

Editorial

The first years of independence in Eastern and Southern Africa constituted a period of marked improvement in living standards in much of the region. Social policies focused on redressing past imbalances in the provision of social services, with primary education and health facilities expanding dramatically and social indicators improving in some sectors. However in the 1970s, triggered by national policies as well as external factors, economic conditions declined. In the 1980s and early 1990s, with the intervention of international financial institutions and the adoption of structural adjustment programmes and market-driven development strategies, the state began to withdraw from social and economic arenas.

Economic adjustment has had far-reaching implications for social policy, in that it institutionalised a predominant concern with economic performance and efficiency. The consequence of this is that social policies have tended to be remedial, fragmented and driven by economic imperatives. During the later 1990s, with an emphasis on cutbacks, cost-sharing and withdrawal of the state, a number of countries in the region have been introducing a range of social policy changes. In addition to measures which have included decentralisation of various services, retrenchment of state employees and reductions in social expenditures, most countries have also implemented measures to address the problem of persistent poverty, or deal with the social consequences of adjustment programmes. Many of these programmes rely heavily on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for programme and service delivery and many have been implemented on the advice of and with the support of bilateral and multilateral agencies.

These social policy changes have become a very topical issue in Eastern and Southern Africa, largely as a result of the large-scale economic reforms taking place in the region. However, despite its topicality, social policy is still conceptualised in inappropriate ways. Historically, social policy has largely been treated as the poor cousin of economic policy, as development was conceptualised in purely economic terms. Consequently, social policy has traditionally been marginalised and has tended to be sectoral. The focus on economic development has not by itself brought about qualitative improvements in human welfare. Instead, standards of living for the majority, particularly in the African context, continue to deteriorate. There is, however, growing realisation that social and economic factors reinforce each other and are of mutual concern in promoting genuine development.

This special issue is one outcome of a regional study into the state of social policy practice and research in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Ottawa, Canada. This study into social policy practice and research has been investigating the responsiveness of various countries in the region to the needs of the local populations in

each country. More specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) to gain an improved understanding of the conceptualisation, organisation, scope and practice of social policy in the region;
- (2) to determine the priorities for social policy research based on an analysis of the state and dynamics of social policy practice in the region;
- (3) to promote information exchange and collaboration among the different countries as the basis for setting up a social policy research network in the region; and
- (4) to enhance social policy as a tool complementary to economic policy for the empowerment of local communities as the basis for sustainable human-centred development.

Initially Professor Osei-Hwedie offers an overview of the topic of social policy, which provides the context for country-specific papers. He points out that a number of factors have influenced the development of social policy in Eastern and Southern Africa, which include a combination of ideology, resource availability, politics and culture. He examines the social policy formulation process in the region, pointing out that many governments were caught unprepared by the traumatic experience of structural adjustment. He indicates that there are some critical areas which need immediate attention, such as an urgent necessity to review the process and mechanisms of cost-sharing – and suggests that measures are required that will enable governments, NGOs, the private sector, communities and bilateral and multilateral agencies to work together as partners in the social policy and development arena.

Further contributions examine the state and dynamics of social policy practice and research in the region. Kascke, Gumbo, Dhembha and Kasere provide an insight into the situation in Zimbabwe; Masiye, Tembo, Chisanga and Mwansa look at Zambia; Mchomvu, Ngalula, Nchahaga, Tungaraza and Maghimbi examine Tanzania; Mwansa, Lucas and Osei-Hwedie provide an overview of social policy in Botswana and Manyire and Asingwire select Uganda.

It is hoped that a better understanding of the economic reforms and their social consequences will contribute to a deeper appreciation of the need for informed social policy within the Eastern and Southern Africa region – and that this will assist researchers and policy makers in designing more appropriate and beneficial policies to address poverty and to accommodate the needs of the population generally, and those vulnerable groups most affected.