

The Dynamics of Social Policy Practice in Eastern and Southern Africa

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Introduction

The socioeconomic difficulties experienced across Africa from the early 1970s, and continuing to the present, brought to the fore the need for more comprehensive social policies which are well-planned and judiciously implemented. The first years of Eastern and Southern Africa's independence was a period of marked improvement for the majority of the population. After close to a century of European rule during which almost all economic and social activities were geared for the benefit of a small, mainly non-indigenous group of people, per capita incomes rose, health and education facilities expanded dramatically, nutritional standards improved, economic and employment opportunities grew, and the local people increased their participation in their own governance.

This tranquillity began to break up, however, during and after the 1970s, triggered sometimes by national policies, such as the expulsion of Asian entrepreneurs from Uganda, but more commonly due to the two oil shocks and the recession in the North that reduced export earnings. In theory, this crisis could have given rise to a range of corrective measures. What happened in practice was that it gave leverage to international financial institutions, particularly the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – where a neo-liberal economic view was dominant – to intervene. However, in the course of the 1980s, episodes of runaway inflation made change more urgent and also made the population more willing to accept it. It is within the context of these socioeconomic difficulties that the role of social policy in national development in Africa has been a major concern.

The Eastern and Southern Africa social policy project, sponsored by IDRC, and coordinated by Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, was a concerted expression of this concern. The regional project involved Botswana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The main objective of the regional project was to establish the state of the art of social policy practice and research in Eastern and Southern Africa, and the extent to which these are responsive to the problems and needs of the population. The project aimed, among others, at identifying gaps and priorities for research so as to make research more accessible to policy; and to establish

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whether there are links between social policy and economic policy on the one hand, and social policy and social policy research on the other. More specifically, the country studies focused on the review and analysis of social policy processes; the state of social policy research; and current and future priorities for research and policy. This paper is an overview of the findings of the country studies. It discusses the context of social policy in Eastern and Southern Africa, the determinants of social policy, the policy formulation process, the relationship between social policy and economic policy and linkages in the policy process.

Methodology

The research design used by the different country teams comprised of approaches of data collection that yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. However, the major emphasis was on qualitative data. The choice of qualitative design was influenced by the desire to collect data that reflected the subjective experience of respondents. The main tools employed consisted of focused group interviews held with selected group of beneficiaries, policy makers, NGO representatives and researchers to capture their subjective experience. Surveys, underlined by interviews and using semi-structured interview guides, were also utilised at national, regional and district levels. These were usually based on purposive samples of relevant ministries and organisations. Content analyses of official documents were also undertaken.

The Context of Social Policy in Eastern and Southern Africa

Social policies are conceptualised as formal and informal rules and guidelines underlying the organised efforts of society to meet the needs of its members and ameliorate the problems confronting them on individual, group and community bases. They are *"guiding principles for ways of life, motivated by basic and perceived human needs"* (Gil, 1990: 23). They are aimed at ensuring the survival of societies and improving their well-being. This definition points to the existence of social policies in all societies. Before the advent of colonialism, there existed social policies and associated social provisions in African societies. In almost all instances, indigenous mechanisms of social provision recognised individual needs as part of wider societal needs. Thus, individualism was at its very minimum and kinship ties and networks provided a strong basis for social provision, generally adequate to meet most welfare requirements. This was based on the exercise of accepted reciprocity and equitable personal intimacies (Ouma, 1995; Brooks & Nyirenda, 1987).

The arrival of colonialism changed the African landscape, and permanently dented this social support mechanism. This was for a variety of reasons, not least the promotion of money as the primary medium for the exchange of goods and services, and introduction of a clear distinction between the homestead and the place of work, that much lessened the need for reciprocity for attaining personal and family welfare (Ouma, 1995). Yet most importantly was the fact that for the duration of the colonial period, the colonialists virtually sidelined Africans, their organisation, and skills as they operated on an ideology that promoted their own social, cultural and economic supremacy. The most critical aspect of colonial society, and crucial to the patterns of social policy in contemporary Africa, was that all activities were directed by the interests of the non-indigenous population, and focused on them alone (MacPherson, 1982).

What is evident from the country studies is that social policies are not clearly conceptualised and that there are different perceptions of social policy within, and among the countries. To some extent, for example, in Zambia, the social sector itself is not well defined and understood. In this regard, and as a result, there is a general lack of understanding of what constitutes social policy, especially, among those who are supposed to implement it. Planners and macro-economists in Tanzania view social policy as subordinate to economic policy, while planners conceive it as synonymous with social welfare or government public policy. Social policies are also perceived in terms of the institutions involved in the planning of policy and delivery of services as is the case in Uganda where social policies are narrowly conceived as the provision of social services (Manyire & Asingwire, 1996; Masiye, et al, 1996).

Social policies in the region are centralised with the central governments playing the major role. They have often responded from the desire to limit or regulate negative situations in society than to promote positive conditions. This has led to residual or remedial actions which are often fragmented and uncoordinated. The focus has been on a wide variety of issues including poverty, unemployment, poor health and sanitation, lack of housing, high birth rates, illiteracy, AIDS, the environment and drought relief. However, there are also instances of universal and institutional redistributive policies (Kaseke et al, 1996; Manyire & Asingwire, 1996; Masiye, et al, 1996; Mchomvu, et al, 1996; and Lucas, et al, 1997).

Community and Social Policy

Community-based social policies are processes through which grassroots efforts are united with those of both government and NGOs to improve community conditions and standards, and to enable communities to participate fully in national

development. Thus, a community social policy is a partnership between communities, government and NGOs. The studies indicate that at the government level, there seems to be little commitment in promoting community involvement in policy making. This situation is compounded by the fact that most communities who need help do not have the resources required for community development initiatives. It is evident that some NGOs have assumed very important roles in promoting community participation in policy development and social programmes. Some of the activities centre around community building, leadership training, and general socioeconomic empowerment to enable communities and their members to have as much input and control of local policies and projects as possible.

Consultation has always been highly appreciated and recognised as a critical element of governance in African societies (Stedman, 1993). However, most observers tend to link consultation to citizen participation in the policy process. Although currently the concept of consultation is officially afforded a high profile in the policy system in the region, it is, in fact, top civil servants who dominate the policy-making process as is the case in all the countries (Holm & Molutsi, 1990). They initiate discussion of issues through commissioned studies which usually result in a series of proposals. Ministries then conduct policy debates among themselves and inter-ministerial committees constitute the arenas in which decisions are made. These committees cover all major concerns of government including, significantly, housing, drought relief, conservation, rural development, and land use. For example, in Botswana, the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning oversees the whole process, setting budget priorities and directing investment of Government's vast financial reserves (Government of Botswana, 1991). This Ministry, therefore, sets the limits and parameters within which the structures of decision-making such as Village Development Committees, District Development Committees, National District Development Conferences as well as International Committees, operate.

Thus, the public often witness little in the form of a policy debate unless a ministry decides to engage in some form of consultation. When this happens, a conference may be organised or ministry officials may tour the country holding meetings to explain proposals. In Botswana, the *kgotla*, the meeting place in front of the chief's residence, is the traditional forum for debate and discussion of local issues (Ngcongco, 1989). The *kgotla* has been used to promote, for instance, a national conservation policy, and the discussion of population and abortion issues. Whatever form the consultation takes, the debate is usually limited to matters of implementation.

The Determinants of Social Policy

A number of factors have, and continue to influence the formulation of social policy in Eastern and Southern Africa. From a historical perspective, these factors which have been instrumental in shaping social policy in the region at different periods include a combination of ideology, resource availability, politics and culture. During the colonial period, the European powers of the time took advantage of the military and technological weakness of African societies to exploit the mineral and agricultural wealth of the Africa continent, subjecting all economic, social, and political activities to their interest. The colonialists assumed that the natives of Africa were in a most elementary state of civilisation, far below Europeans in the evolutionary ladder. This assumption led to two seemingly contradictory conclusions, and the policy and practice of racial segregation. The first, and dominant conclusion, was that Africans must be helped to develop such that the supposedly more advanced, European capital system would benefit.

Concurrently, however, it was also argued that colonialism came about because of the need of Africans: The need to advance beyond their state of development at that time, that is, "to be civilised." There was need to establish religious education, for example, to improve the moral and social character of Africans as a whole. This objective of social policy, however, being by far secondary to the first, was left to voluntary and religious enterprises, which lacking an indigenous base, made their service provision extremely rudimentary and residual. Events in Zimbabwe show how this policy was implemented in service provision. Between 1972 and 1976, only four years before independence, government expenditure on education was in a ratio of 1:12 in favour of white schools, which translated to Z\$40 per black child in comparison with Z\$475 per white child. Also, in contrast to black children, all white children were guaranteed full primary and secondary schooling. Thus again, in 1970, the church ran more than 60 percent of all rural health services in Zimbabwe, and on the eve of independence, in 1980, non-governmental organisations owned 107 of the country's 177 secondary schools (Kaseke, et al, 1996:11).

Some evidence abound which attests to political-expediency as a determinant of policy in the region. For example, in Botswana, the Accelerated Rural Development Programme (ARDP) and the Arable Land Grazing Programme (ALDEP) preceded the 1974 and 1979 general elections respectively. Some people believe that the policies were introduced for purposes of the political survival of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party. The ARDP, observes Picard (1987), was introduced in 1974 by the Botswana Democratic Party government so that it could perpetuate its political hegemony in the rural areas. According to Picard (1987), a presidential directive was issued ordering the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning

to ensure that projects were visible on the ground by September 30th 1974, which was twenty-one days before the general elections. The timing of such exercise may point to the real possibility of political manoeuvre by the ruling party. The government of Botswana has introduced an Old Age Pension Scheme in the aftermath of an impressive performance by the opposition Botswana National Front in the 1991 elections. The Old Age Pension Scheme is seen as being hurried in both design and implementation to appease the elderly electorates ahead of the 1999 general elections (Lucas, et al, 1997).

National politics and ideology are also significant in determining social policy. At independence, the nationalist governments sought to change the conditions created under colonialism and the thinking behind them. This was a period of rising expectations, that, coupled with nationalist sentiments, called for a parting with the past and a search for a new ideology for development. Socialism, or more specifically African socialism, became the vehicle to eradicate completely the colonial economy and its related structures. African socialism (Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe) emphasised equality of all people and advocated, therefore, for equality of access to resources and opportunities. Thus, development efforts were geared towards structural transformation based on the notions of social justice and egalitarian redistribution.

Consequently, backed by the rapid economic growth of the period and the nationalisation of the foreign-dominated private sector that provided the basis for buoyant government revenues, massive investments were made in infrastructure, beginning from road construction to the establishment of new import-substitution enterprises given over to the parastatal sector. Armed with socialist principles, and provided with the necessary resources from the products of nationalisation, governments went into a frenzy of compensating for past policies.

In Zambia, for example, 880 000 new school places were created between 1964 and 1984 (Tembo, 1993). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, where free education was introduced overnight, government established 5 500 primary and secondary schools in six years, an increase of 220 percent over the pre-independence era. Consequently, during this period, school enrolment shot up to 2.5 million, of whom 420 000 were in secondary school, as compared with a total enrolment of 800 000 in 1980, of whom only 72 300 were in secondary education. Likewise, in health, governments embarked on mass building, with the aim of ensuring that no one need travel more than ten kilometres to the nearest clinic (Kaseke, et al, 1996). Also, as in Zambia, the total number of hospitals and health centres grew from 354 in 1964 to 1 006 in 1988, an increase of more than 160 percent (Tembo, 1993). All treatments were offered free of charge, at least for the poor, or at a standard, nominal price.

A notable exception to the socialist agenda is found in Botswana where social

provision has been largely influenced by a conservative, but pragmatic economic philosophy. The emphasis has been on the need for sound development planning and management, characterised by a prudent but conservative fiscal and monetary regime. Every effort was made to ensure that all policies pursued did not place undue burden on the financial resources, and in fact, most social policies were pursued after the country had attained budgetary self-sufficiency in the early 1970s.

In the mid-1970s, however, all this development came to a stop. Almost continent-wide, economies started to experience deep, pervasive, and continuing crises characterised by zero or insignificant growth and high rates of inflation leading to rising foreign and internal debts, increased unemployment, shortages of consumer goods, and deteriorating social infrastructures. The first response of most governments to these developments was to introduce price controls and subsidies for many popular consumer items, and inputs for production, such as fertilisers and seeds. However, these measures proved ineffective, and as the situation deteriorated further, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervened, ushering in a new period in African history: the era of structural adjustment.

The essence of structural adjustment as envisaged by the IMF lies in the neo-liberal notion that the state must divest itself from direct participation in the economy and the provision of social services to make way for free market exchanges. Unfortunately, however, its accompanying mechanism, such as the tightening of the money supply and reduced public expenditure, compounded the already precarious economic status of most consumers. The deep economic crises meant very limited resources for social services leading to a change in the philosophy behind service provision. In the era of structural adjustment, governments have introduced some fees for social services, reduced government funding in service provision, withdrawn consumer subsidies, privatised public enterprises and retrenched workers among other things, as part of the measures to improve the economy. These measures show the importance of resources in determining and sustaining social policy (Manyire & Asingwiire, 1996; Masiye, et al, 1996; Kaseke, et al, 1996 and Mchomvu, et al, 1996).

The demand of SAPs have meant depending on the assistance of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other donor agencies and countries to revitalise the economy and create sustainable levels of economic growth. The assistance from these sources have been instrumental in the development and maintenance of social safety nets to cushion vulnerable groups against the transitional effects of structural adjustment. Donor agencies have also funded a significant number of programmes in education, health and social development in general. This means that they also have important influence in the social policy process. The role of NGOs and donor agencies is even more pronounced in the

implementation process. For example, most rural people in Zambia do not know that the government is also a social service provider because they tend to associate all social provision with NGOs and donors. It is argued that the policy shift in Tanzania, from viewing the provision of social services as a government responsibility to that of social provision to be determined by market forces, has been done to attract and maintain donor support (Mchomvu, et al, 1996; Masiye, et al, 1996).

There is a body of opinion which sees some portions of the social policy agenda in the region as nothing but responses to international expectations. The contention is that some policies have been formulated either with the direct intervention of international donor agencies or through local NGOs sponsored and wholly support by international donors who by and large represents the thinking of their respective governments. For instance, in Botswana, Basarwa (ie, San peoples') development issues have been put on the agenda by international donors, especially those from the Nordic countries.

The role of culture in African socioeconomic development cannot be underestimated. Governments have considered culture as an important factor in the determination of social policy, and have in fact assigned it central and critical roles in many respects. Thus, the policy of public assistance which requires families to support their members or individuals to seek assistance from their families in the first instance, takes cognizance of the culturally determined obligations of family members to support one another. Thus, throughout the region, the policy of public assistance is based on the understanding that the family is a complete social security system. The destitute policy of Botswana is created on this principle, and so also are the health policies in Zambia and Zimbabwe, which incorporate traditional mid-wives in the health delivery system.

Policy Formulation

The available data indicate that the policy formulation process is dominated by the central governments and their agencies. Thus, the process of policy formulation is top-down in approach and involves the beneficiaries mainly in implementation. For example, in Tanzania, the actual process of social policy formulation centres around three levels of decision-making and power. At the ministerial level, experts identify issues and problems. In the process, they may or may not consult with experts in other sectoral ministries and institutions. The main consultation at this level takes place within the Interministerial Technical Committee. The second level is the Planning Commission which is divided into sectoral areas. These also initiate policy which is then sent to the relevant ministry for vetting and feedback. After that a cabinet paper is prepared for the cabinet secretariat before it is sent to

parliament. The third and highest level involves parliament and the presidency. Before political pluralism in 1992, however, the ruling party in Tanzania was the sole initiator of policy (Mchombvu, et al, 1996).

Again in Zambia, government is the key player and the process is so centralised that the provinces have no role in the formulation. Like in Tanzania, the policy formulation process usually begins with line ministries from where it goes to the cabinet and then parliament. In designing social policies, governments in the region are usually not proactive. In the Zambia case, it is indicated that the government responds much more from a desire to regulate negative influences of economic policies than from a desire to promote positive influences in the social sector. Thus, most of the policies tend to be residual, or remedial (Masiye, et al, 1996).

NGOs are also important actors in the policy process, but usually they assume, and are limited to, mainly advocacy roles. In recent years, however, and with the introduction of political liberalisation and democratic governance, governments are increasingly making efforts to consult the stakeholders in formulating policy. However, it is argued that mere consultation is not enough since more often than not the government had already set the criteria and then seeks opinion, a process which most people see as a public relations exercise. Although the operations and methods of NGOs differ, most NGOs are guided by the 'generic' model of service provision as is the case in Uganda. What is apparent, and flowing from this model, is the element of fully incorporating the intended beneficiaries into the policy process. This "bottom-up" approach is seen as contributing greatly to capacity building and sustainable social development.

It is evident that donor agencies have significant input in the direction policy issues take. However, their input is indirect and is generally limited to technical and financial assistance. Donors may fund programmes and projects directly or may facilitate networking and cooperation among NGOs and government agencies to enhance their efforts at service provision (Manyire & Asingwiire, 1996). There is very little indication that communities are involved in policy-making, and it appears that as of now, there seems to be very little commitment to promoting community involvement in the policy process. Because of inaccessibility to the policy makers and the policy process by communities, it is at the implementation phase that community participation becomes manifest with respect to politicking, competition, individual or collective demand-making, and conflict-resolution. Part of the problem is due to the fact that most communities do not have the resources and skills required for community development initiatives. However, some NGOs have assumed the important role of promoting participation in social programmes. Thus, YWCA and the Catholic Secretariat in Zambia, for example, are instrumental in this regard, and in accentuating women's central role in community-building and socio-cultural awareness (Masiye, et al, 1996).

light of the dictates of the SAPs, with as little public funding as possible. All this happened at a time when many in-patients already had to rely on their relatives for a change of bedding, ever more schools operated without books and desks, and people were going back to using unsafe water resources as taps ran dry (Mabote, 1996; Sanders, 1992).

In the context of SAPs, there is a shrinking role of government in the economy. What is clear from all these is that, at least in the initial phase, adjustment has resulted in higher levels of poverty. The social conditions of vulnerable groups have greatly deteriorated. Where cost recovery is instituted, most basic services are no more accessible to the poor due to low levels of affordability. There is also the emergence of the 'new poor' – among mainly retrenched workers, lowly-paid workers, peasant farmers and workers in cottage industries (Daniel, 1985).

Linkages in the Policy Process

There are certain situations in which governments have adopted special mechanisms for interaction and co-ordination in the policy process. Notably, in Botswana, there is a special arrangement between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing whereby policy formulation is the ultimate responsibility of the Ministry of Health (although the Interministerial Committee plays a part in the process), while the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing is an integral part of the implementation of health policy, together with various organs of the Ministry of Health.

Governments in the region have general frameworks for establishing linkages with non-governmental organisations, and bilateral and multilateral agencies, as there is the recognition that these bodies can and do make significant contributions to the well-being of the people. Notable examples include influential agencies: The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – bilateral agencies; and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund – multilateral agencies.

There are substantial efforts to forge links between NGOs and the State to foster partnership and collaboration in the policy process. However, the difficulty in involving NGOs arises when there is no official framework or linkages between the State and the NGOs (Farrington, et al, 1993). For example, in Botswana, until recently, there has been a lack of an overall body to provide a framework for NGO cooperation with the state and vice versa. The Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (BOCONGO) has recently been formed to provide

a structure to the NGOs to mutually cooperate with the state in various endeavours. However, in Zambia, for example, such a body, the Non-Governmental Organisation Coordinating Committee has been in existence for sometime. The creation of NGO Coordinating Committees and the existence of informal mechanisms of linkage provide democratic arrangements for civil organs to effectively participate in policy processes in the region. What this means is that policy initiation can be realised through NGO coordinating committees after consultation has taken place. In this manner, the State may be seen to be adopting a democratic approach (Holm & Molutsi, 1990).

Though mechanisms for co-ordination do exist in the region, the effective functioning of the process still requires vigilance in the employment of effort and resources; and ongoing monitoring and evaluation with opportunity for constructive feedback. Although there may be problems, governments in the region have managed to develop some linkages between themselves and the private sector. These constitute advantageous mechanisms for informing and influencing policy formulation in the region.

Emerging Issues and Conclusions

It is evident that Africa as a whole and Eastern and Southern Africa in particular has witnessed, and will continue to witness, rapid socioeconomic changes, and changes in associated social policy responses and the overall social provision. On one hand, whereas social problems have become critical due to overwhelming poverty and increased marginalisation of the masses, on the other hand, social policy is also increasingly marginalised. A critical question, therefore, relates to the future direction of social policy in the region.

What is clear from the studies is that governments are increasingly withdrawing from social service provision; large numbers of NGOs play key role in the provision of services; most policy actors follow government agenda with the grassroots having very little or no say in the process; donors, multilateral and bilateral agencies fund what they deem necessary to their cause; coordinating structures exist but may not be as effective as required; and a declining relationship between social policy and economic policy has emerged within the context of the dismal economic performance across the region.

The current socioeconomic conditions of the region and the status of social policy, point to some of the critical areas that need immediate attention. There is an urgent necessity to review the processes and mechanisms of cost-sharing being promoted across the region due to the perceived necessity for governments to withdraw from social service provision, and for families and communities to take

direct responsibilities for these. This factor relates to the whole range of social security measures and safety nets, both formal and informal, required to manage and improve the quality of life of the poor and vulnerable groups. An associated issue is the effective coordination of social services and related activities in the context of economic liberalisation and democratisation.

Whereas both major and key players in the policy process are easily identified, the relationship between them is often not on equal basis. This has brought about gaps in both the policy decision and the implementation processes. 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. On the whole, the main question is: How can social policy contribute positively to reform, reconstruction, revitalisation, decentralisation, redistribution, democratisation and other processes of change and development underway in the region; and create opportunities to deal with issues such as related to social security, health, education and poverty in general? Part of the answer lies in a comprehensive understanding of the policy process, inherent strengths and weaknesses; and in finding ways to build on positive elements, and to eliminate or minimise negative ones. In order for social policy to be relevant and effective in the context of the current neo-liberal economic ideology, ways must be found for it to become significant in addressing the socioeconomic and political dimensions of poverty in the region, and positively deal with emerging problems resulting from the socioeconomic and political changes.

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