

RAPID ANALYSIS

Social Contracts: Towards more child- and future-centred framings



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Executive Summary

Social contracts around the world are fraying, reflecting a profound disconnect between institutions and the people they are meant to serve, and a corresponding sense of distrust and disillusionment as growing swathes of society feel that they are being left behind.¹

Questions about our mutual roles and responsibilities as states and societies lie at the core of social contracts. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has called for renewed global and national social contracts, arguing that to tackle the complex challenges we face, such contracts need to involve more actors and be anchored in a comprehensive approach to human rights.²

However, while global policy actors are orientating attention to these issues and some consensus appears to be evolving around priority areas, a key stakeholder continues to be absent from the discussion – children. And they are keenly aware of their exclusion – children and youth more widely increasingly feel their interests are not being effectively considered, and that governance systems, far from serving them, are compromising their futures and those of generations yet to come.

BOX 1

Social contracts and why they matter to children and youth

Social contracts, simply put, are dynamic agreements about how we live together in governed spaces. They reflect how competing interests and moral obligations are handled.

While youth are widely recognized as critical agents of change, social contracts fundamentally involve bargaining which occurs through political processes and the institutionalization of agreements around issues including services, safety and protection. Where asymmetrical power relations prevail, youth are involved in limited ways and children generally not at all. Whether and how the interests of children and youth are sufficiently and effectively represented is open to question and varies in relation to context and social and political norms.

Based on an overview of relevant literature, key informant interviews, and a small roundtable with experts reviewing early findings, this report explores the value of social contract policy framings that have emerged in recent years. With a view to advancing the notion of intergenerational equity – fairness and justice between generations – it discusses why children need to feature more prominently in social contracts, and how these framings might take on a more child- and future-centric form.

While children and youth do not feature strongly in the frameworks that were examined, our analysis concludes that common core elements can be identified across new social contract framings. These highlight the importance of inclusion and participation, solidarity and trust, concrete deliverables, social and economic justice, a human-rights based approach, and resilience and adaptation.

The report argues that these core elements are applicable not only to adults but also to children. With slight modifications, they can be articulated as key elements of more child- and future-centred social contracts that nurture societal resilience.

Recommendations focus on:

- Increasing the inclusion and participation of children and youth in decision-making.
- Rebuilding the trust of children and youth via intergenerational solidarity.
- Delivering concretely on what matters most for children and youth.
- Mainstreaming a child-rights approach into new social contract framings.

Methodology

This analysis has sought to understand how social contract frameworks are evolving across policy institutions, to examine how they are relevant for children and future generations, and to make recommendations to support more child- and future-centric frameworks.

With this goal in mind, some 50 documents from 12 policy institutions were examined, published by the UN and its agencies, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and selected wider scholarly institutions and think tanks. From this review, 11 frameworks were identified (*see Box 1*) that are discussed in the analysis. Five of these frameworks feature more prominently (*see Figures 1–5*), based on their perceived pertinence to the discussion given their wide use and their apparent entry points for thinking about more child-friendly framings. Four key informants from the associated institutions were also interviewed.

To validate and enrich early findings, a small roundtable discussion with specialists was held, following which the paper was revised and circulated for a wider peer review.⁴

For the purposes of this paper, the UNICEF definitions for children (aged 0-18), young people (aged 10-24), and youth (aged 15-24) are adopted.⁵ The paper concentrates on children and future generations, while drawing upon analysis on other categories where relevant, youth in particular.

Question 1: Why do we need to include children and youth in social contracts?

Demographic and technological changes, alongside wider processes of globalization in recent decades, have created contexts and conditions that suggest that our twentieth century social contracts are no longer fit for purpose. If persistently high levels of violent conflict, crisis and inequality are markers, our social contracts are deepening rather than reducing vulnerabilities and failing to serve our collective quest for inclusive, sustainable development. Children, youth and future generations are bearing the brunt of these challenges as they experience deepening vulnerability and lack of political voice, while their responsibilities are growing with the mounting complexities of development in a crisis-filled world. The global youth population is projected to increase by 62 per cent by 2050 in the poorest countries,⁶ with Africa accounting for most of this increase. Notwithstanding this trend, populations across most continents and countries are aging – a demographic shift that will increase dependency on workers and place a greater burden on children and youth and social protection systems.

Children and youth vulnerability and exclusion are highly visible in economic, political and social realms, while many crises not of their making are hitting children and youth disproportionately. Children constitute one-quarter of the global population, yet one-

Demographic and technological changes have created contexts and conditions that suggest that our twentieth century social contracts are no longer fit for purpose

half of the world's poorest.⁷ Some 63 million girls and 97 million boys⁸ (10 per cent of children globally) are child labourers, and 75 per cent of youth are informal workers.⁹ Nearly half of child labourers work in hazardous conditions, with few legal protections, benefits and training opportunities.¹⁰ Youth more broadly feel they are not acquiring the skills needed to be competitive in job markets, particularly in green and digital economies.¹¹ Exclusions in ethnicity, gender, language and culture impede access to good-quality education¹² and broader opportunities to advance well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how crises tend to hit children and youth hard. Young workers were the first to lose their jobs during the pandemic.¹³ Disruptions to children's education due to the pandemic increased learning poverty by a third in low- and middle-income countries, with an estimated 70 per cent of 10-year-olds unable to understand a simple written text. This generation of students now risks losing \$21 trillion in potential lifetime earnings, or the equivalent of 17 per cent of today's global GDP.¹⁴ Environmental crises also disproportionately affect children, with an estimated 850 million children – or one in three worldwide – living in areas where at least four extreme climate and environmental shocks overlap.¹⁵ Children will experience at least twice the number of extreme weather events as their grandparents.¹⁶ They are also more vulnerable to direct climate change impacts on their physical and mental health,¹⁷ and to indirect impacts, including food shortages, inter-group conflict, economic dislocation and forced migration.¹⁸

A number of recent studies have also shown that prospects for intergenerational fairness are deteriorating.¹⁹ Today's children are likely to have to work longer than previous generations and they are likely to experience greater inequality as they confront these escalating crises.

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Despite the adverse conditions and elevated set of responsibilities that accompany them, children and youth are often left out of the political decision-making where visions and plans are crafted.²⁰ Young people feel they are excluded from social contracts.²¹ Their trust in institutions is often the lowest of all age groups – and the fastest declining.²² The low rates of youth participating in political parties and elections, alongside rising protests characterized by strong youth leadership and participation, reflect both their exclusion from and disaffection with state institutions.²³ At the same time, their leadership of social movements, as reflected in the Arab Spring movements for system and regime change, and in global protests to bring about just transitions out of high-carbon economies, illustrate their agency to drive efforts to achieve better futures for all. Their ability to become more questioning of their relationship to the state, and more connected and mobilized in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, further illustrates their resilience, and can be seen as a sign of generational renewal.²⁴

In addition to the clear practical and moral reasons to include children and youth in social contracts, there are legal reasons. UN Member States have made commitments to uphold the rights of children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines the range of political, social, economic, health and cultural rights that children hold.²⁵ This includes the right for children to have a voice on matters affecting them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom



Read **The UN
Convention on the
Rights of the Child** →

of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Article 15) as well as information (Article 17). The UNCRC also recognizes the evolving capacities of a child – that they mature and progressively acquire greater competencies as they move from early and mid-childhood into adolescence and eventually early adulthood.

There are also increasing commitments to notions of intergenerational equity²⁶ and intergenerational justice,²⁷ which recognize the importance of the rights of generations yet to be born and the need to allocate benefits and burdens fairly across generations. These considerations are increasingly frequenting constitutional texts, treaties, political declarations and judicial decisions, from international to sub-national levels.²⁸ Despite these advances in rights, children and youth continue to experience disproportionate vulnerability across a range of areas. Asymmetrical power relations and corresponding inequalities in access to resources, opportunities, voice and rights fundamentally drive this deficit.^{29, 30}

Question 2: How are social contracts evolving?

The social contract concept is commonly associated with classical political philosophy, where it was understood as a consensual or tacit agreement reflecting the mutual obligations and rights of states and society and of citizens within society, and the related trade-offs associated with living together. Classical philosophers, including Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, shared the belief that such an agreement between rulers and ruled would support peace and stability, but the enduring themes and questions underpinning social contract thinking date back well before this era, to ancient civilizations and across worldviews, cultural and religious traditions, and geography.

These reflect the parties to the social contract, its purpose, the mechanisms through which it is forged and can be sustained, and questions of moral obligation and how to handle competing interests.³¹ The ability of social contracts to manage competing interests in a society while maintaining a focus on the society's overall development is among the reasons for the concept's enduring and broad appeal. Social contracts can support pathways to craft new national and global agreements and associated pathways to address our common crises and build a better world for future generations.

Social contracts reflect dynamism over the ages. The mechanisms through which societies forge them, as well as the goals on which they focus, have evolved over time and across geographies and cultures. Religious texts and teachings have helped to set out expectations concerning human interactions, as have cultural practices, constitutional processes, parliamentary Acts, customary and formal laws and regulations and peace agreements.³²

Over the centuries, critical political philosophers and scholars from various disciplines have argued that social contracts too often amount to exclusive, top-down and elitist agreements. They have sought to ensure that the concept and the mechanisms through which social contracts are negotiated better capture the interests and needs of different stakeholder groups. Karl Marx argued that the existing social contract served capitalist interests and individual self-interest – which could not serve emancipatory purposes.³³ John Rawls brought issues of fairness more centrally into

Social contracts can support pathways to craft new national and global agreements and associated pathways to address our common crises

the discussion.³⁴ Feminists and race-conscious theorists have also critiqued status-quo social contracts; the former have identified patriarchal assumptions embedded in the theories, and the latter how the “racial contract” protects the racial social order.³⁵

While the idea of including children in considerations of social contracts may for some be intuitively obvious, it has had influential opponents over these eras. For the Enlightenment philosophers who developed the notion of the social contract, children were not considered suitable for inclusion because they were deemed to lack the capacity to make reasoned decisions. Rawls argued that heads of households should act as contract holders on behalf of children.³⁶ Social norms have also played a role in shaping how children (and youth) are treated, and this continues to this day, with many cultures promoting paternalistic relationships and often denying children a voice in negotiating social contracts.³⁷

Pertinent to children, the notion of intergenerational social contracts has also been explored by scholars, who have focused on understanding the nature of dependencies, expectations, and perceived obligations across generations and in different contexts.³⁸ Despite increasing recognition of these concepts in international reports and commitments, constitutional texts and legislation, especially related to the environment, their translation into policy remains extremely limited.³⁹

Question 3: What are some examples of contemporary social contract frameworks?

New policy frameworks on the social contract have proliferated in recent years, both prompting and responding to sentiment among the public and policy-makers that existing contracts need to be revisited. Existing or old social contracts are seen as deepening vulnerability and exclusion around the world, and failing to serve our quest for inclusive, sustainable development.⁴⁰

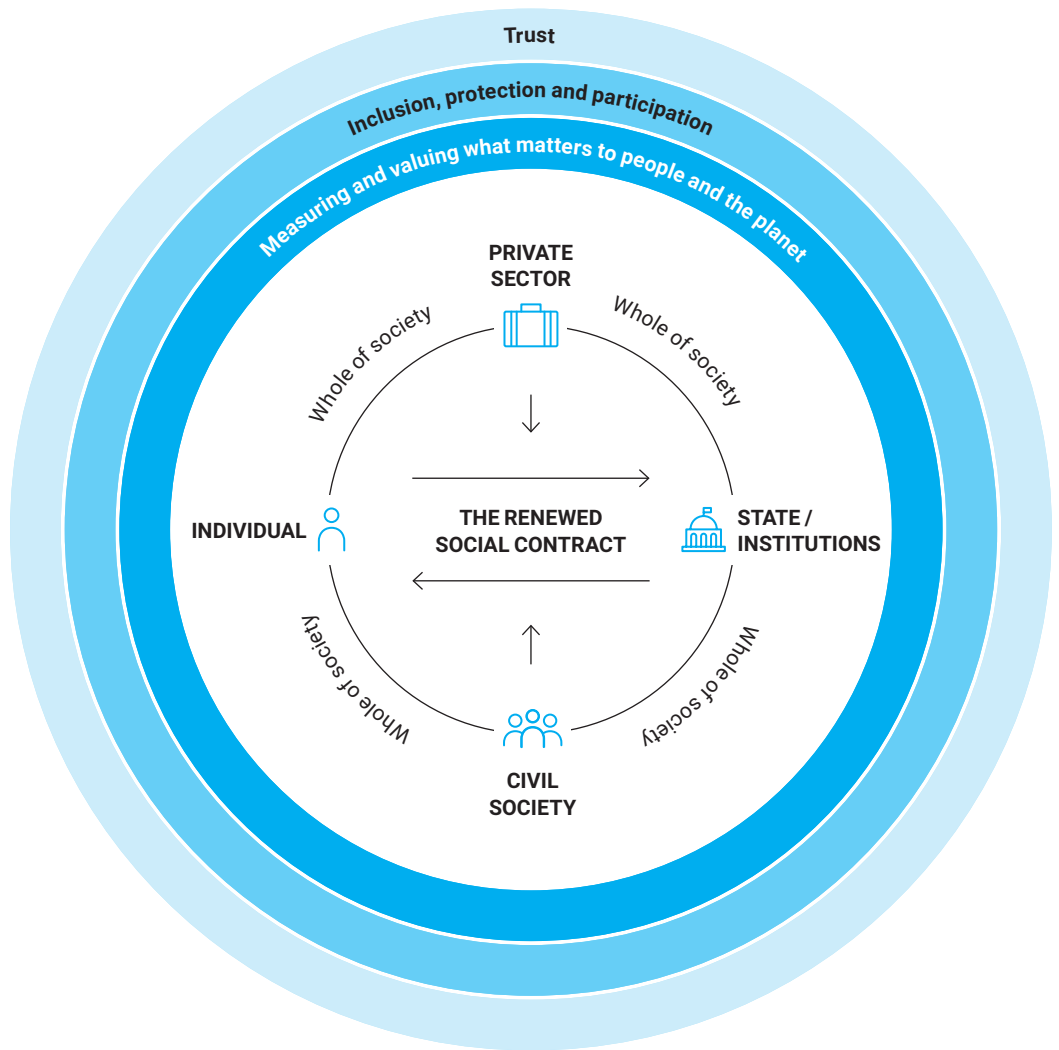
Five policy frameworks are particularly pertinent to the discussion, given their wide use and their apparent entry points for thinking about more child-friendly framings.

Our Common Agenda (OCA), a report by the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) published in 2021, places the social contract at the centre of a 25-year strategic vision for the UN. This report emerged out of a global consultation and highlights the importance of new social contracts to tackle inequality and the adverse effects of globalization.⁴¹ OCA calls for national social contracts to be renewed between governments and their societies (individuals, as well as civil society and the private sector). It calls, too, for a new global compact that renews the principles and practices of collective action with a view to better delivering public goods and protecting global commons – tasks which are beyond the capacity of individual states.⁴² Three foundations, the report suggests, are crucial: trust; inclusion, protection and participation; and measuring and valuing what matters most to people and the planet (see Figure 1).



Read **Our Common Agenda** a report by the United Nations Secretary General →

Figure 1: The Renewed Social Contract from the Secretary-General of the United Nations



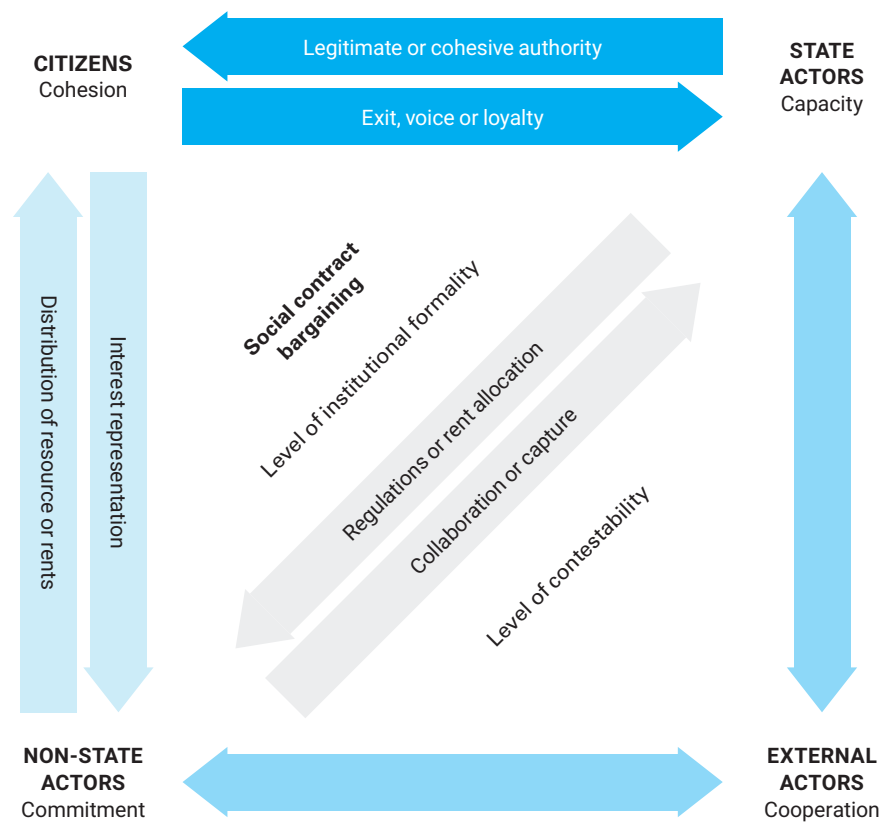
- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions that listen • Services • Justice and rule of law • Taxation • No corruption • Information • Digital space | <p>Inclusion, protection and participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social protection systems including universal health coverage • Education and lifelong learning • Decent work • Women and girls at the centre, peace at home • Bargaining interface • State capacity | <p>Measuring and valuing what matters to the people and the planet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliments to the GDP • Care and informal economy |
|--|---|---|



Source: United Nations, *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*, United Nations, New York, 2021, p. 23.

A second conceptual framework for social contracts, developed by the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group (IEG),⁴³ was based on the evaluation of a number of programmes focusing on better governance and social contract renewal (see Figure 2). The framework captures the main players that shape social contracts (as shown in the four corners of the model), the types of power or influence they exert on each other in the bargaining process (the arrows), the nature of the institutional space where bargaining takes place (the centre), and the ways actors engage with existing social contracts at a given point in time. While this framework speaks to national-level social contracts, the IEG recognizes that multiple social contracts can co-exist at different levels.⁴⁴

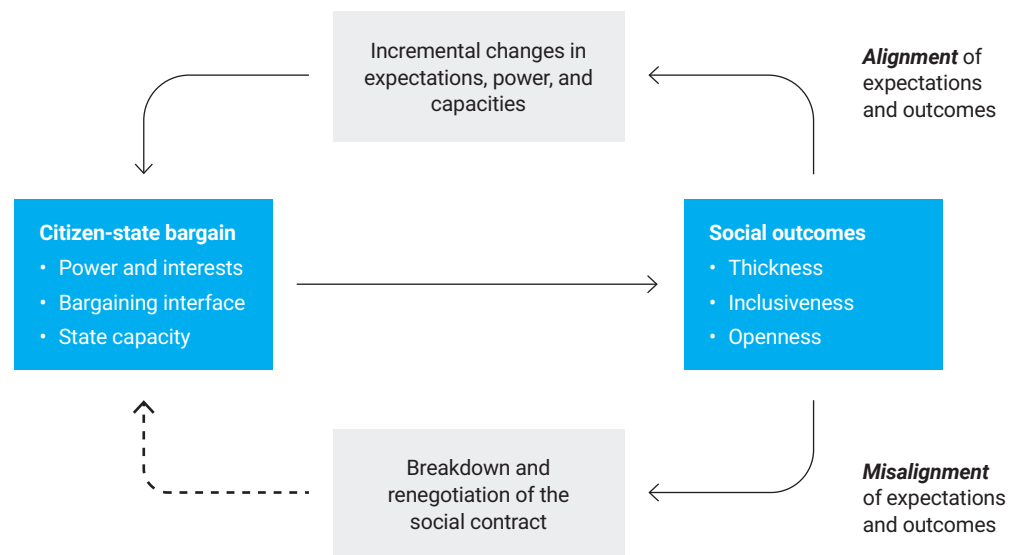
Figure 2: IEG and the World Bank’s Social Contracts Conceptual Framework



Source: Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) and the World Bank, *Social Contracts and World Bank Country Engagements: Lessons from Emerging Practices*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2019, p. 4.

A more recent World Bank publication that focused on sub-Saharan Africa adopts an OECD definition of the social contract as “a dynamic agreement between state and society on their mutual roles and responsibilities.” The report focuses on “the process by which social contracts are forged in the region, how they change over time, and how a more in-depth understanding of social contracts can help inform reform efforts.” Noting the absence of explicit social contract framings from the development discourse in Africa, the World Bank aims to establish a practical and/or analytical framework that can be used by policymakers to analyse social contracts. It examines three aspects of social contracts in particular – the nature of the bargaining space within which agreements are thrashed out between citizens and states (including both formal and informal bargaining mechanisms, and varying depending on state capacity and the ability of citizens to coalesce to make demands of the state); the outcomes of the bargain for all parties involved; and the resilience of social contracts in terms of the extent to which their perceived outcomes align with citizens’ expectations (see Figure 3).⁴⁵

Figure 3: World Bank Africa Development Forum’s Social Contracts Conceptual Framework



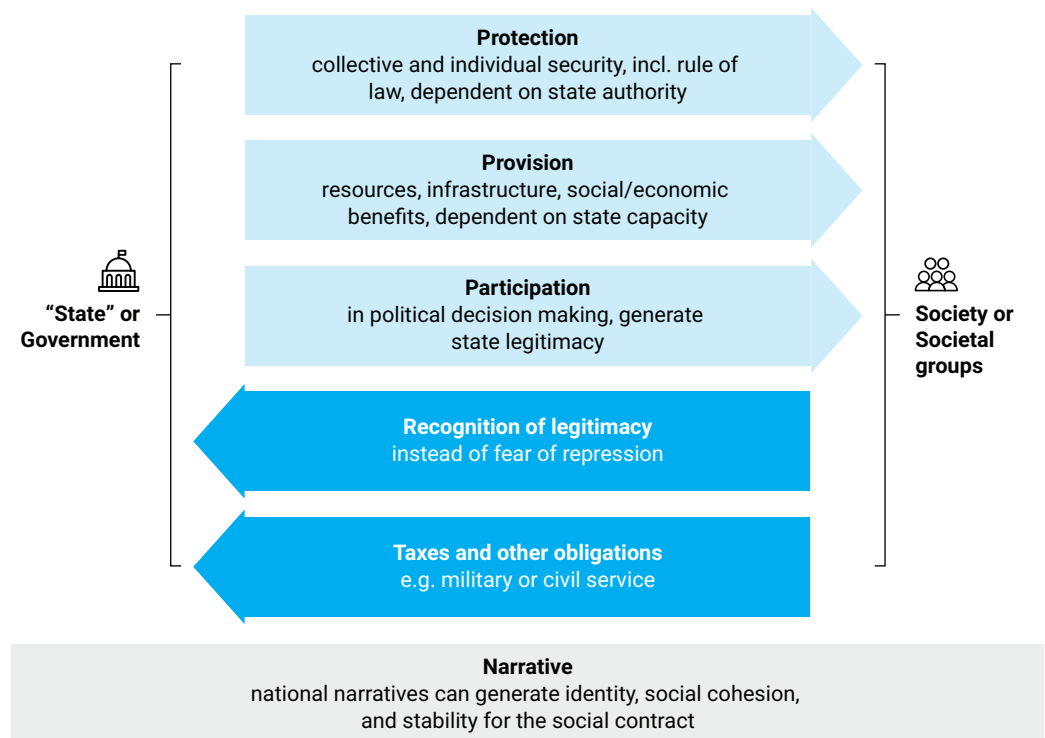
Source: World Bank, 2021, p. 26. Cloutier, Mathieu, et al., *Social Contracts for Development: Bargaining, Contention, and Social Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Africa Development Forum. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Note: The term thickness refers to the involvement of the state in providing services and public goods and in the redistribution of income and wealth.

A fourth framework, used by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), was developed in order to support better analysis by scholars and practitioners of existing social contracts (see Figure 4). The diagram depicts ‘three Ps’ that are suggested as key elements of the social contract to be delivered by the state. The first is protection, for example against collective and individual physical and wider security threats, including criminal acts or acts of state arbitrariness.

The second is provision of basic services, such as social services, infrastructure, social protection and economic opportunities. The third is participation in political decision-making processes at different levels. In response to these deliverables by states, societal groups are incentivized to pay taxes and recognize the state's rule.⁴⁶

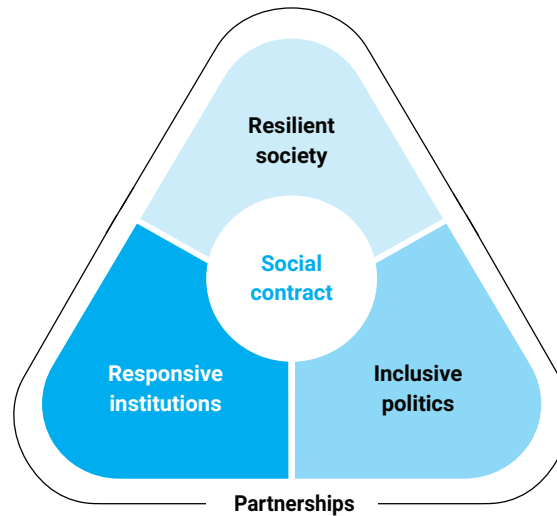
Figure 4: IDOS framework: Deliverables in a Social Contract



Source: Adapted from Loewe, Markus., Bernhard Trautner and Tina Zintl, 'The Social Contract: An Analytical Tool for Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Beyond', Briefing Paper, German Development Institute, Bonn, 2019

Finally, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) social contract framework was designed to assist the institution and its partners to establish more effective governance approaches in contexts affected by conflict and fragility (see *Figure 5*).⁴⁷ For UNDP, a social contract is "a dynamic agreement between states and societies on their mutual roles and responsibilities". It is implicit rather than explicit, stemming from interaction between elites and citizens, and it is considered credible when it "adequately reflects citizens' expectations and the state's capacity to meet these expectations".⁴⁸ The four foundations of the framework are: responsive institutions which are able to deliver services to the population; inclusive politics, which include mechanisms that enable the peaceful expression of interests; resilient society, which plays a key role in responding to conflict and crisis; and partnerships between international actors and national and sub-national ones to operationalize the other three foundations.⁴⁹

Figure 5: Four Fundamental Interlinked Elements for Recovery from Conflict and Fragility



Source: Adapted from Muggah, Robert, et al., *Governance for Peace: Securing the Social Contract*, United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2012, p. 38.

Question 4: How have existing social contract frameworks been operationalized?

Policy actors are presently concerned with questions about how the social contract concept can be operationalized and what added value it brings. International institutions have used new social contract framings for strategic, analytical and operational purposes.

Figure 6: Potential value of social contract framings



Source: Cloutier, Mathieu, et al., *Social Contracts for Development: Bargaining, Contention, and Social Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Africa Development Forum. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/978-1-4648-1662-8>

The *strategic* value of social contract framings lies in the insights they provide into new organizational strategies. For example:

- The OECD Development Assistance Committee’s reconceptualization of the social contract has influenced its state-building work in fragile and conflict-affected settings.⁵⁰ Collaborating with the German government, the organization employed the social contract notion in its Resilience Task Force, which focused on addressing fragility and the renegotiation of social contracts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.⁵¹

- UNDP has carried social contract framings further, integrating them into its 2016 organizational strategy.⁵² While not consistently employed across programmes to spearhead design and implementation, the concept is notably influential in the organization's local governance work.⁵³ However, UNDP's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan does not build the social contract framing into its vision, highlighting only that the traditional social contract is not working for many.⁵⁴
- Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) utilizes social contract framings developed by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) to reflect upon its cooperation agreements and guide its programming support. The social contract is used as a tool to support objective-setting and to facilitate priority development with other European Union members. "Good governance through new social contracts" constitutes one of three pillars of the organization's Middle East programming.⁵⁵ BMZ's cooperation agreements approved in the MENA region have been tasked with showing a positive impact upon, or at least with doing no harm to, existing social contracts.⁵⁶

Social contract
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contracts

Analytically, social contract framings can serve as analytical tools to better understand the nature and effectiveness of existing social contracts and the historical and political contexts that underpin them. Examining what has worked and what has not worked within existing social contracts, and why, can suggest pathways to improve them in the future:

- The World Bank has developed and employed "social contract diagnostics" extensively since 2006 at both a regional and a country level. They have been used to help explain complex development challenges such as entrenched inequalities, poor service delivery, weak institutions and the failure of externally promoted reforms. Systematic Country Diagnostics using a social contract framing have been undertaken across 21 country programmes.⁵⁷ The World Bank hopes that such analysis will bring greater awareness to the socio-political contexts in which its staff engage, to better steer against international actors skewing local dynamics.⁵⁸ At the same time, however, the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group has highlighted the uneven and poor conceptualization of social contracts by staff across many of the studies, as well as the lack of an agreed approach for undertaking diagnostics.⁵⁹
- IDOS is exploring tools that would allow it to quantify the "three Ps" discussed above, as well as what is being delivered by a social contract.

The *operational* value of social contract framings relates to questions of how the social contract concept can be used to support better policy and planning:

- The World Bank's MENA strategy in 2015 represents perhaps the most ambitious effort to translate diagnostics into operations that support social contract renewal at country levels.⁶⁰ The social contract framework is viewed as a means of strengthening government systems, notably in areas of bargaining between state and society around key areas such as service delivery, and offers a lens through which the Bank can ensure it does not foster parallel systems that undercut citizen-

state accountability.⁶¹ Despite advances in diagnostics, however, the organization has not been able to radically shift its portfolio; its default is to focus on service delivery, which is often hampered by the corrosive effects on social contracts of corruption, eroding media independence and failing judicial systems. It acknowledges that it has limited capacity where transitions are not organically underway.⁶²

- While UNDP placed an important focus on the social contract in its 2016 integrated approach, the concept did not feature consistently in programming across countries and regions in the years that followed. In-depth interviews conducted for this analysis found that differences in the level of understanding of the social contract concept, along with related sensitivity on the part of some Member States, meant that a discourse of governance systems and structural transformations was considered a more effective framing for policy and programming responses to the pressures on social contracts. A governance systems approach can be better suited, according to UNDP, to identify and address those areas and factors that affect people's expectations of the state and the state's capabilities and capacities to meet those expectations. The governance priorities captured in UNDP's new Strategic Plan include local governance systems, public sector capabilities to deliver public goods and services equitably, civic space and an inclusive public sphere.

The operationalization of the social contract concept as a programming framework, then, has been limited. This may be a result of the concept not being well understood, or of the complexity of bringing on board actors at all levels and in many different organizations, sections of society, and interdependent countries and regions. It is an open question, moreover, whether international actors can play a role in strengthening national social contracts. Will it be regarded as political interference, for example, if external organizations attempt to influence the direction of such contracts? Should international actors instead limit themselves to being aware of the impacts of their activities on national social contracts? Whether the social contract can become a useful conceptual tool for analysis as well as a programming framework that can be operationalized remains to be seen. The patchiness of operationalization may suggest that it will not evolve in this direction, or may simply indicate, as is the case with many framing concepts, that its wider ownership and utility will take time to fully manifest.

Question 5: What core elements are prominent in new social contract framings?

While there is no single definition of new social contracts, policy discussions and framings reveal a growing consensus around six core themes or elements that comprise them.⁶³

New social contract
framings tend to
feature inclusion
and participation as
a core element

First, new social contract framings tend to feature **inclusion and participation** as a core element. They emphasize the need to be inclusive of a wider range of stakeholders in order to address the complexity and interconnectedness of our contemporary challenges.⁶⁴

Inclusion and participation are both important outcomes of social contracts and vital elements in the negotiation of such contracts. In OCA, inclusion is conceived as ensuring that people are heard and can participate in the decisions that affect their lives.⁶⁵

Social protection
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The second recurrent element relates to the importance of social contracts achieving **concrete deliverables** that target what matters to people. Social contracts that deliver social and economic outcomes help to build trust and resilience and advance intergenerational equity. In OCA, social protection is viewed as a foundation for nurturing peaceful societies, meeting basic needs, protecting human rights and leaving no one behind.⁶⁶ In many frameworks, achieving concrete deliverables is focused on security and protection, social welfare, learning and skills development, health and wellbeing as well as addressing vulnerability and economic exclusion.⁶⁷ The World Bank's framings for improving equity and cohesion advocate enhancing labour market flexibility and protection, increasing social assistance and insurance, implementing progressive tax systems,⁶⁸ and strengthening the accountability of state institutions.⁶⁹ The IDOS framework, used to inform both strategy and analysis, ties protection to securing the population against physical and wider security threats, collective and individual, including criminal acts or acts of state arbitrariness.⁷⁰ Tying protection to security is particularly important in countries affected by conflict and fragility, where children and youth suffer greatly from acts of war and political aggression, as social spheres and areas of protection collapse, livelihoods are destroyed, and pervasive trauma affects generations.

The third element is **solidarity and trust** – a recognition of the importance of ensuring meaningful societal ownership in consolidating and sustaining social contracts. Declining trust in institutions and interpersonally between citizens and groups is highlighted as a challenge which suggests that many political and socio-economic systems are not meeting expectations in relation to existing social contracts.⁷¹

In parallel, the notion of solidarity is rising, reflecting considerations of moral obligation that have historically informed social contract theorizing. Solidarity involves caring for others whether or not we know them and recognizing our collective interdependencies – both of which move the lens beyond the pursuit of individual self-interest. A number of institutions have highlighted the centrality of solidarity in new social contracts – to support intergenerational dialogue and justice,⁷² promote global common goods,⁷³ and as a principle guiding the transformation of global institutions and processes⁷⁴ and the provision of social safety nets.⁷⁵

A fourth element reflects the importance of social contracts being orientated towards **social and economic justice**. Attention is increasingly focused on the need to address inequality and unequal power relations in new social contracts. Responses to social and economic injustice across numerous frameworks tend to be focused on better recognizing the important roles that marginalized groups play,⁷⁶ addressing exclusion and inequality⁷⁷ and ensuring protection of vulnerable groups. Various actors have called for greater efforts to address inequalities by placing a floor under incomes to ensure a basic, reasonable standard of living.⁷⁸ According to OCA, targeting inequality requires engaging global institutions to ensure fairer globalization.⁷⁹

The fifth element reflects the importance of a **human rights-based approach** that ensures greater protection of all members of society. This is seen by many as a core foundation for reinvigorated social contracts that build more inclusive and stable societies. OCA argues that human rights strengthen social contracts by presenting obligations on governments to protect citizens. They are essential factors in building inclusive societies, preventing abuses and supporting problem-solving measures to address grievances.⁸⁰ World Bank research posits a human rights perspective as a “pillar” for assessing the responsiveness of states to societies’ welfare, based on interactive and inclusive procedures for resolving conflicts and holding the state to account.⁸¹ The UNDP ties human rights directly to the conceptualization of the bargain whereby society consents to state authority in exchange for protection by the state of its universal human rights, including provision of public services and goods.⁸²

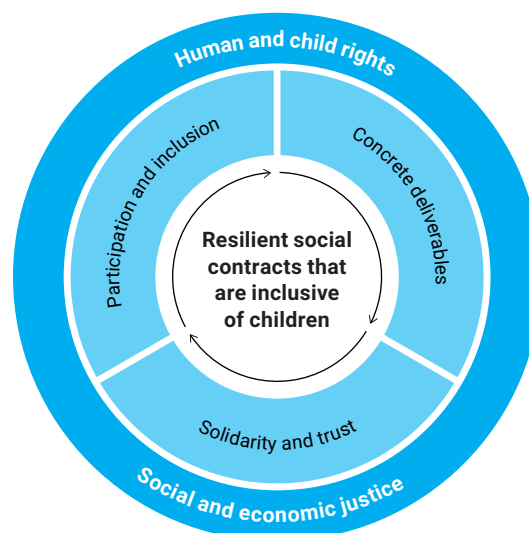
Social contracts that are flexible and adaptive are able to respond to changes in framework conditions

The sixth and final theme in discussions of new social contracts relates to the importance of **adaptation and resilience**. Social contracts that are flexible and adaptive are able to respond to changes in framework conditions, including to shocks and stressors and the many complex and fast-changing challenges facing societies. OCA reinforces earlier frameworks that have given prominence to resilience as a desired character or outcome of social contracts.⁸³ Resilience is also embedded within the UNDP’s framework, where “resilient society” is viewed as a foundational objective,⁸⁴ as well as in the World Bank’s framework, where resilience is viewed as a measure through which social contract outcomes reflect citizens’ expectations.⁸⁵

Question 6: How do children and future generations feature in new social contract framings?

Children and youth are yet to feature prominently in organizational strategies or policy analysis around new social contracts, reflecting the limited extent to which they have historically been addressed in scholarship and political thought. This section explores how the elements identified above apply to children and youth – particularly in the five featured social contract framings.

Figure 7: Towards a more child-centred approach to social contracts: five key elements



Source: Author’s own design with considerable contributions from Tamara Rusinow

Inclusion and participation

OCA has a strong focus on youth in its discussion on participation. It advocates better platforms for public consultation and participation – especially for youth – and for transforming education systems to become more inclusive, dynamic and collaborative. Emphasis is given to the inclusion of vulnerable and excluded groups including youth, and highlights the disproportionate vulnerability of girls and the need to prioritize realizing their equal rights by repealing discriminatory legislation and promoting greater inclusion of younger women across the board.⁸⁶

While the UNDP's social contract framings do not substantially consider children, its 2016 framing mainstreams the empowerment of women and youth across four priority areas: inclusive political processes; rule of law, justice, security and human rights; responsive and accountable institutions; and conflict prevention. The UNDP highlights the importance of informal institutions that mediate and shape relationships between people, communities and the state, and maintains a specific workstream that aims to promote youth empowerment and participation through advocacy and capacity development.⁸⁷

Other policy actors highlight the need for expanded participation of children and youth in political processes as part of their social contract framings. For the OECD, this means strengthening the relationship of youth with public institutions, by lowering the voting age, reducing barriers to youth participating in political life,⁸⁸ engaging youth more meaningfully in policy design, implementation and evaluation, and building youth competencies to participate.⁸⁹ The 2017 UN progress study on youth, peace and security, *The Missing Peace*, underscores the role of youth parliaments and councils as mechanisms to increase the representation and participation of youth in political dialogue and alleviate grievances.⁹⁰

Concrete deliverables

While context provides a starting point for any social contract, there are core economic and social deliverables that tend to be important to and for children and youth across settings. These are reflected in many of the frameworks discussed above. They include social protection, economic empowerment and employment, and health and education. Concrete progress in these areas enables children and youth to better contribute to current and future social contracts, and to the developmental potential of societies more broadly.

OCA ties operationalizing the social contract to ensuring universal social protection coverage (including basic income security for children), universal healthcare and the gradual integration of informal workers into social protection.⁹¹ Protection is also tied to risk sharing and solidarity with younger generations, to the reskilling and upskilling of youth, and to fostering connections between learning and relevant entrepreneurial opportunities and employment.⁹²

Education is a
vital social
contract priority
for children

Education is a vital social contract priority for children and features prominently in numerous frameworks. In OCA, education is embedded in inclusion, protection and participation, and is seen as a deliverable for deepening solidarity. This supports the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) education-

focused social contract framing, where addressing educational and social exclusions is paramount. This requires assuring the right to quality education throughout life; ensuring that education is of contextual, cultural, practical and ecological relevance; and strengthening education as a public sector endeavour – with the central participation of children and youth themselves.⁹³

Other frameworks highlight the importance of lifelong learning as part of social contract renewal. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) framing on the future of work emphasizes early-age investment in youth and people's capabilities more widely, facilitating later-stage learning and lifetime employment. Such investments will have transformative potential, expanding intergenerational social mobility and the choices of future generations.⁹⁴ OCA advocates lifelong learning as a universal entitlement with supporting legislation and policy.⁹⁵ Such learning can support the achievement of concrete deliverables throughout life, building societal resilience to support the social contract, and giving people of all ages the ability to adapt to shocks and labour market shifts throughout their lives.

Solidarity and trust

Recent discussions on social contracts also include a focus on how to build solidarity and trust between generations.⁹⁶

OCA highlights trust as one of three priority foundations for renewed social contracts. It emphasizes the need to build trust by engaging societal groups, particularly those that are often overlooked (including younger people), more inclusively in national visioning and decision-making, and delivering what is most needed to people.⁹⁷ The OECD emphasizes the need to build capacities and institutional coherence to advance equality between generations. This includes: strengthening political commitment and policy-makers' capacity to act; integrating the agenda through policies, laws and strategies in coherent ways; strengthening oversight and monitoring mechanisms; and promoting age diversity in public decision-making.⁹⁸

This concern for greater solidarity across generations has been taken further by some scholars, who support the idea of intergenerational contracts with a focus on entitlements for children and youth. Shafik, for example, suggests entitlements for young people targeted at skills development over their lives, with repayments on investments through higher taxes in future, which will in turn finance elderly care.⁹⁹ This builds upon the common effort in countries around the world to tax the working-age population to better support the elderly and children. Others point to the importance of ensuring that future generations are not burdened with unwanted debt and legislation related to actions that predate them.¹⁰⁰

Social and economic justice

Social and economic justice for children is generally not discussed explicitly across the frameworks, though it appears in indirect and cross-cutting ways. OCA's prioritization of addressing injustices faced by girls is an exception. The report argues for the full realization of girls' rights and repealing of discriminatory legislation.¹⁰¹ Less explicitly, but no less importantly, social contract framings link economic justice to the protection of vulnerable groups, among which children feature strongly. This is supported by

Social contract
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scholars who have argued that education is a tool for shaping the values of young people and promoting a greater focus on social and economic justice in society.¹⁰²

Human (and child) rights-based approach

Protection by the state of its citizens' human rights is a core component of discussions on new social contracts. Children's rights are integral to this, and must also underpin the analysis, strategic planning and operationalization of new social contracts. For UNICEF, children's rights provide a legal framework of entitlements and obligations to guide decision-making on issues that affect children's futures.¹⁰³

OCA, following UNESCO's education-focused social contract framing, posits high-quality education as a fundamental human right and as a prerequisite for youth to be equipped to exercise their voice and contribute to the social contract.¹⁰⁴ Good-quality education is also seen as "society's great equalizer" – laying foundations for peace, tolerance, human rights and sustainability.¹⁰⁵

Youth themselves recognize that they need to take responsibility for seizing their rights and owning their responsibilities in social contracts. The UN Foundation's Next Generation Fellows (NGF), who convened wide-ranging consultations with youth in support of the development of OCA, argue that youth need to step up and start building the world they want by fulfilling their responsibilities to one another, the planet, and future generations. Specifically, they view it as their obligation to hold actors (government, business community, global institutions) accountable, and to speak out against exploitation, exclusion and abuse. They pledge to work with their elders, building a better world through intergenerational cooperation.¹⁰⁶ To play these roles, they demand space to shape the future, through greater participation in decision-making and youth-led initiatives to allow them to better drive needed social change.¹⁰⁷

■
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Recommendations for child- and future-centred social contracts

Incorporating a greater focus on children and intergenerational equity in social contracts will require action in multiple areas. The following recommendations centre on mainstreaming attention on children and, by association, youth and future generations. They build upon the UNSG's *Our Common Agenda* social contract framing and recommendations, and on the wider analysis of new social contracts in policy discussions, as represented in this document. To make social contracts more child- and future-centred, it is important to:

1. Increase the inclusion and participation of children and youth in decision-making that affects them, including in envisioning and planning new social contracts.

Removing the barriers to child and youth participation will be critical if their inclusion is to become a reality. This requires challenging social norms and shifting negative stereotypes related to their ability to participate productively among both policy-makers and communities on the ground. Ending discrimination that impedes girls' participation is particularly important. Children need to be aware of and to understand their rights. This requires incorporating civic participation skills into school curricula and working to ensure that public decision-making mechanisms are accessible to young people, especially the most marginalized. The strengthening and expansion of youth participatory bodies that have power to influence policy is also important. Quotas can be adopted to ensure the direct and equitable participation of youth in national governance institutions and processes.¹⁰⁸ Lowering voting ages and the age at which individuals can hold public office can increase the political participation of youth. Future generations, moreover, require representation because they cannot directly participate. OCA's proposals for an ombudsman or Special Envoy that acts specifically on their behalf as a trustee to protect their interests should be explored.

2. Ensure effective service delivery for children and youth.

Adequate investment in services that improve children's lives pays off – both in laying foundations for inclusive, sustainable development, and in supporting more peaceful and stable societies. Child grants which support poor and marginalized children (or are universal) should be prioritized and combined with access to healthcare and child protective services to enable them to survive and thrive. States should work to ensure good-quality education, reduce the barriers to education, including those related to discrimination, and support lifelong learning.

Removing barriers to the fair participation of youth in labour markets, and especially that of marginalized youth, should also be considered as part of effective service delivery for youth. The private sector and civil society, as well as international supporters, can assist such efforts practically and financially.

3. Rebuild trust and promote intergenerational solidarity.

While essential to children and youth, improving the quality and delivery of health, education and protection services takes time and significant investments in system strengthening and capacity building. Investing in social protection measures that support children to attend school and youth into work and employment could provide quicker wins in terms of supporting young people and building trust in governments (as well as in the long run developing a greater tax base).¹⁰⁹ This might include topping up the incomes of low-paid young workers, or grants that support youth to build their skills or set up businesses. Combating corruption is also critical for rebuilding trust – corruption in service delivery and recruitment decisions and a lack of transparency in government budgeting and expenditure plans are proven ways of alienating young people.¹¹⁰ Perceived unfairness in the distribution of public services, moreover, weakens solidarity between generations as well as young people’s trust in institutions. As well as involving young people more seriously in decision-making, mechanisms to ensure that budget decisions account for the impacts of policies on young people and future generations are key to giving them a sense that their concerns are being respected and addressed by their elders.

4. Mainstream a child-rights approach into new social contract framings and policy.

For vulnerable groups, and children in particular, ensuring that both negotiations and the contents of resulting social contracts are underpinned by the protection and promotion of human rights is paramount. It can be argued that social contracts go beyond questions of rights, giving greater priority to the content and moral basis of duty, and to how agreements that frame the norms and rules by which we live together are crafted. Rights tend to stipulate what is expected of different parties, whereas social contracts enable and require deepened discussions on the mechanisms through which agreements will be forged, secured and sustained. These bargaining mechanisms and processes need to expand and become more inclusive of children and youth if social contracts are to prove fit for the twenty-first century and beyond, and a key starting point for this is ensuring that decision-makers and policy-makers at all levels have a clear understanding and appreciation of children’s rights.

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