OPINION

Speaking of Context, Acting Without It

How Global Development Says "No One-Size-Fits-All"—and Still Applies the Same Model to 200 Countries

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Since publishing my recent opinion piece, "When Norms Are Not Enough," I've had the opportunity to engage in rich and thoughtful discussions with many colleagues. Many responded with appreciation—even where they disagreed—recognizing the urgent need for rigorous, open critique in global social policy. But others reacted differently. I felt it reflected a deeper confusion in our professional culture: the inability to distinguish public policy critique from a reputational challenge.

As someone now working within academia, our role is not as echoing institutional narratives, but as engaging critically—to probe, question, and, when necessary, fault-find as part of a healthy check-and-balance process. Whether one agrees with a particular perspective is secondary to the value of open, evidence-based discourse. Critique—especially when grounded in firsthand, country-specific experience—is not disloyalty; it is essential to ensuring that international public policy remains technically sound, transparent, and responsive to real-world complexity.

This reflection builds on that conversation, focusing on a broader contradiction I've observed across global development. **While institutions routinely claim that "no one-size-fits-all," their models and recommendations often suggest the opposite.** A recent case in point is the ILO's response to Development Pathways' critique of the costings in the World Social Protection Report 2024–26.

In defending its global affordability estimate—19.8% of GDP for basic universal social protection in low-income countries—the ILO invoked the use of a consistent methodology as its core justification. The logic seems to be: apply the same model to all countries, and you produce objectivity.

But that defense entirely misses the point: **Using the same model across 200 countries does not produce objectivity—it produces distortion.**

In some cases, the results are simply implausible. While the ILO defends its proposed high benefit level for Sudan on the basis of inflation, that argument collapses when applied to countries like Malaysia. According to the ILO's own figures, the proposed social pension benefit level for Malaysia would exceed the national minimum wage by 70% and even surpass the individual median income for the same year. Remarkably, it would also be on par with the value of Canada's Old Age Security (OAS). This, in a context where inflation is low and stable: cumulative CPI rose from 100 in 2010 to 134.89 in Canada by 2023, and to 130.38 in Malaysia. The cost of living in Malaysia remains significantly lower, with a Price Level Index of 83.08 compared to 152.02 in Canada. Even 'Parti Sosialis Malaysia' (PSM)—a progressive political party—has called for a social pension set at just 20% of the ILO's proposed level.

This is not about choosing between poverty lines or GDP per capita—it is about judgment. What kind of judgment justifies a proposed annual pension benefit of USD 5,599 for Sudan, while recommending only USD 141 for South Sudan—just 2.5% of its neighbor's amount?. Standardized models can generate numbers, and now even AI can simulate actuarial estimates. But **human oversight, contextual interpretation, and basic reality checks remain irreplaceable.** A model that produces results so clearly misaligned with realities should not be defended—it should be questioned.

The irony, of course, is that while senior development professionals proclaim "no one-size-fits-all," the modeling frameworks often enforce exactly that. Uniform benchmarks, cross-country comparisons, and aggregated averages offer convenience—but they also obscure crucial differences in fiscal space, political will, and institutional capacity. Worse still, they shape public narratives—leading some to conclude that universal social protection is fiscally unfeasible, and others to believe it can be easily rolled out everywhere. Both interpretations, based on flawed aggregates, are dangerous.

These narratives matter. They shape how ministers, donors, and technical advisors approach reform. If inflated figures like the 19.8% GDP estimate become the reference point, they may empower austerity advocates and stall genuine reform efforts. In that sense, the damage is not just technical—it is political.

We urgently need development thinking that is grounded in both rigor and realism. Global tools must serve country-specific strategies, not undermine them (check this, and this, and also this on country specific work in Malaysia). Context must be more than a buzzword.