Request for research proposals

The political economy of social protection systems

Background

United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) has started a new project ‘The Economics and Politics of Taxation and Social Protection’ that aims to shed new light on the system-wide impacts of social protection and tax systems in developing countries. It involves research work that provides analytical tools for policy-makers and researchers alike to understand the current scope of tax-benefit systems and to be able to simulate impacts of policy changes. It also offers new evidence on the impacts of tax systems on economic efficiency; in particular, on tax collection efficacy. Political economy aspects are an important part of this research. Such an approach helps understand which features foster successful adoption of social protection reforms.

The rapid growth of social protection systems in developing countries has underlined important knowledge gaps in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and also in comparative analysis of political structures, norms, and financial considerations that facilitate (or limit) the evolution and sustainability of such systems. Financing, in particular, remains as a key constraint. Revenue mobilization strategies have been explored in some developing countries to finance social protection. These include reforms on natural resource taxes, royalties, and fees; shifting expenditure from subsidies and tax exemptions to social protection, and redistribution. Efforts to increase the tax capacity by making the tax administration work more efficiently and by broadening the tax base are often essential, although the feasibility of these strategies often depend on political economy considerations.

Offer and expectations

UNU-WIDER invites research proposals from qualified researchers working on, or interested in exploring political economy considerations of social protection systems in developing countries. The aim of these papers is to culminate as articles in a special issue of a journal.

The specific objectives of this request for research proposals are:

1. To shed light on how policy can generate sustained routes to develop social protection systems.

2. To analyse the taxonomy of social protection systems across regions and assess the implications of such configurations for global development efforts to tackle poverty, vulnerability, and other forms of wellbeing deprivation.
To advance our understanding of the types of political regimes or conditions that have facilitated (or limited) the expansion of social protection and their political legitimacy.

To analyse how fiscal institutions have evolved over time in developing countries, and examine how these developments are linked with parallel changes in the informal sector and social protection.

To analyse the incentives of incumbent governments to use natural resource rents, redistribution, or other forms of revenue mobilization to finance social protection, and examine the short-term and long-term implications of such decisions.

Research proposals are invited to cover any of the following areas:

- Theoretical models of political economy
- Conceptual analysis of social protection systems
- Country case studies of programmes and impacts
- Econometric analyses utilizing cross-country and panel data
- Regional comparative studies

Proposals from individuals (or groups of individuals) as well as non-profit organizations are welcome. Applications from suitably qualified women and developing country candidates are particularly encouraged.

Individual researchers will be issued UNU Consultant Contracts (CTC), while non-profit organizations will be issued Institutional Contractual Agreements (ICA). Based on the qualifications of the lead researcher and an assessment of the research proposal, a total honorarium in the range of USD 6,000–10,000 will be paid in two instalments. A first instalment of 50% will be paid upon delivery of the first draft paper, and the second 50% payment will be made after submitting the revised full version of the working paper and a 1 page summary of the main research findings. Both of these deliverables must be deemed acceptable by the editors before payment will be made. The honorarium is expected to cover all expenses associated with the conduct of the proposed research (including data collection, research assistance, etc.). It is not required to submit a budget.

The working paper will be considered for publication in the WIDER Working Papers series. The working paper should be limited to 10,000 words or less, inclusive references. All successful applicants are expected to attend a 1-2 day Symposium (date and venue TBD) where work in progress will be presented. Costs of attending the Symposium will be borne by UNU-WIDER in accordance with United Nations University travel guidelines.

UNU-WIDER will formally pursue publication options after the selection of accepted research proposals. The editors will draw from the finalized papers to develop a special issue to submit to a journal. The editors may make requests of successful applicants in the development of the special issue proposal.

While the final payment of the honorarium will be made upon delivery of the full version of the working paper and 1 page summary, the final version of the journal special issue will not be complete at that point. After payment has been made, researchers will be asked to:

- Respond to reasonable requests by the publisher and editors with respect to finalization of the journal special issue
- Participate in at least one knowledge-sharing event around the launch of the journal special issue

Dates (EET–Eastern European Time)

2 March 2015  Announcement posted.
30 April 2015  Final opportunity for questions on the request for research proposals.
15 May 2015   Deadline for submission of research proposals.
15 June 2015 Target date for informing successful applicants.
1 November 2015 Target date for submission of first draft of papers.
1-30 November 2015 Target time window for Symposium.
30 June 2016 Target date for submission of revised full version of the working paper and a 1 page summary of main research findings.
30 August 2016 Target date for submission of the journal special issue.

Knowledge-sharing events will be planned subsequently.

Evaluation process and criteria

Research proposals will be scored based on the following criteria: a) quality of research question(s) and methodology (40 points), b) technical capabilities of applicant(s) (30 points), and 3) policy relevance (30 points). Based on this assessment, a pool of suitable proposals will be determined. From this pool, accepted proposals will be drawn by a decision panel. The decision panel will consider additional criteria such as overall coherence of the special journal issue, diversity of topics addressed, and geographic coverage. Only successful applicants will be contacted.

Other considerations

For successful proposals:

1. Researchers or their institutions (non-profit) will sign a Consultant Contract or an Institutional Contractual Agreement with UNU-WIDER that follows the UNU conditions of service for Consultant Contracts (CTC), or Institutional Contractual Agreements (ICA).

2. Researchers/institutions will transfer copyright of research produced under the contract to UNU-WIDER. The purpose of this copyright transfer is to allow UNU-WIDER to effectively negotiate with editors of journals in order to seek the most desirable possible publication outlet for a related set of papers. If no (further) publication is expected by UNU-WIDER, the copyright can be returned to the author(s).

Proposal submission details

1. The research proposal should be no more than five pages of A4 paper in length, excluding cover page and references. Please use 12 point font, 1.5 line spacing, and standard margins. The proposal should clearly state the following: i) research objectives and hypothesis, ii) theoretical framework and methods, iii) data sources, and iv) policy relevance. Please complete a cover page separately with complete contact information of researcher(s).

2. Submission of proposals should be done electronically by using a form on the RFRP announcement page. Details (such as address, gender, nationality, date of birth) of all researchers involved should be entered to the form and the cover page. The cover page, the proposal, and short CVs (five pages or less) of all researchers will need to be uploaded. Please familiarize yourself with the form in advance.

3. Please do not provide a budget.

4. Any questions regarding the request for research proposals should be sent to researchproposal3@wider.unu.edu no later than 30 April 2015. All queries and responses will be published on a rolling basis on the RFRP announcement page.