and competitive rationales.

### From the Welfare State to the Developmental Welfare State: Five Models in Asia

This brief contends that Asia is currently an interesting region in terms of the evolution of welfare states. This is because of massive deprivations on the one hand, and an unprecedented range of social policy initiatives and innovations on the other.

One can distinguish five types of developmental welfare states in Asia, which all have in common a response – however varied – to poverty, vulnerability, social exclusion, demographic challenges, ecological stress, and to a lesser extent to income disparities.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the first group are developmental welfare states that intervened in the economy with deliberate industrial policy to raise productivity in agriculture and trigger new branches of manufacturing production, or facilitate a shift into the services industry. These countries also – albeit hesitantly – introduced social policies to improve livelihoods.

However, social policy was subordinate to economic development, as evidenced by low levels of government spending dedicated to the social sectors, and a form of social protection that was means tested, and frequently conditional on behaviours. They could be classified as instrumentalist developmental welfare states. Examples include Japan in the 1950s, or South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia during the 1960s; a group of countries that have sometimes been labelled the »Asian tigers«. While notions of social justice had some traction, these welfare states were generally not democracies.

A second type of developmental welfare state emerged in Asia in the late 1990s. In countries such as South Korea or Thailand, the Asian financial crisis led to considerable GDP growth cuts or even decreases, and resulted in unemployment affecting all social strata. At the same time, democracy movements, led by trade unions and student movements, established claims on the state to provide public goods to its citizens. In that sense, a new social contract emerged in these countries after 1997. In South Korea, for example, the National Basic Livelihood Security Act was adopted in 1999. The Act introduced a right to social assistance, which was universal for all citizens, and designed to guarantee a social minimum. Democracy emerged in this period and became a constituent element.<sup>6</sup> This »type two« developmental welfare state is characterized by a social contract, and could perhaps be classified as an emerging developmental welfare democracy.

In China, the government recognized the growing disconnect between urban and rural regions in the 1990s. The Minimum Subsistence Guarantee, the *dibao*, for urban populations was introduced in 1999. This was a response to the impact of the market reforms introduced from the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping, which brought huge income disparities within and among economic classes and regions. The *dibao* was a selective – i.e., not universal – transfer, and was extended to rural populations only in 2008. It does not cover migrants. The Rural Cooperative Medical Insurance Scheme was universalized in 2013. Policy changes, such as an abolition of the *hukou* system<sup>7</sup>, were announced very recently. If that latter reform were to materialize, it would make all citizens eligible for the same type of social services – education, health, social assistance transfers – regardless of their status as rural or urban, migrant or resident. So far, however, the social contract is restrictive, and democracy lacking, but there is a state commitment to universalize welfare state functions, thus constituting a third form.

A fourth type of developmental welfare state can be discerned for example in South Asia (see Figure 1). Social policy in the realms of education, health, employment,

5. For a comprehensive overview on Asia, see Porsche-Ludwig et al. (2013); on Europe, see Lippl (2008).

6. See Ringen et al. (2011) for a trajectory of this development.

7. The *hukou* is the obligatory household registration certificate, Citizens have access to social services only in the place where they are registered, and registration cannot be transferred from rural to urban areas.

and social protection is – notionally – based on norms of social justice, deducted from the countries’ constitutions and development plans, and there is an explicit language of rights. Drivers have been various social movements – such as that of the informal sector – post-conflict situations with a need for social healing, as well as pressure from the emerging middle classes, either stemming from an enlightened commitment to improving social justice, or a concern over the impact of social disruptions on their security.

The welfare functions are becoming justiciable: in at least one country, citizens can claim their entitlements in court. In several countries in South Asia, civil society organizations are in a position to monitor delivery and performance. The social transfers are in principle universal, such as social pensions. Many are categorical – such as child benefits or education grants for girl children or children in disadvantaged castes – thus contain a strong

social inclusion angle. Some social assistance transfers are means-tested. Access to food is an additional function, going beyond the five welfare state functions listed above. Outcomes in South Asia, on the other hand, are poor, with human development indicators still among the lowest in the world; there is a disconnect between design and welfare state performance. This form of developmental welfare state is found in varying formats and qualities in Bangladesh, India, Maldives, or Nepal (Koehler 2011, 2013, 2014b). It could perhaps be classified as an emerging rights-based developmental welfare state.

There is a fifth type, or phase, of the developmental welfare state – those that are in regress. In some of the older developmental welfare states in Asia, one observes a continuous dismantling of welfare provisions. There is a partial deterioration of entitlements and rights. Behavioural conditionalities and rigid forms of means-testing

Figure 1: The Design of Social Protection in South Asia

Social Protection Panorama – South Asia				
Food-related Measures	Social Assistance	Public Works	Affirmative Action	Human Rights
Cooked school meals (India)	Universal old age pension (Nepal)	National Rural Employment Guarantee (India)	Secondary school stipend for girls (Bangladesh)	National Food Security Act (India)
Subsidized Public Distribution System (India, Nepal, Bangladesh)	Benazir Income Support Programme (Pakistan)	Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (Bangladesh)	Education for all (Nepal)	Mid-day meal (India)
Subsidized grain prices	Child benefit (Nepal)	Karnali Programme (Nepal)	Child grants for girls (India)	Right to education (all)
	Unorganized sector health insurance (India)		Rural development and community based interventions (India)	Right to health services (all)
				Right to work (India)
				Right to information (India, Bangladesh, Nepal)

Source: Based on Bonnerjee and Koehler (2011)

are being introduced.<sup>8</sup> Sri Lanka may be a case in point. While free education and universal health access remain, earlier guaranteed universal entitlements to food security and minimum income have been replaced by means-tested, targeted anti-poverty provisions (Jayasuriya 2014).

## Welfare Outcomes and Welfare Expenditures: A Quick Look at Asian Performance

Finally, it is necessary to examine these welfare states' outcomes. To do this, one needs to examine human development indicators and rankings, and look at efforts in terms of expenditures.

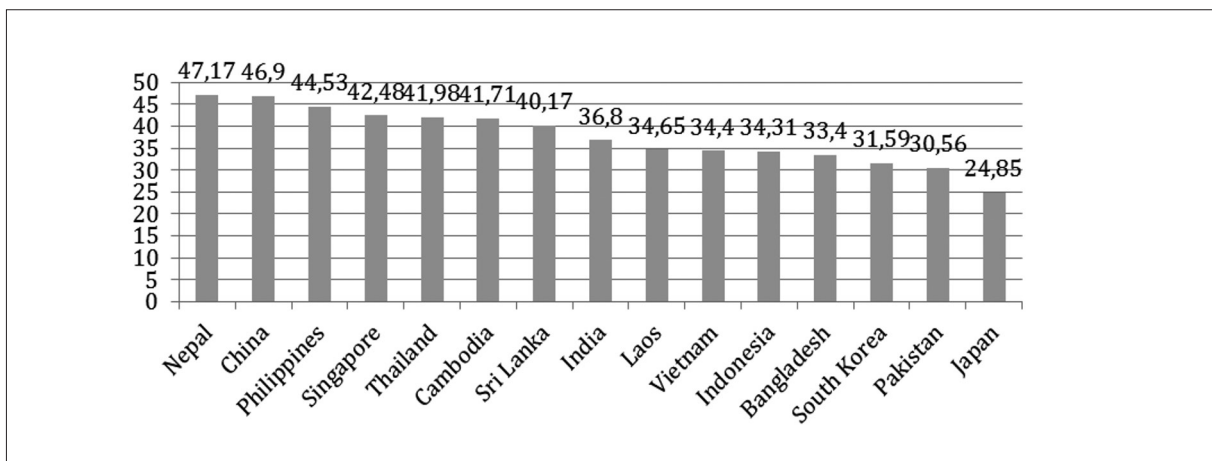
Regarding human development outcomes, it is well known that across Asia, despite its image as a highly successful region, individuals and communities face severe deprivations on many levels. In the region, an estimated 740 to 870 million people live on less than 1.25 US-Dollar per person per day, and 1.643 billion on less than 2 US-Dollar per person per day. Moreover, 83 million children are

undernourished – with between 7 per cent (China) to 45 per cent (India) of the under-five population being stunted – and three million children die each year before reaching the age of five. A staggering 1.8 billion people live without basic sanitation – with huge implications for health, safety, and dignity (UN ESCAP 2012). Twelve countries in Asia-Pacific experience high vulnerability (ILO 2010: 31).

Considerable levels of income inequality accompany vulnerability, poverty, and low human development. Many Asian countries experience income inequality at a Gini coefficient<sup>9</sup> of .45 and higher – including the Philippines, China, and Nepal (see Figure 2).

This dire situation – contradicting the welfare state image – is due to many factors. One among many determinants is the low level of social sector expenditures, which is one expression of welfare state effort (Table 2). Data are available only for health and education, so it is not possible to explore government expenditures for the five pillars listed above; health and education expenditures serve as a proxy.

Figure 2: Gini Coefficient: Income Inequalities in Asia



Source: [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco\\_gin\\_ind-economy-gini-index](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_gin_ind-economy-gini-index).

8. An example from another region is Europe, which, as mentioned, featured well-established and comprehensive welfare states from the 1950s, and also took on a developmental role in the sense of shaping agricultural and industrial development, directly via infrastructure development or investment in key sectors, or indirectly via fiscal policy. Many of this region's welfare states are now being downgraded. Examples include the Agenda 2010 in Germany, which de-democratized the modalities for social assistance, or the narrowing of eligibility for the child benefit in the UK as a consequence of austerity politics.

9. The Gini coefficient is expressed by an index between 0 and 1. The closer to 0, the more equal income distribution, the closer to 1 (100 per cent), the more unequal the situation; generally, a Gini coefficient higher than .30 is considered socially unjust. A dynamic picture showing changes over time would reveal the increasing income inequality of the past decade, but is not possible given the lack of time series and recent data. [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco\\_gin\\_ind-economy-gini-index](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_gin_ind-economy-gini-index).

Table 2: Social Expenditures as a Share of GDP, Proxied by Health and Education Expenditures 2010

Country	Health Expenditure as Share of GDP	Education Expenditure as Share of GDP
Bangladesh	1.2	2.2
China	2.7	...
India	1.2	3.1
Indonesia	1.3	3.0
Malaysia	2.4	5.8
Nepal	1.8	4.7
Pakistan	0.8	2.4
Philippines	1.3	2.7
Sri Lanka	1.3	2.1
Thailand	2.9	3.8
Vietnam	2.6	5.3

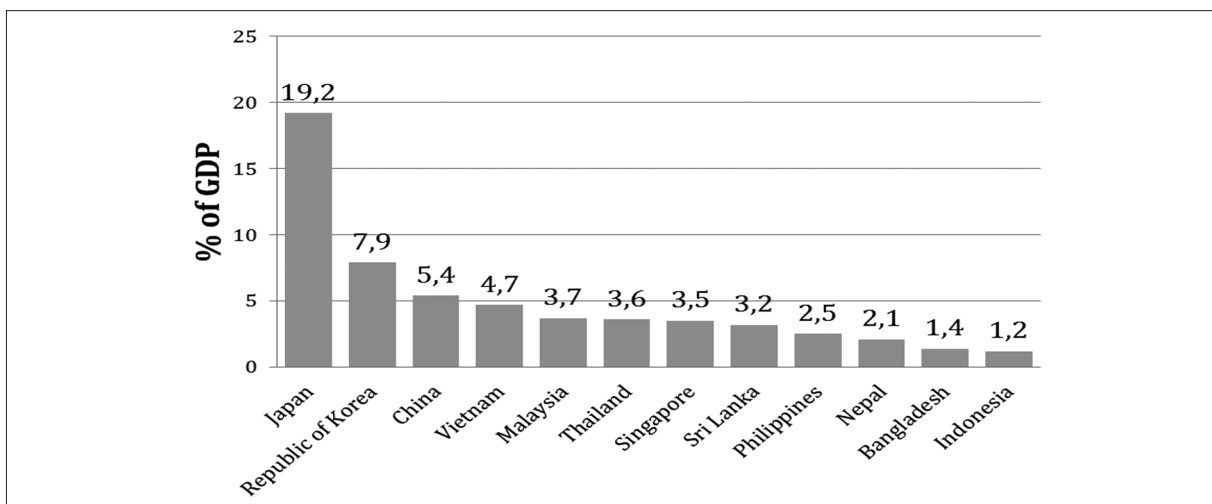
Source: UNDP (2013: 162ff)

These expenditure shares are extremely low, and are not sufficient to meet the right to education and health of these countries' populations. They are also very low compared to social sector expenditure patterns of mature welfare states – such as Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands – where the sum of health and education expenditures as a share of GDP averages around 15 per cent (UNDP 2013: 165).

Another useful proxy for measuring the intentions of a government to function as a welfare state is to track social protection expenditures. As defined by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), these comprise social security, social assistance, and labour market policies.<sup>11</sup> Based on these three variables, only Japan devotes a sufficient share of its GDP to social protection – at roughly 20 per cent. In the other Asian countries, despite many reforms over the past decade, the expenditures are below 10 per cent (Figure 3).

Similar to the efforts for health or education, the social protection effort is low, with the exception of Japan. The small share of social expenditures or social protection expenditures to some extent challenges the proposition presented in Section 4 that some of these countries are developmental *welfare* states.

Figure 3: Total Social Protection Expenditures as a Share of GDP

Source: Asian Development Bank (2013) <http://spi.adb.org/spidmz/index.jsp#10>

10. »For example, if the SPI [Social Protection Index] were 0.100 in country X, this index number would mean that total social protection expenditures (per intended beneficiary) represent 10 per cent of poverty-line expenditures. The higher this index number, the better a country's performance.« (ADB 2013: xii)

11. »The SPI is a relatively simple indicator that divides total expenditures on social protection by the total number of intended beneficiaries of all social protection programs. For assessment purposes, this ratio of expenditures to beneficiaries is compared with poverty-line expenditures.« (ADB 2013: xii)

## Conclusion: The Case for a Developmental Welfare State, Building on Asian Experiences

This brief has attempted to address two questions. One deals with the role of the state, in the – potentially – progressive form of the democratic (developmental) welfare state. The second explores the nature of welfare states observed in Asia, and examines whether there is an Asian welfare state model.

The discussion offers for consideration several hypotheses regarding welfare states and the Asian experience. One is that many countries feature some form of welfare state, because education, health, the labour market, social protection and family policy are subject to state-led provisions. The countries differ significantly, however, in the specific form the welfare state takes, and have fundamental differences with regard to commitments and practice in terms of democracy and social justice. Since the 1950s, developmental welfare states have emerged in Asia – states that combine attention to economic and to social policy. There is a continuum of how these developmental welfare states function; their rationale ranges from instrumental to progressive.

With respect to Asia, several types of developmental welfare states have been evolving since the 1950s. An initial group emerged with the South Asian independence movements. A significant new wave of developmental welfare states emerged in East Asia as a response to the 1997/8 economic crisis. A third wave is currently taking shape, with rights-based or notionally universal welfare states taking shape since around 2005, some in democratic settings responding to pressure from civil society, and driven also by the interests of an emerging middle class.

Given the disparate outcomes and the very poor human development situation in most Asian countries – as well as the low levels of government expenditure devoted to the social sectors – perhaps one can summarize: the Asian developmental welfare state models are a work in progress, worth noting, especially for their intent.<sup>12</sup> They offer policy pointers towards overcoming inequities, and are a useful point of reference for the post-2015 development debate.

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12. See also Chopra (2014) in this vein.



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