From Bismarck to Beveridge: Social security for all

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120 years ago, Germany became the first nation in the world to adopt an old-age social insurance programme, designed by Otto von Bismarck. The German Chancellor was motivated to introduce social insurance in Germany both to promote the well-being of workers in order to keep the German economy operating at maximum efficiency, and to stave off calls for more radical socialist alternatives.

Coupled with the workers' compensation programme established in 1884 and the "sickness" insurance enacted the year before, this gave the Germans a comprehensive system of income security based on social insurance principles.

Despite his conservative credentials, Bismarck would be called a 'socialist' for introducing these programmes, as would President Roosevelt 70 years later. In 1935 the US President signed into law the Social Security Act, incorporating a new term that combines "economic security" with "social insurance".

Following the First World War, social insurance schemes developed rapidly in several regions, and social protection was included on the agendas of the newly-established international organizations, including the ILO and the International Conference of National Unions of Mutual Benefit Societies and Sickness Insurance Funds which was launched in Brussels in October 1927 and later became the International Social Security Association (ISSA).

In 1941, in the Atlantic Charter, President Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill committed to improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security for all. At the height of the Second World War, in 1942, the UK government published the Beveridge Plan, named after its main author, Lord Beveridge, which led to the setting up of the first unified social security system. In France, Pierre Laroque led government efforts to extend social protection to the entire population, and a national social security system was set up in 1946.

In 1944, with the tide of war turning, the ILO's historic Declaration of Philadelphia called for the extension of social security measures, and for the promotion, on an international or regional basis, of systematic and direct cooperation among social security institutions, the regular interchange of information and the study of common problems relating to the administration of social security.

One year later, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose Article 22 recognized that "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security". In 1952, the ILO adopted the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (No. 102), and in 2001 it launched a Global Campaign on Social Security and Coverage for all.