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# James Midgley and Mitsuhiro Hosaka (eds.) (2011), Grassroots Social Security in Asia, Abingdon: Routledge / Book Review



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policy and polity) and then empirically through a case study of how the UK has responded to the open method of co-ordination.

Chapter 6 takes a legal turn and explores the effects and constraints imposed by EU economic law (free movement and competition law) on social policy-making capacity at Member State level. This offers a nuanced account of the intricate ways in which EU economic law interacts with national social policy. The next chapter is also legal in focus, exploring the capacity for constitutional reform (through the Lisbon Treaty) to provide the foundation for greater European governance in the social field. In the final chapter, the author looks to the future – the post Lisbon period, and considers how different elements established under Lisbon and the Open Method of Co-ordination might be taken forward. This chapter is strong at identifying how the resources, institutions and governance techniques bequeathed by the Lisbon Strategy and the Open Method of Co-ordination can be harnessed.

I see Armstrong's main contribution in the analytical framework which he develops and applies. What this book offers existing scholarship above all is a coherent framework to conceive of and understand the last ten years of EU engagement with social policy. It should therefore prove a classic in the field. Compared to existing work, Armstrong's book ranks highly, and I would recommend it because it provides a clear, critical and readable account of the most recent developments in EU social policy and offers progressive proposals for the future. As far as I am concerned, this is *the* book if one wants to know how the EU developed its social policy approach to poverty and social exclusion over the ten fateful years of the Lisbon Strategy.

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James Midgley and Mitsuhiro Hosaka (eds.) (2011), *Grassroots Social Security in Asia*. Abingdon: Routledge. £75, pp. 157, hbk.  
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Midgley, Hosaka and their collaborators take up an important, often neglected topic in this book on grassroots forms of social security and their viability, a subject that is essential for policy makers to understand. Poorer families, particularly in the Global South, are increasingly vulnerable to risks as traditional community safeguards are eroded by the spread of industrialisation and market forces. At the same time, states are more and more opposed ideologically and practically to expanding protection. Exposed to risks of crop and livestock failure, temporary shortfalls, lifecycle fluctuations in income, illness or death of the primary breadwinner, families at the border of poverty can fall under the line. Even small additional expenses incurred with price rises threaten the ability of families to feed themselves and educate their children.

*Grassroots Social Security in Asia* is concerned with finding solutions to these dangers and informing policy makers of potential institutional solutions. The book focuses on the efforts communities are taking to cope with such risks themselves in the form of the broad category of mutual aid organisations, while offering suggestions on how these can be improved through the addition of government and commercial links. Grassroots organisations have responded in a number of ways to manage this risk, inconsistently varying by area, organisational ability, contacts and financing, among other variables. Advocating the increase of non-governmental organisations in order to solve social and developmental problems is controversial in some fields: sociology and political science, among others, debate the role of these organisations as status quo and pacification institutions, and highlight their inadequacies and arbitrariness. For policy makers hoping to aid the poor, however, there are currently few viable options. International

funding organisations place strictures on governments to reduce their share of social spending, while governments themselves are hard-pressed to balance their budgets. Formal social security systems are often lacking, covering a small percentage of the population, or the benefit systems themselves are inadequate. The vast numbers of self-employed and agricultural workers are generally excluded.

Midgley *et al.* recognise these flaws in government social security in the Global South, and in response offer a compelling alternative. They argue that governments should collaborate with and financially support grassroots efforts to furnish social security, a category that includes loans, pensions and life and health insurance. This solution is viewed not as the continuation of long-standing methods of risk reduction, but as a new form of social security that transcends traditional mutual aid, incorporating market and commercial techniques.

The key argument of the book is that grassroots organisations have devised a number of innovative and successful methods for providing social security, but these fall short without the help of either private businesses or government. The book argues that government regulations and linking NGOs (non-government organisations) to the commercial sector improve the functioning of these NGOs, ameliorating many of their questionable practices while extending their welfare services. The politics of NGO effectiveness are acknowledged in the book in passing, but relegated to the background. The authors focus practically instead on what can be done to extend social welfare.

NGOs specialising in micro-finance should move to micro-insurance, a change that entails formalisation and often also organisational sponsorship. These two dynamics alter grassroots organisations, introducing set rules and formal structures. This transition to a formal organisation, the authors contend, subjecting it to the strictures and regulations of government and commerce, improves the functioning of the NGO while retaining the community connections that government and business lack. Business can be enticed to link with grassroots social security providers in cases where governments impose such involvement and where NGOs serve as ‘micro-agents’ or interlocutors for commercial companies, supplying the time-consuming labour needed to connect with the grassroots in poor and rural communities. The goals of NGOs and private business do not always coincide, as the book notes for example in the case of loan repayment. Business prioritises loan repayment over continued insurance coverage, a policy that can cause policies to lapse unbeknownst to the policy holder. The book discusses policy solutions for such problems: in this case, linking loan repayments with premiums, enabling the continuation of the insurance policy.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide useful background on the development of social insurance and local mutual aid. Chapter 1 would aid students in understanding mutual aid, and Chapter 2 explains how these organisations are deficient and need to be supplemented by micro-insurance. The substance of the book is a series of detailed case studies of mutual aid experiences in India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mongolia and Indonesia. The cases are detailed, and would serve best for specialists or policy makers hoping to enact a scheme like the ones in the book. The cases encompass institutions providing micro-insurance, micro-finance, health insurance and life insurance. Some of the general themes that emerge from the case studies are the centrality of life insurance to the ability of poor families to manage risk and the usefulness but difficulty of including health insurance in the social security portfolio.

Overall, the book provides useful examples and advice for countries and aid providers to improve the lives of the poor.

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