More Than Growth:

How Welfare Institutions Shape the Outcomes of Development

in China, India, and Vietnam

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Introduction

In global development discourse, economic growth is often treated as the ultimate benchmark of success. Rising GDP figures are celebrated by governments and international institutions alike, offered as evidence of national progress. Yet across much of the Global South, this growth has failed to deliver inclusive prosperity. Inequality deepens, public services remain fragile, and millions continue to live in poverty—despite decades of economic expansion. As World Bank President David Malpass (2021) has acknowledged, the post-pandemic landscape exposes growing institutional fragmentation, policy fatigue, and the widening gap between economic gains and social outcomes. This paradox raises a deeper question: if a country grows, but its people do not thrive equally, can it truly be called "developed"?

This essay addresses that question through a specific lens: welfare institutions—including education, healthcare, and social protection. While often positioned as secondary or reactive policies, recent scholarship challenges this view. As Thandika Mkandawire (2004) argues, social policy is not merely a corrective response to market failures, but a constitutive element of the development process itself. Welfare institutions are not residual—they are productive and transformative, shaping human capabilities, state legitimacy, and the inclusiveness of economic growth. The United Nations' (1986) *Declaration on the Right to Development* further reinforces this normative shift, asserting that all peoples are entitled to participate in—and benefit from—economic and social progress.

Building on this perspective, this paper argues that welfare systems are not mere afterthoughts or compensatory tools following development, but strategic instruments embedded in how development is structured and governed. In this view, prosperity and poverty are not solely outcomes of growth models, but also of how states institutionalize distribution, inclusion, and protection. Developmental outcomes, in other words, reflect not only how a country grows, but how it governs who gets to benefit from that growth. As Mottley and Shah (2023) contend, reforming global development finance must include a reimagining of welfare as a core pillar—not a marginal cost.

To explore this, the paper examines three case studies—China, India, and Vietnam—which have all experienced significant economic growth since the late twentieth century, yet diverge sharply in how they distribute that growth. Drawing on developmental state theory (Evans, 1995), post-war structuralist approaches (Rapley, 2007c), and institutional critiques of extractive regimes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), the paper compares how each country's welfare architecture reflects—and reinforces—its underlying development model.

The paper begins by reviewing theoretical approaches linking welfare and development. It then presents three country case studies, each analyzing how welfare institutions are designed, governed, and embedded in development strategies. A comparative discussion follows, highlighting the role of institutional design in shaping "inclusive growth" (Georgieva, 2023; Mottley & Shah, 2023). The conclusion argues that welfare systems are foundational—not auxiliary—to sustainable and equitable development trajectories.

Literature Review

Over the past decades, development theory has evolved from linear modernization models to more nuanced, institutionally grounded approaches. Early modernization accounts emphasized industrialization and top-down planning (Rapley, 2007a), but were challenged by dependency theory and critiques of structural adjustment, which exposed how global institutions constrained domestic development (Woods, 2006b). Malpass (2021), then World

Bank President, echoed this by acknowledging how global fragmentation and inequality hinder inclusive development. These insights reflect a growing consensus that development is not merely economic sequencing, but a product of institutional and global power dynamics.

A key turn in the literature concerns welfare institutions. Rather than residual, they are now seen as foundational to development. Mkandawire (2004) and Sen (1999) argue that access to healthcare, education, and redistribution drives long-term growth. The UN's (1986) *Declaration on the Right to Development* further institutionalizes this shift. Powell (2024) warns that global financial volatility undermines welfare expansion, especially in lower-income contexts.

Institutional theory offers frameworks to assess these dynamics. Evans (1995) introduced the "developmental state" model, where capable bureaucracies promote growth and equity. Zhu (2020) and Nguyen (2019) illustrate how East Asian states combined welfare with strategic planning, while Migdal (1988) and Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) highlight how fragmented or extractive institutions inhibit such coordination. Woods (2006c) and Mottley & Shah (2023) criticize IFIs for perpetuating narrow targeting and fiscal constraints, calling for deeper reform of global development finance.

These tensions play out empirically. In China, official policy documents (State Council, 2024, 2025a, 2025b) emphasize welfare as a tool for legitimacy and long-term growth. Vietnam's 2021–2025 plan similarly positions welfare within its development model (Government of Vietnam, 2021). In contrast, India's fragmented system reflects electoral pressures and limited institutional coherence (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Together, this literature suggests that welfare provision is central—not peripheral—to development, shaped by domestic capacity and global institutional structures.

Theoretical Insights

This paper is grounded in a comparative institutionalist approach, aligned most closely with the developmental state tradition articulated by Peter Evans (1995). Evans's model of embedded autonomy provides a useful lens for analyzing how states coordinate welfare provision within broader strategies of economic transformation. It also helps differentiate countries with strong bureaucratic structures—such as China and Vietnam—from those like India, where fragmented authority leads to inconsistent welfare delivery (Migdal, 1988; Rapley, 2007c).

At the same time, this paper draws inspiration from Thandika Mkandawire (2004) and Amartya Sen (1999), whose work challenges the "growth-first, redistribute later" orthodoxy. Both emphasize that welfare systems are not compensatory mechanisms but integral components of development itself—essential for expanding human capabilities, legitimizing governance, and sustaining inclusive growth.

While the developmental state model provides the backbone for analyzing China and Vietnam, the Indian case complicates this framework. India's democratic pluralism and fiscal decentralization introduce constraints on coherent welfare expansion—reflecting elements of Thelen's (2004) institutional path dependency and the limitations posed by external conditionalities (Woods, 2006b/c).

Ultimately, this paper seeks to advance a theoretical synthesis: that national development is shaped not only by growth strategy but by the institutional architecture through which growth is distributed. Welfare institutions are thus both reflections of political choices and instruments of structural transformation.

China

China's unprecedented economic transformation over the past four decades is widely regarded as a defining case of state-led development. Since the early 1980s, the country has lifted over 800 million people out of poverty (World Bank, 2022), an achievement that is often credited to its top-down, investment-driven growth model. However, this narrative obscures the complex relationship between welfare institutions and development outcomes. This section argues that China’s social protection system—though relatively limited in fiscal scope—has been strategically deployed to reinforce regime legitimacy, manage social tensions, and support targeted development aims. In doing so, it reflects the logic of a “developmental state” as articulated by Evans (1995), where welfare operates less as a universal right and more as a political instrument.

The state’s top-down coordination allowed for bold reforms, including the establishment of the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NRCMS), the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (dibao), and later, the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) campaign (Zhu, 2020). The TPA campaign, launched in 2013, aimed to eliminate absolute poverty by 2020 through individualized policy plans, cadre responsibility systems, and digital poverty registries (Zhu, 2020). Official documents from the State Council emphasize this trajectory: the 2024 Rural Vitalization Plan reiterates that poverty alleviation must transition into sustainable development (State Council of China, 2024), while income redistribution reforms and enhanced basic service provision are central themes in the 2025 policy agenda (State Council of China, 2025a, 2025b).

Strategically, China’s welfare approach has evolved from fragmented, urban-centered benefits tied to the danwei (work unit) system toward a more inclusive—though still selective—framework. Key programs include the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (dibao) (Zhu, 2020), the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme, and Urban Resident Basic Medical Insurance. While these schemes expanded coverage to hundreds of millions, their benefits remain modest and unevenly distributed (Nguyen, 2019). For instance, by 2012, the dibao program had become the world’s largest conditional cash transfer, covering over 70 million recipients. However, eligibility criteria varied significantly across provinces, and enforcement often relied on subjective local discretion (Rapley, 2007c).

Despite notable gains in poverty alleviation, China's overall spending on social protection remains low by international standards. According to the World Bank (2023), China allocates roughly 6–7% of its GDP to social protection programs (excluding health), compared to an average of 11% in other upper-middle-income countries. In 2022, general government final consumption expenditure stood at just 14.7% of GDP, reflecting the state's continued emphasis on infrastructure and industrial investment over redistributive spending (World Bank, 2023). As Milanovic (2023) argues, this pattern risks producing "growth without equity," especially in a rapidly aging society.

China's relatively limited welfare expenditure also reflects international structural constraints, even if the country maintains a high degree of autonomy from global financial institutions. Unlike India or many African states, China has not relied heavily on IMF structural adjustment programs or conditional World Bank loans. This allows the CCP to shape welfare policy according to domestic priorities rather than donor prescriptions (Woods, 2006a; Haynes & Williams, 2021). However, its fiscal conservatism—rooted in fears of entitlement dependency and long-term budgetary burdens—echoes the broader neoliberal caution embedded in global economic norms (Mkandawire, 2004; Moyo, 2009).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of China's targeted welfare strategy has drawn both praise and criticism. On the one hand, programs like TPA and Dibao have significantly reduced absolute poverty, especially in remote and ethnic minority regions. On the other hand, the emphasis on narrow targeting over universal provision has left many "newly vulnerable" populations—such as informal workers, migrant laborers, and the urban poor—without adequate protection, especially during economic shocks like COVID-19 (Economy, 2024). Moreover, China's rapidly aging population poses a looming challenge, with individuals over 60 projected to account for 28% of the population by 2040 (World Bank, 2023). Pension systems are already under strain, and rural elderly face particular vulnerability due to weaker local support networks.

One often overlooked component of China's social protection landscape is the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Though heavily regulated, several NGOs have played pivotal roles in poverty alleviation and welfare delivery. The China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), for example, works in partnership with local governments to implement targeted programs and mobilize community resources. As noted in a 2021 World Bank blog, NGOs in China can enhance development outcomes by filling administrative gaps, improving program design, and expanding coverage to hard-to-reach populations (World Bank, 2021). However, the regulatory environment remains restrictive, and NGO autonomy is limited compared to other developing democracies.

Institutionally, China reflects many of the strengths and contradictions of a developmental state. Its bureaucratic capacity, long-term planning horizon, and centralized coordination have enabled rapid welfare scaling. Yet, unlike the more inclusive institutional frameworks envisioned by Sen (1999) or Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), China's welfare system is technocratic and deeply politicized, with social rights contingent upon performance metrics and party alignment. Welfare is used not merely to distribute resources, but to discipline populations, engineer loyalty, and mitigate unrest—an arrangement that secures short-term legitimacy but raises long-term questions about inclusivity and resilience.

In sum, China's welfare regime is neither minimalist nor egalitarian—it is strategic, selective, and state-centric. While it has delivered remarkable results in poverty alleviation, its sustainability depends on whether the state can expand its vision of social protection beyond control and toward a more universalistic social contract. In the face of demographic shifts, rising inequality, and global economic volatility, the future of China's developmental model may rest not just on how much it grows, but on how it chooses to share that growth.

India

India's welfare architecture reflects the country's long-standing tension between economic ambition and deep-rooted inequality. Despite periods of rapid GDP growth since liberalization in 1991, India continues to struggle with persistent poverty, especially in rural and marginalized regions (Moyo, 2009; World Bank, 2023). At the heart of this developmental paradox lies a fragmented but evolving welfare state, one that is deeply shaped by democratic pressures, fiscal constraints, and the legacy of global structural reforms (Haynes & Williams, 2021; Mkandawire, 2004). This section argues that India's welfare model—characterized by programmatic targeting, decentralized delivery, and NGO supplementation—reflects both the opportunities and limitations of pursuing poverty alleviation in a democratic developmental context. Although the Indian state has expanded its social protection reach, its implementation has often been uneven, politically driven, and constrained by both domestic governance challenges and international economic orthodoxy (Woods, 2006b).

The political dimension of India's welfare system is closely tied to its electoral logic and institutional complexity. As Haynes and Williams (2021) highlight, developing states often experience fragmented and strategic governance, where state capacity is selectively exercised to maintain legitimacy rather than ensure universal outcomes. India's multiparty democracy and decentralized structure create overlapping and sometimes contradictory welfare schemes, many of which prioritize visibility over long-term integration. This fragmentation undermines implementation consistency, mirroring Mkandawire's (2004) observation that in many developing contexts, social policies serve as ad hoc tools of political maneuvering rather than cohesive development planning. For instance, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), while legally transformative, is frequently underfunded and administratively inconsistent across states, reflecting the political trade-offs embedded in welfare delivery (Mkandawire, 2004). As Drèze and Khera (2017) argue, the

MGNREGA program often falls short of its promise, with millions of households unable to access their full entitlements due to administrative bottlenecks and insufficient budgetary allocation.

India's welfare trajectory also shows a shift toward technocratic targeting through biometric infrastructure. The Aadhaar-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system is promoted as a tool to eliminate leakages and ensure subsidies reach intended recipients. However, this mirrors the kind of "technical persuasion" that Woods (2006c) describes as often masking deeper political exclusions, especially when access to state benefits is conditioned on documentation or digital access. The Public Distribution System (PDS), despite reforms, still faces challenges such as exclusion errors and corruption (Moyo, 2009), emphasizing that technological fixes alone cannot overcome governance deficits. These dynamics echo Mkandawire's (2004) critique of development states that adopt technocratic solutions to circumvent systemic reform, often reinforcing rather than resolving inequality.

India's social policy is further shaped by global economic structures. Following structural reforms in the early 1990s—guided in part by IMF recommendations—India shifted toward liberalization, reduced public investment, and a more market-oriented development model (Haynes & Williams, 2021; Moyo, 2009). Even after regaining fiscal autonomy, fears of inflation, credit downgrades, and global investor sentiment have curtailed large-scale social spending (Woods, 2006b). According to World Bank Open Data (2023), India's general government final consumption expenditure remained around 10.4% of GDP in 2022, which is markedly lower than the average for comparable economies. This limited fiscal scope has contributed to a preference for narrowly targeted programs over universal entitlements, a trend consistent with what Milanovic (2023) critiques as "growth without equality" in much of the Global South.

In this context of constrained state provisioning, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as indispensable welfare actors. Woods (2006b) notes that international financial pressures often create vacuums filled by non-state entities, particularly in the Global South. In India, organizations like Pratham and SEWA have filled critical gaps in education, gender-based support, and informal worker protection. Pratham's nationally scaled programs in literacy and learning outcomes—particularly its Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)—demonstrate how civil society can produce both direct impact and robust policy feedback. Similarly, SEWA has advanced bottom-up models of social protection, offering micro-insurance and credit for women excluded from formal welfare channels (Mkandawire, 2004). These NGOs exemplify what Haynes and Williams (2021) term "endogenous development" driven by embedded actors operating beyond the state apparatus, but they also highlight a dependence on civic initiative where state capacity falters.

Ultimately, India's welfare experience underscores the difficulty of realizing equitable development in democratic and globally constrained settings. Despite modest success in reducing poverty, institutional fragmentation, fiscal conservatism, and neoliberal norms continue to constrain the reach and depth of social protection. NGOs have innovated in response to state gaps, but their efforts cannot substitute for systemic reform. As Mkandawire (2004) and Woods (2006a) both argue, development outcomes are ultimately shaped by institutional commitments, not merely GDP growth. India's challenge, then, is not only to expand its welfare state but to reorient its development paradigm—so that welfare becomes a foundation for equitable citizenship rather than a temporary fix for structural exclusion.

Vietnam

Vietnam's developmental trajectory has been deeply shaped by its post-reform statecraft. Since the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986, the country has embraced market liberalization while retaining strong party control, producing impressive economic growth and poverty reduction. According to the World Bank (2023), Vietnam's poverty rate fell from over 70% in the 1990s to under 5% in 2020, making it a standout case among low-income socialist countries.

The government's *Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2021–2025* positions welfare as essential to inclusive growth and national cohesion (Government of Vietnam, 2021). The plan emphasizes social protection for vulnerable populations, education reforms, and universal health coverage while maintaining macroeconomic stability and export competitiveness. According to World Bank Open Data (2023), public health spending hovered around 4.5% of GDP between 2015–2021, notably higher than many structural adjustment-affected peers. Nonetheless, total government final consumption expenditure remains modest, constraining universalism. This section argues that Vietnam's welfare architecture demonstrates the strategic role of the developmental state in engineering inclusive outcomes under constrained international and institutional conditions. However, this model remains vulnerable to regional disparities, fiscal limitations, and governance inconsistency (Mkandawire, 2004).

Vietnam's welfare system is deeply embedded in the legacy of socialist planning, where the state remains the principal provider of essential services such as education, health, and poverty relief (Haynes & Williams, 2021). Unlike the abrupt retreat of the state in many other post-socialist contexts, Vietnam pursued a gradual recalibration of its public sector role, maintaining a high level of public investment in social infrastructure. Programs such as the National Target Program on Poverty Reduction (NTPPR) and its successor, the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTPSPR), reflect this continuity. These initiatives focus on rural development, infrastructure expansion, and human capital investment, especially in ethnic minority and mountainous regions. While the state outlines policy frameworks, implementation is often delegated to provincial and commune-level authorities, introducing disparities in capacity and oversight (Mkandawire, 2004). The decentralized model allows for contextual adaptation but often results in uneven delivery outcomes. For instance, V-Dem data indicates that while access to basic education and health has improved nationwide, the quality and equity of services still vary significantly across regions (V-Dem, 2023).

Vietnam's relative success in poverty alleviation also stems from its cautious engagement with international financial institutions. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Vietnam accepted assistance from the IMF and World Bank but resisted the full neoliberal policy package that characterized structural adjustment elsewhere (Woods, 2006a). This enabled the Vietnamese state to retain strategic control over social spending and public investments while selectively liberalizing trade and investment. As Moyo (2009) notes, countries that retained a degree of policy sovereignty fared better in aligning development strategies with social needs. In Vietnam's case, this meant continuing to fund public services even amid donor pressure for fiscal restraint. According to World Bank Open Data (2023), Vietnam maintained public health expenditure around 4.5% of GDP between 2015 and 2021, significantly higher than many low-income countries influenced by structural adjustment constraints.

Still, this cautious autonomy did not eliminate external constraints. As Haynes and Williams (2021) emphasize, aid-dependent regimes often internalize donor preferences over time. Vietnam's increasing integration into global markets has led to mounting concerns over inequality, particularly as foreign direct investment clusters in urban centers, leaving rural and ethnic minority regions behind. Despite impressive macro-level gains, social protection coverage remains fragmented for informal workers, who constitute the majority of the labor force and remain largely excluded from formal welfare structures (World Bank, 2023). The state's attempt to universalize health insurance through compulsory enrollment has improved access, but out-of-pocket spending remains high—at over 40% of total health expenditure in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). These challenges point to the limits of state-led welfare provision in the absence of comprehensive fiscal reform and inclusive growth planning.

In this context, NGOs and mass organizations play an increasingly important complementary role. While the Vietnamese government maintains tight control over civil society, it has permitted selected NGOs and international organizations to contribute to welfare provision, particularly in health, education, and ethnic minority development. Organizations like the Vietnam Women's Union and Vietnam Red Cross operate with semi-official status, bridging the gap between the state and underserved communities. Additionally, international NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam have supported local capacity-building and poverty monitoring, particularly in remote regions (Woods, 2006b). However, as Mkandawire (2004) warns, NGO-led provision in developmental states often depends on political approval and lacks long-term institutional anchoring. In Vietnam, while such actors fill vital service gaps, their autonomy and scalability remain constrained by political sensitivities and bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Overall, Vietnam illustrates a model of welfare that is both state-centric and selectively pluralist. The state's continued leadership in policy direction, coupled with adaptive openness to non-state and international actors, has enabled broad-based poverty reduction. Yet, institutional fragmentation, regional inequality, and fiscal conservatism still limit the system's universality and resilience. In line with Mkandawire's (2004) theory of developmental welfare states, Vietnam represents a case where endogenous political will and international negotiation have enabled moderate success in translating growth into inclusive outcomes. However, sustaining and deepening these outcomes will depend on whether Vietnam can reform its welfare delivery mechanisms to overcome entrenched inequality—not only between income groups but across ethnic and geographic divides.

Conclusion

The comparative examination of China, India, and Vietnam reveals that welfare institutions are not peripheral to development but rather fundamental in shaping distributional outcomes. While all three countries have achieved periods of impressive economic growth, their trajectories toward prosperity and poverty alleviation have diverged based on the structure, capacity, and inclusiveness of their welfare regimes. China's technocratic centralism has enabled the rapid, state-driven expansion of social protection, reflected in strategic documents emphasizing rural revitalization and income redistribution (State Council of China, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). Yet its top-down model often limits local adaptability and transparency. India's democratic pluralism offers space for bottom-up welfare innovation but is hindered by fiscal fragmentation, clientelism, and uneven implementation, as noted in government performance assessments and welfare expenditure data (World Bank, 2023). Vietnam, operating within a post-socialist framework, has maintained a balance between central direction and selective pluralism, allowing for effective yet constrained welfare delivery (Government of Vietnam, 2021).

These institutional differences reflect broader theoretical tensions in development studies. The experience of Vietnam and, to some extent, China underscores the relevance of developmental state theory (Evans, 1995), where an autonomous but embedded state apparatus plays a proactive role in mediating growth and welfare. Meanwhile, post-war structuralist insights (Rapley, 2007c) are evident in all three cases, particularly in the use of state-led poverty programs and public investment as tools for social transformation. However, persistent inequality, marginalization of informal workers, and regional disparities across all cases also support the institutional critique of extractive regimes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), which cautions that development without inclusive institutions risks reinforcing structural exclusions, even amidst rising GDP. These concerns echo broader global calls for more equitable development models, as highlighted in the UN's *Declaration on the Right to Development*

(1986) and recent critiques of financial fragmentation by international figures such as Powell (2024) and Georgieva (2023).

Ultimately, this essay has shown that development is more than a function of growth metrics or liberalization policies. It is deeply shaped by the quality and logic of welfare institutions—how they are designed, who they include or exclude, and how they adapt to political and fiscal pressures. The comparative lens highlights not only the strategic role of the state, but also the importance of institutional flexibility, international context, and grassroots actors such as NGOs in shaping meaningful outcomes (World Bank, 2021; Mottley & Shah, 2023). As global development discourse continues to emphasize "inclusive growth" (Georgieva, 2023; Mottley & Shah, 2023), these three cases demonstrate that achieving prosperity requires more than expanding markets—it requires states and societies to build welfare infrastructures that genuinely redistribute the gains of development. Growth may ignite development, but welfare sustains it.

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