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➤ **Featured article: The social and political crisis in Spain**

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As I am completing the writing of this article, Cyprus -- a small Mediterranean country on the European periphery -- is sinking into financial collapse and has already been negotiating with the EU and the IMF on a "bailout" of its banks, after its Parliament rejected the first draconian proposal. Following the Greek financial meltdown earlier, Cyprus appears as another manifestation of the dramatic consequences of the neoliberal management of the economic crisis by the powerful financial institutions with transnational reach. While not having reached the dramatic stage now seen in Cyprus, the Spanish

socio-economic situation is steadily growing worse over time, and events have been evolving both rapidly and unpredictably.

Since the global financial crash in the summer of 2008, the Spanish economy began experiencing financial turbulence, which has now put the country into a state of recession or, in official terms, "negative growth". That situation has been aggravated by the orthodox neoliberal austerity measures, which, under the mandate of the European and international financial institutions - the "Troika" consisting of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank, none of which gets their political power from any popular vote - have been imposed by successive Spanish governments from the main political parties of both the center-left (PSOE) and the center-right (PP), which were able to reform the Constitution so as to give priority to debt payments over any other public expenditure, including social services. With the ongoing European crisis, the dramatic weaknesses of the Spanish socio-economic model have become evident. Its key features are as follows: a very limited and fragile welfare state that suffers from the low capacity of the state to collect and redistribute fiscal resources, relying instead largely on European assistance; a mass consumption culture, primarily based on the use of consumer credit and the fictitious effect of support for families instead of public welfare networks; a development pattern that has concentrated, after the demise of the industrial base, on economic sectors that have provided little value-added, such as tourism, financial speculation, and real estate investment, being also quite volatile. On top of everything, there is a national economic elite that has sought enrichment mainly through the reduction of environmental regulations and labor costs, with the use of cheap immigrant labor, as well as the management of public concessions and speculative activities in the quest for short-term profits. All of the above has created a system that has limited capacity to implement effective regulation of the national economy and remains very vulnerable to international speculative turbulence. In addition, the dominant elites have, at the first signs of economic difficulties, tried to shift the costs of reforms onto salaried workers and small businesses, seeking to dismantle public services and to open new business opportunities through privatizations and the commercialization of sectors that were previously publicly-owned or provided public goods such as education or water management.

Such measures, taken out of the arsenal of neoliberal orthodoxy, have resulted in cuts in social spending and increases in indirect taxes (which are known to be the most regressive). These measures have had a dramatic social impact in terms of increased unemployment and the wider spread of casual and part-time work, pushing up poverty levels, and leading to further social polarization. The decline in income has affected most of the population, lowering their consumer spending, and has had an aggravating effect on the already depressed economic situation. In addition, the neoliberal policies have further undermined the already weak Spanish welfare state, especially in terms of unemployment assistance, public health care and education, and the universal old-age pensions. Overall, the adjustment program imposed by the institutions without an electoral mandate from Spanish citizens has had an effect similar to the programs applied in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s: a spiral of recession, growing poverty and increasing social tensions. That period became known as "the lost decade", a situation that has now come to characterize the peripheral countries of southern Europe.

The effect of those measures has been a de facto abandonment of the social contract established in 1978 after the demise of the Franco dictatorship, the adoption of the Constitution and the transition to democracy. That social contract produced a broad social consensus and political stability for over thirty years – maybe with the exception of the still existing regional tensions related to the ethnical complexities of the Spanish state. Today, however, the social contract is breaking up under the impact of the delegitimization of the leading political elites, impoverishment on a large scale, the loss of social rights and the lack of prospects for a new generation of Spaniards, for whom the rights enshrined in the Constitution have become mere formalities with no real effect, as they see that their opportunities in life have been curtailed or even blocked.

Many young people, perhaps the best educated generation in the history of Spain, are fully aware of the huge gap between their expectations and an existing reality characterized by the need to adjust to widespread social uncertainty or consider emigration. This is the first generation in a century for whom, even in the absence of the negative consequences of a wide-scale military conflict, it is pretty clear that they might not be able to achieve the material level of well-being of their parents. The already limited social protection system is now being reduced to a minimum (with cuts in scholarships for high school or college, the new barriers introduced on receiving unemployment benefits and the end of rental subsidies or programmes for home purchases by young people). The immediate result of the above policies has been to strengthen the traditional “Southern pattern”: most often families remain the main institution that provides protection and security for its members. In practice, both the “adult” middle-age generation, with its more stable wages and work arrangements, and retirees with their pension benefits have been sustaining the new younger generation that is entering the labor market with great difficulties. The above is proved by the data on youth employment and the quality of employment, which demonstrates many precarious work arrangements experienced by youth and sustainable only because young people keep receiving additional income support from their families. Measures such as promoting access to housing, education and income support for young people and the introduction of a basic income for students, the unemployed and the poor would give genuine meaning to some of the social rights set out in the Spanish Constitution, also making it possible for young people to exercise full and active citizenship, despite the fact that age-based criteria make them a minority in society. But such measures would require a bold and robust public policy of redistribution, which is lacking and which would entail progressive changes in the ratio between the income earned by labor and that acquired by capital, changes that have been very far from the ideas supported by the major parties and for which today’s dogma of austerity leaves little political or fiscal space.

The described situation has a very important political impact in terms of the loss of confidence in the principal actors of the political system, who are increasingly perceived, as shown even in the surveys of official institutions, as being all linked to each other and as serving not the public interest but rather the power of the dominant economic groups.

The result of the growing gap between constituents and their representatives, amid the blockage in the institutional channels for dealing with social demands on the government and pursuing a very unpopular adjustment program, has been an increase in political conflict, with the merging of the traditional union organizations and the rise of many new

collective actors such as the so called "indignados" movement, the massive "tides" in defense of public services (such as health, education, etc.), and groups protesting against the eviction of families who cannot afford to pay their mortgages and who lost their home to the bank while still being obliged to pay the debt (estimated to amount to 500 evictions weekly, making families homeless, adding up to 46,000 in 2013 so far). Those demonstrations, despite having only indirect impact on the Spanish political system, are generating a massive politicization of the everyday problems of the impoverished majority, problems that had previously been experienced as private hardships but today add up to growing discontent across a broad ideological and social spectrum.

The austerity program also leaves little room for the government to meet some of the most wide-spread and urgent social demands. The entrenched corruption among the major political parties and the crown have led to their discreditation, with attitudes fluctuating between fear, cynicism and outrage, even among the less politicized sectors of the society.

This is a dramatic social situation, but one that is open to new political developments that were unprecedented and unexpected just three years ago. Among all, what seems less likely is that the status quo could be sustained with no modifications in policies. Spain is undergoing a period that fits perfectly into Antonio Gramsci's description of crises: "periods when the old hasn't quite died and the new hasn't quite been born". One might venture a hypothesis at such a stage, hard as it may be, that the ongoing evolution will lead to one of the following options: 1) The quick and sudden imposition by the government or by some of its transnational "proxies" of the whole package of adjustments, which would end up defeating public resistance without much political cost but changing the social landscape of Spain, with the destruction of public services, the oligarchic redefinition of the social contract, the impoverishment of large segments of the population and the adaptation to a peripheral role in the European division of labor; 2) The partial adoption of some of the social demands but in a superficial way while changing only minor elements of the political regime but preserving its central components, and involving a negotiated moderate adjustment package whose impact would depend on the strength of the partners in the negotiations; 3) The expression of discontent and resistance to the austerity and cuts in social spending in a way that will lead to a new democratic popular consensus regarding a more or less complete break with the austerity program, introducing measures for an urgent social bailout of the impoverished majority and the recovery of the popular sovereignty, with deep implications for the economic model and the eventual more equal distribution of the burdens of the current economic and fiscal crisis.

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➤ **Meeting of minds, meeting of hearts? UNICEF and the World Bank discover common ground on social protection**

The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) is a human-rights organization, and its work on social protection is framed within a human-rights based approach to development. The World Bank's approach to social protection has been anchored on the provision of targeted income support and access to basic social services to the poorest population groups and

those needing assistance after economic downturns or other events that pose major risk. Yet both organizations are making efforts to identify areas of potential collaboration, creating a common framework for helping countries develop or further strengthen their social protection systems. Having recently released strategic documents on social protection—the UNICEF report is called Social Protection Strategic Framework (<http://www.unicef.org/socialprotection/framework>) and that of the World Bank Resilience, Equity and Opportunity: The World Bank 2012-2022 Social Protection and Labor Strategy (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/280558-1274453001167/7089867-1279223745454/7253917-1291314603217/SPL_Strategy_2012-22_FINAL.pdf)

--both agencies are seeking common ground and increased coherence, particularly at the country level. One common message—the importance of building integrated social protection systems—has emerged after the recent UNICEF-World Bank Webinar convened to explore points of mutual interest between two agencies in the organization of social protection systems on the ground.

While there is an expressed caveat that no “one-size-fits-all” solutions exist and neither organization is willing to prescribe a specific pathway for countries to follow, both agencies are striving to provide countries with coordinated support and a coherent message, regardless of their specific mandates. Furthermore, they set the goal of engaging other strategic partners in integrated systems work. Admittedly, the theory of integrated systems has been much better explored compared to the existing evidence, but it is hoped that the emerging practices will be helpful in informing both strategic thinking and down-to-earth policies. Both agencies are concerned that there has been in recent years a proliferation of social protection programs that are often fragmented with little or no coordination, which may undermine their efficiency and efficacy. So it is important for systems to be internally coherent—at the policy, program and administrative levels—and externally coherent when other sectors are involved. Both organizations are planning to collaborate on collecting evidence, identifying tools and knowledge sharing.

The question raised during the webinar discussions regarding the relation of the proposed approach to the Social Protection Floor (SPF) Initiative was also addressed and answered. The joint work on systems envisions support for the implementation of the SPF initiative, particularly regarding guidance on how to make the SPF operational. There is a professed expectation on the part of both the UNICEF and the World Bank teams that working to strengthen inter-agency work on integrated systems through their membership in the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board, is beneficial for getting other partners to collaborate on SPARCS (Social Protection Assessment of Results and Country Systems)—a platform for developing common instruments and methodologies for the assessment of social protection systems.

➤ **Social Media and Citizens Engagement**

Delegates to IPU’s 128th Assembly convened in Quito, Ecuador from 22 to 27 March 2013 and adopted a resolution that calls on parliaments to use social media to better inform and engage with their citizens but also to protect the right of the freedom of expression on and

off-line. The resolution also underscored that a free, open and accessible internet is both a fundamental human right and a tool for citizen engagement. Parliamentarians also needed to take on the responsibility of ensuring citizens' access to free and secure online communications. The resolution followed IPU's release of its first-ever set of social media guidelines for MPs and parliamentary staff. Available freely online, it aims to encourage the more widespread and effective use of social media by parliaments and politicians, as well as provide guidance to those responsible for managing social media channels. The guidelines help to define the scope and purpose of social media for parliaments, while also providing a benchmark for good practice in citizen engagement. The World e-Parliament Report identified that by the end of 2012, a third of all parliaments were already using social media with another third planning to do so.

➤ **Useful resources and links**

For the social media guidelines mentioned above, please go to:
<http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/SMG2013EN.pdf>

For the World e-Parliament Report the link is:

<http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#e-parl2012>

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