

Examining social security in Norway and South Africa

Olivier, M. & Kuhnle, S., eds. 2008. **Norms and institutional design: social security in Norway and South Africa.**

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Ever since philosophers, such as Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882), started to support a government that would take *positive steps* to improve the lives of people through specific policies, the welfare state and the idea of social security have become of scholarly

importance. This book focuses on the critical elements and criteria which are necessary in an institutional framework to ensure the provision of effective and efficient social security in South Africa. The editors endeavour to obtain answers to the following questions: What are the norms and standards which should guide the (re)-designing of principal institutional arrangements for social security provisioning and service delivery? Why should some standards be chosen rather than others? Why and how are certain norms/standards/institutions justified above the use of others? To what extent are seemingly successful arrangements in other countries or regions applicable in the South African and broader regional (Southern African) context? What lessons are learned from experiences of European countries, particularly from the Scandinavian experience in Norway?

The introductory chapter interprets the concept of the welfare state, outlines the development of Scandinavian welfare states and highlights some of their major characteristics which relate to the underlying values of the Scandinavian welfare state construction. This is followed by 22 chapters in three parts which are divided in a *normative framework*, a *conceptual framework* and an *institutional framework* to cover analyses of various aspects relating to the aforementioned questions.

Part 1, dealing with the normative framework in chapters 1 to 10, starts with the concept of the welfare state, outlines the development of Scandinavian welfare states and describes the values crucial to the construction of such a state. Issues pertaining to a normative framework for social policies; some elements of the prevailing constitutional framework in South Africa impacting on effective and social security provisioning in South Africa; lessons, positive and negative, from social security provisioning in other Southern African states; good governance and social security provisioning; and poverty in Norway and South Africa are also dealt with.

The next five chapters in Part 2 deal with the conceptual framework of social security provisioning. This part of the book explores issues relating to international normative standards and pension provision; historical relations between voluntary organisations and government in Norway; and the realisation of rights to social security. The last two chapters offer some interesting African views on the concept of social security with reference to solidarity, *Ubuntu* and the welfare state, and also the concept of informal social security in African societies.

Part 3, consisting of chapters 16 to 23, deals with the institutional framework and starts with chapters on the South African social security landscape, as well as relevant principles, norms and standards pertaining to the adjudicative context of efficient and effective social security provisioning in South Africa. This part of the book also covers themes relating to the Norwegian old age pension scheme and social care services to the elderly; disability provisioning in South Africa; policies for families with children in Norway; child support and protection in South Africa; and unemployment protection in South Africa.

The point of departure in this book is the creation of the welfare state as “the ultimate goal in attempts to improve human well-being” (p. 80). For some South African politicians and scholars the welfare state probably remains an attractive policy option. It would, however, be extremely difficult to implement such a model in South Africa. A fundamental precondition is an economy and broad tax basis which makes the financing of social security schemes possible. This makes the welfare state indeed a remote possibility in South Africa. In view of this one cannot but feel that South Africa and Norway are in essence two non-comparable entities in terms of their socio-economic and political context. The highly egalitarian and developed Norwegian society and the country’s political-economic framework differs vastly from that in South Africa and this also concerns social security to a very large extent. After all, South Africa performs more like the typical lower middle-income country where social indicators are concerned and the most salient characteristic of its political economy is that of inequality in terms of the distribution of wealth. Having said this, this does not mean that this publication is fundamentally unsound as a project that is intended to examine possible lessons for South Africa from the Scandinavian experience. Success stories should be examined and some of the authors in this publication duly acknowledge the point that the Scandinavian/Norwegian experience cannot be taken as a blueprint for South Africa as Norway and South Africa followed different paths in developing social security.

Furthermore, the book covers a wide range of issues relating to social security in Norway and South Africa. But much of what is written is discussed in a legalistic and administrative framework and context. In view of this, it could be argued that the editors left some important and contentious issues in the contemporary South African political context basically untouched. Sound arguments exist for social security in a market system and observers also generally

agree that for a developing country, South Africa has a relatively well-developed social security system and the required constitutional framework. However, the post-1994 political context has been characterised by competing ideological positions, specifically a social-democratic welfare ideology versus a neo-liberal, supply side oriented economic policy. For some South Africa's social security system has been the only successful and broad-based anti-poverty strategy. Others contend that over-expenditure in the sphere of social security and under-expenditure of genuinely developmental social welfare initiatives are the order of the day. These ideological positions continue to underpin much of mainstream South African bread-and-butter politics and future policy options.

In the final analysis the editors express the hope that this publication will contribute not only to the scholarly debate on the issues discussed in the different chapters, but also to the current and future frameworks of the policy dimensions of reforming social policy. This said, the book is indeed a welcome contribution to the academic knowledge base. The value of the book lies in the wide spectrum of Scandinavian and South African scholarly perspectives on social security issues which are offered. Scholars, policy-makers and other functionaries in search of a better and deeper understanding of South Africa's social security context and challenges may certainly benefit from it. The editors present a publication that discern important relationships among the relevant issues, generate imaginative possibilities for policy action, and operate easily in the conceptual realm from a reader's point of view.