

Assessing Sub-Saharan Africa's Structural Adjustment Programmes: the Need for More Qualitative Measures

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ABSTRACT

The view that Africa's structural adjustment programmes have largely failed for not decreasing income inequalities has become commonplace. This thesis is correct, however, only if these programmes sought greater income equality and defined equality as their critics do. Basing its argument on the origin of the structural adjustment programmes, this article suggests that this assumption is incorrect, and suggests criteria by which to assess these programmes' success or failure on their own terms. It is argued, however, that this latter exercise is critically impeded by our reliance on quantitative indicators which are rarely sufficiently sensitive to capture the essence of such success or failure. Alternate indicators and how they may be collected are suggested.

From their inception, sub-Saharan Africa's structural adjustment programmes have been criticised, mainly on the grounds that they more distort their constituents' development than advance it. Such distortions set in, it is suggested, because such economic development as these programmes achieve is not accompanied by an attendant degree of social progress, defined usually in terms of more egalitarian income distribution (Bourguignon, de Melo & Suwa, 1991; Sahn, 1994; Watkins, 1995). Armed with this thesis, analysts then assemble much convincing data to prove their point, such as the financial enrichment of the business, political and administrative elite at the expense of the majority, an ever-increasing proportion of who are relegated to living in poverty.

This paper assesses the thesis that sub-Saharan Africa's structural adjustment programmes were introduced, among other reasons, in the name of egalitarianism. Its main argument is that to prove that these programmes fail to distribute income progressively, it is necessary first to show that they sought greater income equality and, second, that they define equality as their critics do.

Background

For most of its years of independence, and especially since the early 1980s, sub-Saharan Africa has registered the smallest gains on most human development indexes as compared to other geopolitical regions (Table 1). Also, it is the only geopolitical region where per capita food production has been declining regularly

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(IFAD, 1993) (1). It is partly in response to this situation that local governments – often at the instigation of international agencies – have been induced to reexamine their development policies, and to pursue new strategies to revitalise their economies.

Table 1 UNDP Human Development Index, by Region: 1960 -1992

Region	Year				Absolute Increase 1960-1992
	1960	1970	1980	1992	
All Developing Countries	0.260	0.347	0.428	0.541	0.281
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.200	0.255	0.306	0.357	0.156
South Asia	0.202	0.248	0.290	0.376	0.174
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.504	0.586	0.654	0.735	0.231
South-East Asia and Oceania	0.284	0.373	0.484	0.653	0.329
Middle East and North Africa	0.277	0.363	0.480	0.631	0.354
East Asia	0.255	0.379	0.484	0.653	0.397

Source: UNDP: 1994:95

Although there are many, often conflicting, explanations of the origins and nature of Africa's developmental difficulties – ranging from structuralist schools of thought to neoclassical monetarist analyses (Mkandawire, 1989) – there is virtual consensus on how these difficulties should be tackled. Mainly, these ideas revolve around modernisation theory. This theory contends that the traditional, largely authoritarian systems of stratification of most African societies impede the emergence of the dominant Western ideal of man (rational, motivated by self-interest, competitive, and self-managing) which, in turn, thwarts the development of the entrepreneurial, capitalist class-system which this theory deems is the cornerstone to achieving progressive change (Midgley, 1995).

It is in interpreting the primary objectives of this “modernisation” or “progressive” change, however, that cardinal disagreements reemerge, and consequently give rise to different prescriptions for action. In the light of the fact that all sub-Saharan African structural adjustment programmes are heavily influenced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, on whose assistance local governments have become dependent, most of the disagreements are argued along either the New Right or the Liberal world-views which dominate these organisations' behaviour.

The Perspective of the New Right

For the New Right, the central objective of structural adjustment is to unleash the free market, which according to its social and economic analysts *ipso facto* engenders productivity. This productivity, in turn, generates capital and savings that are then re-invested to further economic growth. New Right policies aim, therefore, to stimulate production by getting the price of commodities "right," mainly by removing "distortions" in product and factor markets. This generally includes establishment of competitive exchange rates, privatisation of economic activities, tax reductions, curtailment of public spending on "unproductive" consumption, elimination of state subsidies to services and goods, and abolition of minimum wage legislation.

The critical property of these policies from the perspective of this paper, is that progressive income distribution features in none of them. Indeed, given the New Right's faith in *inequality*, fundamental to the free market's sheer existence, egalitarianism as a matter of policy negates the very objective of structural adjustment. Of course, this does not mean that advocates of the New Right reject more progressive income distribution as a possible outcome of the free market. As countries get wealthier, everyone should benefit, but the way this wealth is distributed, according to neoclassical theory, is of little importance. Criticism of the structural adjustment programmes' failure to achieve greater income equality, at least from this perspective, is therefore misdirected.

The Liberal Perspective

If we cannot criticise the structural adjustment programmes for failing to promote egalitarianism on the terms of the New Right, then it is to the Liberal interpretation of these programmes' objectives that we must turn. This is no easy task, however, for much Liberal thought is hard to pinpoint. In part, this is because Liberalism covers an extremely wide range of sociopolitical thought, and so its ideas are often muddled. Also, Liberals are guided by few, if any, predetermined constructs. What concerns them is the functional efficiency of societies as they are rather than realising some abstract good, and so their analyses and subsequent prescriptions for action are more a matter of pragmatism than of principle.

Liberals share the New Right's faith in the free market, but their faith is equivocal. "*The world*," as Keynes (in George & Wilding, 1994:69) pronounced, "*...is not so governed from above that private and social interest always coincide*," or as Patten (1983:105) remarked: "Adam Smith's '*invisible hand*' can get up to

a great deal of mischief on its own.” Chief among these mischiefs is the free market’s potentially destructive implications for social order and stability, which in Liberal analysis is the basis of all social life. In the words of Harold Macmillan, “...if capitalism had been conducted all along as if the theory of private enterprise were a matter of principle we should have had civil war long ago” (Gilmour, 1978:168).

The Liberal response to civil disorder is to use society’s organs of governance to create among its members a sense of ‘community,’ which Liberalism, that developed together with the nation-state, generally interprets as “One Nation.” “Society,” writes Walker (1987:45), “is held together only by the moral bond of mutual obligations.” Similarly, but from a more institutional position, Gilmour (1983:224) argues that “...a free state will not survive unless its people feel loyalty to it.” Liberals are deeply concerned with poverty and inequality that threaten conflict, and consequently with measures to reduce these situations. “(People) will not feel loyalty (to the state),” to requote Gilmour (1983:225), “unless they gain from (it) protection and other benefits.” In short, the answer to reconciling society’s need for social stability with the social consequences of capitalism, that is, class divisions, rests with social policy and so with the social services (Marshall, 1963).

Conventional thinking holds that the social services promote equality. As Le Grand (1982:3) notes, it is “...wholly or partially in the name of equality (that) most governments subsidise in some way the provision of medical care, education and housing.” Yet this political rhetoric aside, the question must be asked: precisely what kind of equality are Liberals concerned with, which is to ask what objectives do they demand of the social services? The answer, like much Liberal thinking, is never clear, but generally can be subsumed under three broad headings:

- (a) social integration,
- (b) social security, and
- (c) equal opportunities.

(a) Social Integration

Primary among the Liberal objectives for the social services is enhancing people’s commitment to their system of governance and inculcating them with a sense of equal worth in order to incorporate them in a common culture. Expressed originally by Adam Smith, who saw economic development as the vehicle by which every individual could mix freely with others without feeling ashamed to appear in public, this idea has its clearest pronouncement in the works of T H Marshall. The extension of the social services, he wrote:

"...(can) have a profound effect on the qualitative aspects of social differentiation.... (Their aim) is not primarily a means of equalising income...What matters is that there is a general enrichment of the concrete substance of civilised life...(that is,) equality of status (which) is more important than equality of income" (1963:103,107).

The practical expression of this "equality of status" is the Liberals' adoption of universal service allocation in preference to selectivity, although selectivity clearly is more effective in redressing poverty and income inequalities by omitting upper income groups from benefits. Selective service provision, however, is socially divisive. This is because it differentiates sharply between those who receive benefits and those who finance them. In contrast, universal services, which operate by "*equality of nondifferentiation*" (O'Higgins, 1987:13), treat all recipients alike, and so supposedly are more effective at reducing social distances. In Liberal eyes, this equality of entitlement and use (which clashes inherently with the principle of distribution) is a price worth paying to secure the greater goal of social integration.

(b) Social Security

The second Liberal objective for the social services is, "*...(to make) accessible to all, irrespective of their income, occupation or social position, the conditions of civilisation which, in the absence of such measures, can be enjoyed only by the rich*" (Tawney, 1964:122), or as Walker (1987:45) phrased it, "*...(society has) the obligation to guarantee to even the humblest the means to live and enjoy a decent life.*" This objective follows largely from the first because to feel part of their social heritage, and to live by its prevailing standards, people require a sense of security against unavoidable ill-fortunes, such as old age or disease, against disruptive market changes, such as unemployment, and against discrimination based on their ethnic origins, religion and lifestyles.

Much disagreement abounds about what is meant by the "civilised" or "decent" life that the social services are meant to ensure, and like many social situations, these ideas are more easily identified when lacking. It is partly for this reason, and partly because of their general view that it is the role of the social services only to cushion free market exchanges, not ameliorate them, that most Liberals equate social security with minimum standards that focus on manifest wants, or the absence of ill-fares rather than the promotion of well-fares. To paraphrase Bradshaw & Deacon (1986:84), want, squalor, disease, ignorance and idleness were Beveridge's evil giants; welfare was not. This becomes even more apparent in the Liberals' third objective for the social services, namely the equalisation of opportunities.

(c) *Equal Opportunities*

The final objective for the social services is the promotion of equality of opportunities by which Liberals mean that everyone should have an equal opportunity to compete. To this end young and old require some minimum standards of health, education and shelter, and sufficient peace of mind to make good their individual potential. In the words of Winston Churchill:

"We want to draw a line below which we will not allow persons to live and labour (because then they cannot live and labour efficiently), yet above which they may compete with all the strength of their manhood. We want to have free competition upwards; we decline to allow free competition to run downwards" (George & Wilding, 1985:63-64).

In short, it is up to what Lowe (1993) aptly calls "*the opportunity state*" to enable people to be unequal if they so wish after being given similar opportunities to reach the same starting line.

In summary, Liberals hold that the state should promote institutions that foster social stability and effective market participation, but must refrain from income redistribution that not only negates individual freedom but sustains expectations that cannot be satisfied. "*Equality*," as Honore de Balzac observed, "*...may perhaps be a right, but no power on earth can ever turn it into a fact*" (Winokur, 1987:91), and so pursuing it as a matter of policy will inevitably undermine order. Also, according to one of Liberalism's most important proponents, John Galbraith, the achievement of economic growth much reduces people's concern with income inequality, and so makes its amelioration redundant (Reisman, 1980). This because economic growth increases social mobility and so diminishes the importance of class. Also, it encourages more equitable consumption, and so lessens interest in the position of the rich and the inequalities they represent. Finally, economic growth promotes greater social pluralism by introducing additional forms of social prestige to wealth, such as being in the public limelight. Consequently, and for all these reasons, gauging the structural adjustment programmes by measures of distributional equality is again inappropriate.

If not Income Distribution, then what?

If neither New Right nor Liberal standards can be used to assess the structural adjustment programmes' success or failure in terms of distributional equality, then what measures are appropriate? For the New Right, the answer is simple: we must use purely economic indexes to assess the programmes, such as rates of invest-

ment, savings and GNP. As one or more of these measures go up so the programmes succeed, and as they go down they fail.

From the Liberal perspective, on the other hand, the answer is more complex. This is because few of our current socioeconomic indicators gauge successfully the Liberal notion of social equality, and because of structural limitations in Liberal thought to achieving genuine social service universality.

(a) Social Equality

As demonstrated above, the Liberal notion of equality is concerned with the nature of social membership in political collectives, and especially with integrating the poor into the wider community. This idea goes beyond counting money, calories, years of education or the number of rooms per household. Such quantitative measures and statistics have their merit, but miss the point. What is required are more qualitative data that reflect people's *sense* of being *part* of their society. We can compose this data, I would suggest, of using three interrelated measures:

- (1) a measure of communal standard of living;
- (2) a measure of security that this standard of living will be maintained in the future; and
- (3) a measure of people's expectations about improving this standard of living.

Social Belongingness = communal standard of living + sense of security in maintaining this standard of living + expectations about improving one's standard of living.

Communal standard of living pertains to the prevailing physical and social living conditions of a particular people with reference to sufficiency rather than to satiety. It sets the ground, therefore, for the minimal requirements of feeling a sense of belonging to a given society, and accounts for the fact that all resources above a minimum amount have diminishing returns (2). The pioneering work in this field was conducted by Peter Townsend (1979) who tried to assess the extent to which the poor can live up to the mundane standards of their society (such as in England, to afford to prepare an English breakfast) and to partake in what are considered normal activities (such as being able to afford to hold a wake after the death of a relative). More recently, the UNDP (1993, 1994) has taken a similar path. It showed that different people in the same country live in different worlds. Generally, however, there are still very little data of this nature, other than the distinction between rural and urban populations and, to a somewhat lesser extent, between the genders.

The second measure, *security*, refers to people's legitimate expectation that they will maintain their present-day standard of living and opportunities in the future. To date, the idea of security has mainly been interpreted in national terms. Yet for most people, security pertains more to worries about their daily life: Will my family and I have enough to eat? Shall I keep my job? Will my street and neighbourhood be safe from crime? Shall I be discriminated against because of my gender? Will I be prosecuted because of my religion or ethnic origin? (UNDP: 1994).

At their most abstract or final goalpost, one could argue that the structural adjustment programmes cover much of this issue in seeking social and economic stability. Yet apart from making inroads into the most basic human needs, such as food, health and income, the idea of social security in its wider sense is still little referred to in analyses of the overall state of societies. One possible reason for this is that the way different individuals define security much depends on their immediate situation and culture as exemplified by the following quotations gathered by UNDP personnel (UNDP, 1994:23):

- A primary school pupil (Kuwait): *"I feel secure because I am living with my family and I have friends."*
- A woman (Nigeria): *"My security is only in the name of the Lord."*
- A woman (Iran): *"I believe that a girl cannot feel secure until she is married and has someone to depend on."*
- A fourth-grade schoolgirl (Ghana): *"I shall feel secure when I know that I can walk the streets at night without being raped."*
- A secondary school pupil (Mongolia): *"Before, education in this country was totally free, but from this year every student has to pay. Now I do not feel very secure about finishing my studies."*

The difficulties in gauging such diverse attitudes must not blind us to their importance. Also, they reiterate the critical significance of ensuring that data collection is culturally relevant, although this, too, poses considerable difficulties, especially in the African context.

Finally, any measure of social belonging must include people's *expectations about improving their standard of living*. A pertinent method to gauge this variable is suggested by *relative deprivation theory*. This theory suggests that people seek the standard of living of the people they compare themselves to, and that these comparisons are socially upwards, following a largely triangular number series.

Thus if we divide society into ten income groups, beginning from the poorest to the richest, relative deprivation theory suggests that persons in the poorest group want to live like the group immediately above them, the second group wants to live like the group two levels above them, the third group wants to live like the group three levels above them, and so on. Consequently, if we know the standard of living of all ten groups (a relatively simple matter), we have a ready-made measure of each group's expected standard of living.

(b) Social Service Universality

In keeping in line with the free market system, Liberals assume that what is principally required to equalise the use of the social services among the social classes is to remove these services' money barrier and create some degree of geographic equity. In other words, it is assumed that the mere availability of services and their provision free-of-charge at the point of entry or at a subsidised level are sufficient guarantees of their universality. It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that such formal accessibility is a far cry from *de facto* accessibility. For example, in many African countries, children's health lags even where health facilities are present and services are provided free-of-charge. Consequently, many of the indexes which we currently use to assess the social services, such as the number of doctors per given population, are inadequate. This is because proof of accessibility is the *use* of a service, not its mere presence. Also, due to their Western bias and attempt at internationalisation, most of these indexes do not take account of the full range of need-meeting services that people in non-Western societies have available.

Thus all present-day medical statistics are oblivious to traditional medicine. Similarly, the data prepared by the personal social services disregard the plethora of indigenous and religious arrangements that provide similar forms of assistance to their own.

To be more meaningful and relevant, therefore, we must expand our stock of social service indicators. In particular, these indicators must account for the fact that need-meeting is not a one-way endeavour. It places demands both on the people with needs and on the institutions which are meant to satisfy these needs. Both parties must be able to reach out to each other and work together. The difficulty in everyday life, however, is that such capacities are often lacking. This is due to a range of personal, social, organisational and other factors that cumulatively may be called 'supply' and 'demand' accessibility (Table 2). Supply accessibility denotes an institution's capacity, ability and will to provide required resources. Demand accessibility relates to the elements that determine the individual's resource-utilisation patterns (adapted from Aday & Andersen, 1976).

Table 2 *Determinants of Supply and Demand Accessibility*

Supply Accessibility			Demand Accessibility		
Components	Variables	Examples	Components	Variables	Examples
Resources	Volume & Geographic Distribution	Personnel Facilities Equipment	Predisposing	Socio-demographic Beliefs	Age Sex Ethnicity Religion Superstition
Organisation	Entry Structure	Criteria of Eligibility Location Administrative Ritualism Who attends to users? How users are treated? Type & level of help provided.	Enabling	Soft Resources Hard Resources	Knowledge of Resources Market skills Money Time Transport

Supply accessibility is characterised by two elements: resources and organisation. Resources are the capital and labour that are devoted to a particular field (health, welfare, education, housing), and in analysing them we must relate both to 'modern' and to 'traditional' services. Included here are the personnel, structures and materials that are used in service provision, with their volume and distribution. Other than for traditional social services, much of this information is already available, although usually not conveniently located.

The second element of supply accessibility is organisation. This describes what the system does with its resources. The components of organisation are *entry* and *structure*. Entry refers to the processes and conditions that are involved in gaining entrance to a system, and includes factors like the provider's criteria of eligibility, administrative ritualism and physical location. Structure, on the other hand, concerns the characteristics of the system that determine what happens to users after entry. Included are variables like who attends to the users, how they are treated, the time they must wait, and the actual type, level and quality of assistance they receive.

The significance of all these elements to service utilisation need hardly be mentioned. Restrictive entry policies, routine rule application, limited opening hours, staff who are overburdened, or an employee's negative personal attitude towards certain kinds of users all indicate how simply blockages in service provision can occur, and prevent services from being genuinely universal.

The other side of the service provision equation are individual determinants of utilisation, which relate to *demand accessibility*. These can be divided into *predisposing* and *enabling* components. The former consist of variables such as the age, gender and ethnicity of users, and their values and beliefs about appropriate states of well-being. These and other such variables describe the propensity of individuals to use services. For example, in cultures where self-reliance is a dominant value, people often find it more difficult to ask for external assistance than in cultures that put a premium on collectivity. Similarly, a Moslem woman might refrain from seeking Western-type medical assistance if all the medical personnel at her local clinic are male.

In contrast, the second component of demand accessibility, *enabling*, refers to the practical means people have to use the services at their disposal. Among others, these include people's knowledge of what resources are available in their community and how to use them, as well as language skills, physical mobility and time. Again, as with supply accessibility, barriers to any of these elements detracts from universality, or to use the economists' terminology, universality is predicated on equality of cost, that is, that no individual faces higher costs in using a service than another (Le Grand, 1995).

Summary

This paper has argued that to assess meaningfully sub-Saharan Africa's structural adjustment programmes we must use these programmes' own terms of reference. Given that all these terms of reference are grounded in New Right or Liberal theories, we cannot, therefore, use egalitarian income distribution as a measure of their success or failure, but must rely on other criteria instead. For proponents of the New Right this is relatively simple; basic, universally available macroeconomic indicators are sufficient (see, for example, Demery & Squire, 1996). For the supporters of Liberalism, on the other hand, assessing the structural adjustment programmes is more difficult. This is largely because most of the socioeconomic indicators that we currently use are insufficiently sensitive to gauge their notion of social belonging, or because we lack such indicators altogether.

To overcome this *lacuna*, it is necessary to refine the nature of the data we collect and analyse. To this end, two sets of indicators were suggested. One pertains to the

Liberal notion of social equality. This can be assessed by combining measures of a communal standard of living, the sense that this standard of living will be maintained in the future, and people's expectations about improving this standard of living. The second set of indicators suggests how to more sensitively assess the means by which social equality is attempted, and consists of a variety of determinants of demand and supply accessibility that have to be fulfilled to ensure that social services are genuinely universal.

Notes

- (1) It must be borne in mind, of course, that sub-Saharan Africa cannot be treated as a homogeneous whole, where policies are uniformly implemented and outcomes are consistently disappointing. The objectives of the programmes discussed in this article, however, are sufficiently consistent to warrant their uniform discussion under one common heading.
- (2) It is often overlooked that this is even true of life itself, as measured for example by longevity. As Gershwin's drug-pushing Sporting Life in *Porgy and Bess* noted (albeit in the chauvinistic tones of the time): "Methuselah lived nine hundred years/ Methuselah lived nine hundred years/ But who calls that living'/ When no gal will give in/ To no man that's nine hundred years."

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