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# **The World Bank's social assistance recommendations for developing and transition countries: Containment of political unrest and mobilisation of political support**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a political-sociological analysis of the World Bank's social assistance programmes in developing and transition countries. It builds on the argument that political objectives have played a critical role for the Bank in shaping these policies, including the prevention and containment of social unrest as well as mobilization of popular support. The paper presents empirical evidence based on an analysis of 447 World Bank policy recommendation documents published between 1980 and 2013. It was found that, despite the Bank's denial of having any political agenda, many WB documents explicitly refer to social assistance as a possible instrument for governments to contain social unrest and mobilize political support. Moreover, the World Bank's political concerns have increased steadily over the last three decades. The findings support the argument that international institutions such as the WB do not solely consider the well-being of people as an end in itself but also as a means of achieving further political goals. This political dimension of social assistance programmes has consequences for the way policy recommendations should be interpreted by political and social actors in developing and transition countries.

## **Key words**

Developing countries, political objectives, social assistance, social unrest, World Bank

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## I. Introduction

Over the last four decades, social assistance programmes for the poor have undergone dramatic expansions in most developing and transition countries. These programmes include a wide spectrum of cash and in-kind support programmes for the needy, including conditional cash transfers, free healthcare for the poor, food aid, and public work programmes. The World Bank has facilitated and shaped this expansion through social assistance policy recommendations to national governments. Several scholars have illustrated that national governments have taken these recommendations into serious consideration in designing and redesigning welfare systems (Brooks, 2004; Deacon and Hulse, 1997; Radin, 2008). According to Weaver (2008: 1), “not only the Bank’s financial lending, but also what it says about development, shapes other multilateral, bi-lateral, and national development strategies and defines the conventional wisdom on global development”.

The central research question addressed in this paper is: *To what extent have political objectives shaped the World Bank’s social assistance recommendations for the developing and transition countries since the 1980s? More specifically, to what extent has the Bank recommended social assistance programs as political instruments for the containment of social unrest and the mobilization of popular support?* By political objectives, we refer to all set of power-related intentions of governments to shape, control and transform the political actions of grassroots groups. We are interested in

those political objectives that include the struggles and interests of incumbent political parties and government institutions, that shape public policies in ways that structural (economic or demographic) forces not necessarily would have entailed, i.e. those objectives that cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of structural dynamics. More specifically, political objectives refer to government concerns for the *containment of social unrest*, protests waves, popular political grievances in the broader sense and the *mobilization of popular support*, needed during times of intra-elite competition, wartime, and the mobilization of new blocs of supporters by new political leaders from outside established "intra-elite" circles. The latter may occur via populist political change, as in the case of India, Thailand, Brazil, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and South Africa, where governments appeal to the poor through populist policies, facing opposition from the middle classes and the elites (Ashman and Vignon 2014; Sridharan 2014; Onuch 2014; Singer 2014; Yörük 2014).

The existing literature on the expansion of social assistance programmes has predominantly focused on a wide array of *structural* factors that are considered by national governments, including rising poverty, unemployment, de-industrialization, and aging. Political motives of authorities have been mentioned in the literature, however, to a lesser extent. There are a number of studies that look at political factors to explain the policies of the World Bank specifically (see e.g. Van Houten 2007; Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Toye 2009), but there is still much space left for empirical

evidence. Moreover, these studies address different policy domains in which the WB operates, but not welfare and poverty reduction.

This article aims to fill these gaps by providing empirical evidence for the World Bank's political motivations for social assistance policy recommendations, obtained through a systematic, in-depth analysis of all WB policy documents on poverty reduction and social assistance published since 1980. The article examines the extent to which World Bank recommendations have been driven by political objectives in addition to Bank's declared objective of alleviating poverty as an end *per se*. The article argues that apart from structural changes underlying the expansion of social assistance policy recommendations, there is a clear influence of political concerns about social unrest and popular support driving the World Bank to specific recommendations for social assistance programmes.

The paper will first look at ways in which politicization of welfare programmes has been addressed in existing literature. Subsequently it will set out the central argument of politicisation of the World Bank's welfare policy recommendations; and lastly the paper will present and interpret the findings of our analysis.

## **II. Politicisation and existing literature**

Governments' concerns with political mobilization have accelerated as a consequence of the global rise of the poor as a key grassroots political group, which has largely grown in capacity to threaten or strengthen existing local and global political and economic regimes during the last decades. Mike Davis (2006) argues that the informal proletariat, which consists of workers and the poor who are excluded from formal social security nets and live on precarious grounds, has now become a new grassroots political agency as the source of political threat and support for both governments and the economic elite. Poverty of the informal proletariat usually interacts with existing ethnic, racial and religious inequalities/differences and this contributes to prevalent political polarizations, as well. (Arrighi, 2009; Wacquant, 2008).

There are many scholars providing arguments and evidence for the statement that social assistance policies serve to stabilize politics in the contemporary world. Harvard economist Dani Rodrik drew attention to the political dimension of growing social policy programmes. Rodrik (1997) argued that globalization created deeper class divisions between the rich and the poor that would be politically unstable. He suggested that a re-orientation from pensions to anti-poverty programmes would address the political challenges of globalization. Rodrik argued later that global political economy should include nationally situated welfare systems coordinated by a global safety net in order to get rid of instability, inefficiency and weak popular legitimacy (Rodrik, 2011).

The “welfare-terrorism nexus” literature further provides insight into the relationship between welfare provision and grassroots political threats for governments. This literature analyses how political unrest is linked to the social welfare situation and how social programmes could serve as a tool to contain this unrest (Burgoon, 2006; Paxson, 2002; Stewart, 2002). Most importantly, Burgoon (2006) asserts that welfare efforts can reduce poverty, inequality and socio-economic insecurity and thereby diminish incentives to commit, support or tolerate terrorism. Other scholars share this point and argue that poverty and inequality stimulate feelings of injustice and thus can stimulate the mobilizing capacity of terrorists and fuel civil and ethnic conflict (Auvinen and Nafziger, 1999; Gurr, 1970; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Krieger and Meierrieks, 2009; Paxson, 2002; Li and Schaub, 2004). The welfare-terrorism nexus fits within the broader literature on securitization and the security-development nexus (see e.g. Keukeleire and Raube 2013). Favourable social policy measures can assimilate oppositional movements by undermining radical groups’ imperfect substitute for economic security and equality and hence bring about legitimacy for governments by decreasing people’s grievances (Chenoweth, 2007: 3; Burgoon, 2006; Taydas and Peksen, 2012).

There has been a broader securitisation of policies after 9/11 so the question arises whether politicization and securitization of welfare policies by the WB can be attributed to the Bank’s own interests or whether the Bank is merely following the agendas established by individual member countries. Yet, since terrorism has a disastrous effect



on economic development in developing countries, and more so than in developed countries (Sandler and Endler in Keefer and Loayza 2008: 18, 35-6) one could argue that conflict and terrorism negatively affect the WB's efforts to eradicate poverty; as well as its own (infrastructure) investments in those countries. This way, one could interpret the Bank's objectives of containing unrest not as political but in fact as supporting its goal of poverty reduction, if it were intended to prevent terrorism.

### **III. Social welfare as a political tool and The World Bank's de-politicising rhetoric of social assistance**

In the post-war period up to the late 1970s, welfare systems in many countries worldwide were based on employment-based social security programs, which, since the 1980s, have been gradually replaced by social assistance programmes targeting the poor (Goldberg and Rosenthal, 2002; Deacon and Cohen, 2011; Sugiyama, 2011). The literature explaining the welfare systems in the post-war period, i.e. during the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism, or Embedded Liberalism (Ruggie, 1982) emphasized political factors and structural factors together, including such political factors as the containment of unrest or mobilization of popular support, and such structural factors as demographic changes or economic incentives. According to Ruggie, embedded liberalism is the system in which economic and political elites pursued the double task of continuing the free markets economy on an international level; and developing interventionist and welfare based policies domestically. A modern welfare state was established in the Western world to sustain full-employment, economic growth and

social services under the auspices of the US hegemony (Arrighi, 1990; Harvey, 2005). Over time, social security came to be seen in the Western world as a permanent feature of capitalism for its contribution to political stability and continuity (Katznelson, 1981). The welfare state provided the means for political legitimacy necessary to contain the threat from grassroots groups, most importantly the working class movements (Goldberg and Rosenthal, 2002). Simply put, the welfare state functioned to contain social unrest (O'Connor, 1973; Olson, 1982; Offe, 1984; Fox-Piven and Richard Cloward, 1971).

While the literature on the pre-1980 welfare systems thus emphasized both structural and political factors, most studies of recent welfare systems transformations have solely emphasized structural factors, such as aging, labour informalization, unemployment, globalization, deindustrialization, the rise of poverty, and the rise of the service sector (Brooks and Manza, 2006; Pierson, 2001; see also Hall, 2007; Ruger, 2005; Radin, 2008; Tungodden et al., 2004). This literature has thereby largely under-examined the possibility that contemporary welfare system changes have also been affected by political concerns of national and supranational institutions.

The World Bank presents itself chiefly as an organization “working for a world free of poverty” (which is the Bank’s official motto [World Bank 2015]) and denies having *political* objectives in its policy recommendations (Miller-Adams, 1999: 5). The 1944

Articles of Agreement that established the workings of the Bretton Woods institutions, states that “[o]nly economic considerations shall be relevant” – and ‘political activity’ is even named ‘prohibited’ (UN, 1944: 65; see also Van Houten, 2007: 653-4). Reasons for this non-political character would be that it allows the Bank to cooperate with different types of regimes (Miller-Adams, 1999: 5) and that its politically ‘neutral’ status would provide the Bank with more authority and legitimacy in recommending policies to others (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 21).

A 2011 study by the Independent Evaluation Group states that the WB tries to “de-politicise” social assistance programmes in third world countries (IEG, 2011: 57). While the report admits that social security programmes may be prompted by “non-poverty objectives”, it was also claimed that “the Bank, with the overall mission of poverty reduction, generally does not directly support such objectives” (IEG, 2011: 38) and never gets involved in political matters (IEG, 2011: 65).

However, a number of studies have however found that there *are* clear references to political concerns in the World Bank’s policies. This body of literature often places the World Bank’s policies in a broader framework of politics and globalization (see for instance Goldman, 2005; Van de Laar, 1976; Benjamin, 2007; Woods, 2006; Miller-Adams, 1999; Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). As argued by Barnett and Finnemore,

“neutrality is often, probably always, impossible” in World Bank’s policy making processes (2004: 21, also see Van Houten 2007: 653).

The World Bank’s donor states have a strong influence on the Bank’s policy-making (Weaver and Leiteritz, 2005: 371), with the US remaining the most influential one (Fleck and Kilby, 2006: 224; see also Weaver, 2008: 1; Morrison, 2013: 297). Donors impose their interests through (i) direct appointment of the leadership cadres of the Bank, (ii) donating majority of the funds, (iii) the threat of denying Bank funds access to the national private capital markets in case Bank declines donors’ interests (see also Gwin, 1994: 56 cited in Weaver, 2008). The Bank’s actions would thus be situated somewhere in between being an instrument of powerful states and having a bureaucratically driven autonomy, giving it a form of “relative autonomy” (idem: 6; see also Toye, 2009: 299). The Bank’s bureaucracy, as in many other international organizations, has developed an internal culture, consisting of ideologies, norms, values and power relations that create particular interests distinct from those of member governments (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 19, citing Alvesson, 1993).

However, as noted by Weaver, since the mid-1990s, there has been a shift in the bank discourse to include greater emphasis on political factors, as a result of the changing external political climate following the fall of the USSR: “Donor states, freed from Cold War tensions, no longer shied away from these inherently political areas of development

aid” (Weaver, 2008: 92). Moreover, having recognized the devastating effects of the crude neoliberalism of the 1980s, the Bank has modified its agendas to include policy of adjustment “with a human face” after the mid-1990s.

Thus, the Bank is a rationally organized bureaucratic structure whose bureaucracy has well-defined interests and objectives. In order to attain these objectives and maximize bureaucratic interests, the Bank has to negotiate manners with member organizations, which structurally leads the Bank towards a conservative direction. Domestic and international political interests of donor and client governments are thus negotiated within the relatively autonomous structure of the Bank and translated into politically driven policy recommendations. To the extent that member states have tendencies to contain unrest and mobilize popular support (which is not a rare case), the Bank is drawn into recommending mechanisms to do so. It is fairly possible for the Bank to recommend social assistance for political containment or mobilization because the clients, as political actors, tend to internalize policy recommendations that would function politically at home. In short, politically useful recommendations might find customers more easily (Toye, 2009: 305). On the other hand, due mainly to the encouragement of donor governments, the Bank also functions as an overseer of global political stability. World Bank donor states may have their longer-term security interests defended if one considers the objectives of stability, which in turn should lead to less migration or threat (including that of terrorism). Social unrest is considered as a ‘threat’, and thus as a

'security issue' (see Keukeleire and Raube, 2013: 557). This is different than creating particular recipes for particular governments but generating blueprints for political stabilization through social assistance programs that can be modified and adapted to each case. The Bank, in that sense, is politically conscious and concerned for global grassroots political stability.

In addition to existing structural factors, these political objectives have increasingly come to shape policy preferences of the Bank, particularly since the 2000s. Particularly, political motivations of the Bank have shifted from political mobilization to political containment over the course of 2000s. This suggests that overseeing global political stability has become a key motivation driving the Bank into proposing social assistance programmes in an increasing manner.

As an effect, the symptoms of this politicization of social assistance can be seen from what is implemented by national governments: In Brazil, governing PT has used conditional cash transfers for electoral purposes, especially from Afro-Brazilians of north-east and of favelas countrywide (Martins de Moura, 2007; Hunter and Power, 2007; Souza, 2006). In China, social assistance is being used to "avoid serious social unrest from those who were left behind by the economic reforms" (Gao, 2006). In Turkey, free health care program for the poor is being disproportionately directed to the Kurdish minority as part of the strategy to contain the ongoing Kurdish unrest (Yörük,

2012). In Indonesia, the government has used a social assistance program in Aceh region to “encourage people to overcome mistrust of government that is result of the conflict” (WB/Barron et al., 2004).

These examples show that politicization of social assistance is likely a concrete global trend. This article contributes to the existing literature on the World Bank policies by providing further empirical evidence for the Bank’s possible contribution to the global use of social assistance as a means to political containment and mobilization.

#### **IV. Research and empirical findings**

The following section will systematically assess how the arguments raised in literature about welfare spending as means to political containment and mobilization, may apply to the policy recommendations of the World Bank as well. The existing studies that analyse the relationship between social unrest and social assistance mostly consider social assistance as the independent variable and social unrest as the dependent variable. This analysis reverses the causal relationship and asks whether social unrest has influenced World Bank’s policy proposals. We will examine the extent to which the World Bank social assistance policy recommendation documents include references to political concerns for containment of social unrest and mobilization of popular support. We will also analyse how the references to these concerns have changed over time.

The analysis is based on a survey of a total number of 447 World Bank social policy related documents and reports, published between 1980 and 2013. These concern Country Focus reports, Economic and Sector work reports, Project Documents, and documents from the Publications and Research department, including working papers. These are thus analytical rather than operational reports. The article focuses on the period after 1980, because since the 1980s social assistance has gained prominence in welfare provision and the authors tried to understand to what extent the World Bank social assistance program recommendations have been shaped by political concerns in this period of global social assistance boom. The authors followed a two-stage keyword search method. In the first stage, documents on social assistance policies were identified from the World Bank's online archive. In the second stage, these documents were searched for 24 specific keywords that are likely to indicate the World Bank's interest in political objectives<sup>1</sup>. NVivo 10 was used to code all relevant documents. The following section will present the trends and patterns that were highlighted through the analysis. Subsequently, the article will provide an analysis of the content of these social policy recommendation documents and show the ways in which the World Bank has proposed social assistance as a political instrument.

### ***Trends over time***

The results show that the World Bank has explicitly discussed social assistance as an instrument of political containment and mobilization in more than one quarter of all



documents – 116 out of 447 reports. Specifically, 48 documents referred to welfare as a tool for political mobilization; 57 documents for political containment; and 11 to both containment and mobilization. The time series analysis of the number of World Bank documents that contain political references has furthermore shown two main trends:

- 1) The number of documents that include references to political containment or mobilization has increased over time, especially after the 2000s (Figure 1).
- 2) In relative terms, the percentage of documents with reference to political containment vis-à-vis political mobilization has increased after the 1990s (Figure 2).

{**Figure 1:** WB reports indicating political objectives, according to year of publication}

In addition to these macro trends, there are short-term fluctuations in the World Bank's political emphasis. The analysis demonstrates that the World Bank seeks to realise a wide range of political objectives through social assistance programmes, and explaining each turn with respect to macro sociological and political changes might be beyond the scope of this article. However, as first hand hypothesis to be tested later, we can assert that particularly during the 2000s, there has been a rising emphasis on the containment of social unrest in policy documents, which is likely connected to the global "war-on-terror" that was initiated after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. Particularly, the Bank reported that the perception of social assistance as a

measure against terrorism was “strongly reinforced by the terrorist attacks in September 2001, which have increased global awareness of the need to deal with inequality to increase the world’s security” (WB/ Gottret and Schieber, 2006: 145). Similarly, there is a particular increase in the number of references to political containment after 2011, which seems to stem from a concern with the wave of social protests that started with the Arab Spring in 2010. The local peaks in the references to political mobilization in 1991 and 1995 are possibly related to the transitional efforts to incorporate the populations of ex-Soviet Union republics into the capitalist world, which involved ways of popular mobilization for the economic and political transition. Finally, the local peak during the mid-2000s in political mobilization might be related to the upsurge of the left in Latin America through political parties that came to power with the use of populist policies, such as in Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Argentina.

{**Figure 2.** Ratio of containment and mobilization objectives across time}

N.B. The ‘containment and mobilization’ category was split to reflect the ratio of containment and mobilization objectives. Percentages of ‘containment’ and ‘mobilization’ add up to 100%.

### ***Political objectives***

Several political objectives can be distinguished in the policy documents of the World Bank. First, we have found evidence for the Bank’s objectives regarding the containment of social unrest. Second, the Bank has also expressed the aim to mobilize popular

support through social assistance programmes. The following section will present selected examples from concrete policy recommendations over time.

*a. Containment of social unrest*

A core objective of several welfare programme recommendations is the prevention of possible social unrest. Throughout 68 out of 447 policy documents and country analyses, the World Bank has presented social protection to national governments as a means of preventing or containing unrest. A key report that presented an historical review of World Bank policy research indicated that there is a shift towards a more poverty alleviation oriented approach after the 1990s and this was closely related to the fact that “excluding large segments of society wastes potentially productive resources and breeds social conflict” (WB /Dethier, 2009: 8). In several **transition countries**, for example, the Bank assessed that “the main motivation for social assistance programs is (...) political (to prevent backlash against the transition)” (WB/Milanovic, 1995: 29). In the case of Bulgaria, the World Bank warned that “popular consensus behind political and economic change could be undermined by sharp downturns in economic welfare and/or an extreme widening of income inequalities.” This would be problematic because in turn it “(...) could lead to a resurgence of popular support for a return to ‘socialism’ or a rise in nationalism” (WB/ Hassan and Peters, 1995: 1). This indicates a clear political agenda.

Another example which was immediately related to domestic political unrest, is a US\$5 million grant to the Republic of Djibouti, provided between 2008 and 2009, in order to “help the Government of Djibouti in reducing hunger, preventing an increase in poverty and social unrest” (WB/IEG, 2012: ix, 5). Djibouti is of geo-political importance to the international community since it serves as a “base for counter-terrorist and anti-piracy operations” (WB/IEG, 2012: 1). One of the means to try to achieve social stability was to avoid growing poverty, which in turn should prevent social unrest from increasing (WB/IEG, 2012: 6). An evaluation of this project explicitly mentions that “the aim was to prevent unrest and riots from higher food prices” (WB/IEG, 2012: 18).

One specific political aim of the WB’s welfare policy recommendations appears to be to prevent or **counter terrorism**. In his essay entitled “Fight Terrorism by Ending Poverty”, the ex-president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, argues that, as a measure for countering terrorist activities and ethnic strife, governments should take action to “eradicate poverty, promote inclusion and social justice, and to bring the marginalized into the mainstream of the global society and economy.” (Wolfensohn, 2002: 42). Furthermore, Barr mentions that one of the objectives of social safety nets programmes is to prevent the possibility that (economic) reforms would result in a deprivation of “losers who are politically too powerful to ignore” (WB/Barr, 1995: 3).

The World Bank also tends to associate political conflict with facets of economic deprivation, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic necessities. For the Bank, “recognizing the prevention of conflict as central for poor societies may substantially alter the design of policies” (WB / Feinstein and Picciotto, 2001: 293). This has reflected on many country case reports. In Bolivia, for instance, the Bank stated that “following social unrest the government introduced a minimum pension of B\$850 [Bolivian Dollars] per month in 2001—nearly twice the minimum salary” (WB/Gill et al., 2005: 46). In Peru, “the threat of terrorism was a major incentive for the creation of some targeted programs” (WB, 1999a: 3). Very similar political motives were mentioned by the Bank for programmes that were introduced in Indonesia as well as Colombia (WB/Barron et al., 2004: 25; WB, 1990a: 21). In 2010, the Bank financed a project in the Kyrgyz Republic with the aim to deal with the “economic and social impacts of the **political and ethnic turmoil**” (World Bank, 2010: 15). The World Bank assessed that the Kyrgyz government should ensure adequate energy provision to the population, with the purpose of preventing political and social instability in the upcoming cold season (World Bank, 2010: 14).

The Bank stated that “low incomes, poverty, unemployment, income shocks such as those sparked by volatility in food prices, rapid urbanization, and inequality between groups all increase the risks of violence” (WB, 2011: v). For the World Bank, “it is clear that higher inflation has become a major socio-political issue and has led to social unrest

across all continents” (WB/ Wodon and Zaman, 2008: 4). Moreover, the Bank claims that not only in underdeveloped countries but also “in democratic societies, neglect of the poor can (...) lead to political instability” (WB/Subbarao et al. 1997: 14). Issues which are most often mentioned as a ground for unrest are a shortage in basic needs (e.g. food (WB/Bora et al., 2010) and energy (World Bank, 2010)). According to the WB, these might be abused by oppositional radical political groups for political mobilization.

The World Bank furthermore argues that in order to **mitigate conflict**, countries need “the realization of a social system which widely spreads the benefits of progress, providing socioeconomic growth among all the significant regional, religious and ethnic groups in society” (WB/Østby, 2007: 20). Looking at Rwanda, the Bank concluded that “rising poverty undoubtedly played some role in exacerbating social tensions leading up to the genocide, and reducing poverty is critical (...) also as a means to improve the prospects for social and political stability” (WB, 1999b: 83). In this logic, economic support programmes for the poor do very well for “alleviating poverty and reducing the potential for social unrest”, two objectives closely linked in the Bank discourse (WB/Datar et al. 2009: 2). In Nepal, through econometric analyses, the Bank concludes that “conflict intensity is significantly higher in places with greater poverty and lower levels of economic development” (WB/Do and Iyer 2007:1). Civil disturbances also triggered the emergence of public works programmes in India and Tunisia (WB/ Subbarao et al., 1997: 95). In 2010, the Bank financed a project in the Kyrgyz Republic

and suggested the Kyrgyz government pay sufficient attention to shelter and everyday sustenance of the citizens with the aim to deal with the “economic and social impacts of the **political and ethnic turmoil**” (World Bank, 2010: 15) .

**Youth unrest** is another matter that has received increasing attention in World Bank documents in recent years. In Sri Lanka, the Bank observed that in addition to brutal state repression to quell actual violence, the government responded to youth unrest with “policy attempts to manage youth anger and frustration by setting up special programs targeting young people, be it in the form of employment creation, cultural and sports activities, or poverty alleviation schemes” (WB/ Gunatilaka et al., 2010: 223). For the Bank, this example is representative for many policy initiatives that were introduced in several countries in North Africa and the Middle East following the Arab Spring.

Another target issue is that of **food riots**. The Bank observed that in India “famines are politicized in a way that would make it hard for any government to survive if it failed to prevent a famine” (WB/ Van de Walle and Nead, 1995: 43). The 1993 World Bank report on Tunisia is particularly worth considering because it is one of the first examples of presenting social assistance as a measure against **food riots**. Considering the violent protests that erupted in response to subsidy cuts in a number of countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, the Dominican Republic, Sudan, Liberia, and most recently, Jordan, the Bank concluded that “careful management of the on-going reform program

has facilitated the Tunisian Government's efforts to (...) successfully avoid a repeat of the "food riots" which had characterized previous attempts at reform" (WB/ Tuck and Lindert, 1996: 95; see also WB/ Demery, 1987: 45). Also in Morocco, the Bank has recommended "a series of direct food assistance programs [which] can do much to reduce political opposition to ending subsidies and raising food prices" (WB/ Demery, 1987: 45). Lastly, with regards to Bolivia, the Bank warned that "(...) unless the state began to provide better public services and alleviate poverty more effectively, the credibility of the current regime might be threatened" and recent social protests in the country were used as illustration of the "fragile legitimacy" of the government (WB/Narayan, 2002: 309). Similar recommendations have been made for India previously (WB/ Van de Walle and Nead, 1995: 43).

*b. Mobilization of popular support*

Mobilization of popular support is the second major political objective present in social policy programmes recommended by the WB to national governments. The Bank recognises that, for example, social safety nets are political tools that can influence the electorate's perception of political actors. The Independent Evaluation Group explicitly advises the WB to help countries in setting up their SSNs for this specific purpose (IEG, 2011: 42).

One example that illustrates this objective is the World Bank's conclusion that Delhi's "Employment Guarantee Scheme has helped to mobilize the rural poor as a political



force” (WB, 1990b: 99). The Bank argued that “politicians often seek to enlarge their political base by providing free public services or lucrative service-related jobs to their supporters”, by citing a cheap universal healthcare programme in Thailand, the so-called 30-Bath Gold Card system, as an instrument that Thai governing party used to win a “landslide victory” in the 2001 elections. For the Bank, this is one of the reasons why new public work programmes have usually been introduced before elections, such as in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Jamaica and the Philippines (WB/Subbarao et al. 1997: 95). In 2010, the World Bank stated that the Zambian government used the so-called Fertiliser Support Programme as a means to “win support from rural chiefs and residents” prior to the elections. The World Bank report calls this strategy “politically successful” (WB/IEG, 2010: 61).

Another political objective of social protection programmes that is observed in these documents is to gain support from the population to push through “sensitive” economic reforms, which may otherwise not have been accepted by the society (WB/Barr, 1995: 3; see also WB/Bigio, 1998: 178). The World Bank believed that political instability is considered a hindrance for policy implementation (IEG, 2005: 108). In the 1998 report, “Social Funds and Reaching the Poor”, the Bank argues that “social funds also can be used to build political support for economic adjustment programs” (WB/Bigio, 1998: 178). The World Bank in fact seems to apply social safety nets as a means to institute unpopular economic reforms regularly. As the IEG report formulated, “when the social

safety net (SSN) can be installed at the same time as economic reform, that is an excellent way to garner political support for both the reforms and the SSN agenda” (IEG, 2011: 66). Thus, resistance or political opposition against the reforms can be avoided – and as such, governments would prevent insecurity and instability. To this end, the reforms should be pushed through fast and have an extensive scope (IEG, 2011: 66, 74). SSNs can also serve to make “difficult economic reforms more acceptable politically helping win support in elections, demonstrating government legitimacy to gain social peace” (IEG, 2011: 63)<sup>2</sup>.

## **V. Discussion and conclusion**

The official discourse of the World Bank is that its objectives are not political, but social - to alleviate poverty as an end *per se*. However, the analysis illustrates that these claims do not hold true in full. We showed that while the Bank claims to embrace, what Weaver calls “apolitical, technocratic, and economic rationality”, as the exclusive motivation of action, it nevertheless refers extensively in its documents to political concerns of the containment of social unrest and mobilization of popular support. The Bank is politically conscious about global political dynamics and displays political objectives in many of its social assistance recommendations for developing countries, which results from intricate power relations among the Bank and member countries. Throughout a great number of country case reports, the World Bank has referred to utilisation of social assistance policies as a tool to either contain social unrest or to mobilize popular support.

The Bank appears to perceive social unrest as a threat, which should be avoided or counteracted by developing country governments using social poverty reduction. Also, many World Bank reports and policy documents show that the World Bank is in fact concerned with the extent to which social assistance programmes can generate political environments that can facilitate the implementation of economic reforms by garnering necessary popular support. In other words, the political reasoning of the World Bank is twofold: 1) social benefits can reduce or prevent social instability; 2) social protection can facilitate the mobilization of popular support that is needed in electoral competitions or for the introduction of controversial economic reforms.

This article has shown that while poverty reduction has always been the fundamental and inherent goal of social assistance systems, after the 1980s, and particularly after the 2000s, the World Bank increasingly has recognised the existence of a link between social welfare of the poor, social unrest and popular support for governments. The findings of the analysis show that in addition to structural factors, the Bank has also taken into account such *political* factors when forming its recommendations, and that the Bank has proposed governments to pursue these political objectives through social assistance policies.

The article found two main trends in World Bank's social policy recommendations: First, over the course of three decades, there has been an increasing reference to political

concerns in policy documents (Figure 1). Second, the political emphasis of the Bank has shifted from political mobilization to political containment particularly during the 2000s (Figure 2).

There is an increasing emphasis on political motivations and increasing shift of emphasis from political mobilization to political containment. Mobilization has occurred mostly for electoral purposes and its cyclical trends have become gradually less important than political containment of the radicalization of the poor. The peak in references to political mobilization in the 1990s can plausibly be linked to the required support for painful political and economic transitions in countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the former Soviet Union. Since the 2000s, social assistance has been increasingly suggested as a measure to contain political instability led by the poor. The explicit reference to poverty as a cause for social unrest is relatively recent and has accelerated during the 2000s. This is particularly related to the increased concern with terrorism and the “war on terror” that started after September 11. The sharp increase in the number of references to containment especially escalated after 2011, which seems to be related to the global wave of protest that began with the Arab Spring. Against the background of increasing emphasis of containment over mobilization, the local increases in mobilization efforts might be related to inclusion of ex-Soviet republics into the capitalist world through electoral politics in the mid-1990s and the upsurge of the left in Latin America through electoral politics in the mid-2000s.

Scholars from the “welfare-terrorism nexus” literature have provided insight into the ways in which social assistance programs could be used to reduce the radicalisation of the poor instigated by radical political groups. In these existing studies, social unrest and radicalism have been considered as the dependent variables, while changes in welfare policies have been taken as the independent variable. Our analysis has looked at the opposite causal direction and analysed the extent to which social unrest against and popular support for governments have shaped social assistance proposals of the World Bank. Through the analysis of World Bank policy documents, the article found that the World Bank widely recommends responding to structural and political conditions alike with the expansion of social assistance programmes. Despite its proclaimed political non-interference and exclusive emphasis on structural factors, the World Bank is in fact politically conscious and cautious and has been following the global trend of politicisation of poverty reduction since the 2000s. The World Bank has indeed taken into serious consideration the political results of social unrest. For the Bank, political unrest must be prevented, since it would not only hamper long-term political stability, but also form an obstacle to the introduction of certain desired economic reforms to achieve growth. The findings furthermore suggest that structural dynamics, such as rising poverty, financial constraints, and demographic changes, create conditions within which certain political groups and interests emerge, which in turn determine the actual trajectory of social policies. Poverty becomes an issue to deal with insofar as the poor in

developing countries threaten and strengthen international and domestic political and economic structures.

The World Bank's poverty alleviation and social assistance policies have tremendous effects on the living standards of millions of people across the world, mostly in middle and lower income countries. Safety net schemes more recently recommended by the Bank have qualitative and quantitative advantages over previous project-based developmental strategies. Therefore, the question here is not whether World Bank sponsored poverty alleviation programs are positive or negative, but rather to what extent political concerns are involved in the policy recommendation making. The World Bank, nor member states, should be considered homogeneous entities. On the contrary, the direction of policies and recommendations are constantly being negotiated between Bank staff and member governments. As many scholars have shown, securitization of social assistance policies depends on an understanding that radical groups may transform poverty related grievances into political activism and alleviating poverty might be seen as an "instrument", rather than an end in itself, to undermine the conditions of this radicalization. Therefore, not every policy maker in the World Bank does see social assistance as a political instrument, but the extent to which assistance is politicized and securitized is determined by these power struggles in and around the Bank.

With this analysis we hope to make a contribution to the academic debate on welfare policies and in particular on the political dimensions of World Bank policy choices. The findings suggests that international institutions such as the World Bank do not solely consider the well-being of people as an end in itself but also as a means of reaching political goals. Future research should more closely investigate the internal dynamics of politicization of social assistance policymaking processes in the World Bank, and consider the interactions of different actors involved.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Notes**

1. The following key words were used: protest, opposition, terror(ism), informal, poverty, (social) unrest, elections, populist, dissident, (un)employment, turmoil, political, security, threat, strike, demonstration, contain, conflict, stability, safety, health, target, violen(ce), risk.
2. These strategies are not solely applied in policies towards developing countries: also in the case of Germany certain economic developments have deliberately been made socially acceptable through means of social security benefits (G20, 2003: 64).

## **Author biographies**



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Figure 1: WB reports indicating political objectives, according to year of publication

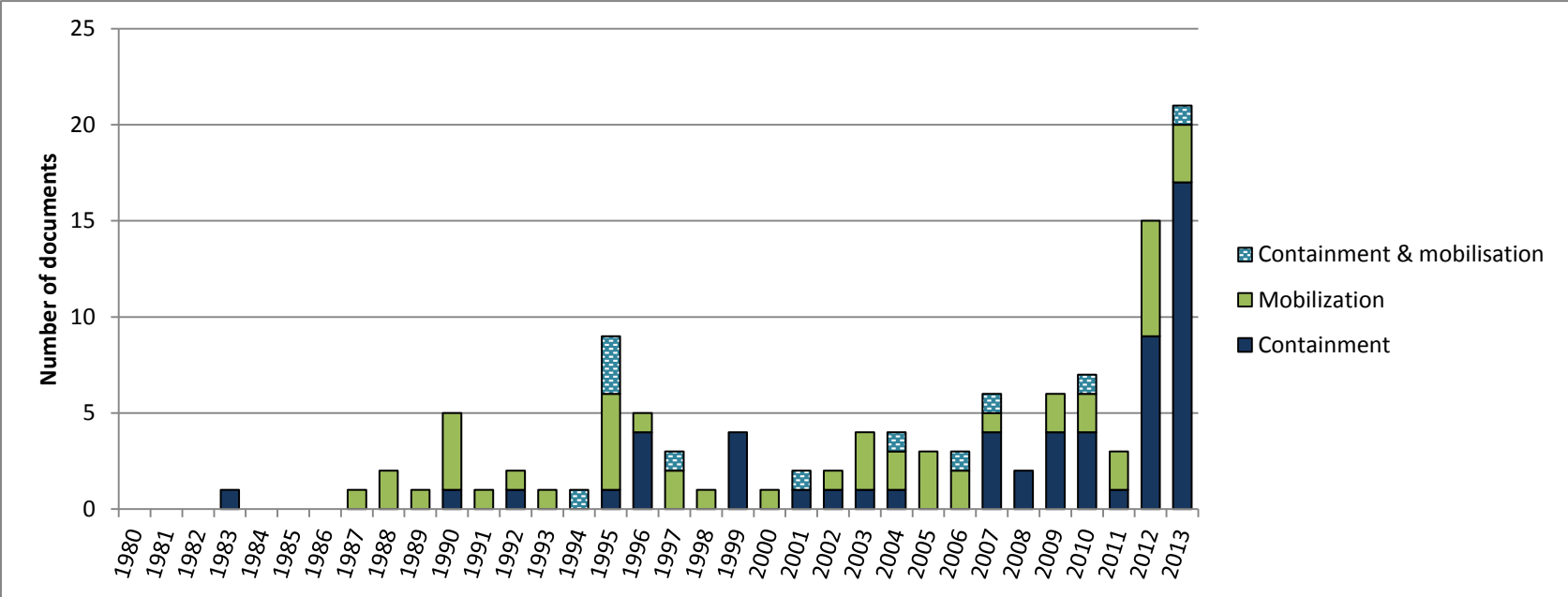


Figure 2. Ratio of containment and mobilization objectives across time

