

# **The State of Dynamics of Social Policy Practice and Research in Uganda**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Social policy has increasingly undergone serious trials and changes in the last three decades, particularly in the last decade due to the implementation of macro-adjustment policies. This paper attempts a Ugandan experience in relation to the state and dynamics of social policy practice and research. The nature and scope of social policy, the process and agents of social policy, and social policy research together with related obstacles are delineated in this paper.

## **Introduction**

For quite some time, there has been concern about the role of social policy in the process of national development. This concern arises from the observed decline in the standard of living for the vast majority of the populations in the country, little or no attention given to the maintenance of the basic social infrastructure and the apparent excessive preoccupation of governmental authorities with economic development to the exclusion of socio-cultural consideration.

There is a general increase in levels of poverty and the concomitant decline in nutritional standards, a growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' Widespread inaccessibility of the populations to basic social services and utilities, rural-urban disparities with governments increasingly favouring the latter with the meagre resources available, gender disparities whereby women continue to be marginalised in the national development processes, growing levels of both absolute unemployment and disguised unemployment, increasing social insecurity especially on the part of social groups susceptible to vulnerability. This scenario calls into question the extent to which the present World Bank/IMF-sponsored market model is sensitive to issues of human development in general and development with equity in particular. This is the context within which social policies in Uganda are formulated and implemented.

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## **The Study**

The research design for this study was qualitative. The aim was to collect data which accurately reflected the actual situation on the ground to facilitate the determining of research priorities as well as constraints in the field of social policy. A full coverage of the relevant institutions and individuals with the desired information was undertaken. All government agencies with a major responsibility for social policy; the NGO board and other voluntary social services organisations as key policy makers/administrators were identified and covered. Finally, major research institutions as well as individuals researchers in the country were seen.

The main methods of data collection consisted of a content analysis of policy documents, research records and reports. In-depth interviews were held with key policy-makers/administrators, executive heads and programme managers of NGOs, heads of research or training institutions and individual researchers. The analysis of the data was thematic, analysed according to the major themes identified for each of the two parts of the research project.

## **The Context of Social Policy Practice in Uganda**

Social policies are perceived as the outcomes of national and local decisions in response to human development. They consist of formal and informal rules which are embedded in the organised efforts of society to meet identified personal needs as well as within the wider context (Gil, 1993). The ultimate aim of such organised efforts is to enhance the well-being of societal members in their respective environments.

Social policy is not a recent phenomenon to be associated with the onset of colonialism in Uganda. The traditional welfare system provided collective efforts through which communities looked after their members. With colonialism, however, existing social arrangements were either seen as of little significance or as standing in the way of modern administration and social policies.

The limitations of the traditional welfare system notwithstanding, social needs and social problems were experienced by societal members, but with increasing urbanisation, traditional societies became increasingly inadequate to handle the new problems created by rural-urban movements and technological changes (Asingwire, 1992). A more formal system of services became inevitable.

It was in this regard that during colonial period, the question of state provision arose. Times of change transformed not only traditional economics but also their associated social institutions and social relations. The traditional organisations in which there was assured social provisions not just for individuals but for the whole

community became altered. This was the state of affairs in the social policy domain that prevailed in Uganda at the time of independence in 1962.

The first decade of Uganda's political independence was characterised by active state involvement in the area of social policy development and implementation. The state focused on major fields of social policy such as health, income, maintenance/employment, housing and education. All this began to change in the early 1970s when the regime in power developed a non-pragmatic approach towards addressing socioeconomic issues. The process of social policy fell prey to the unconventional style introduced in the social policy domain whereby military decrees replaced legislated laws (eg, Amin's era).

At present, the kind of social policy obtaining in Uganda is dictated by the changes occurring in what Bennett (1990) refers to as "post welfare agenda." The state is limiting its role in the social sector and instead creating an "enabling environment" where policy beneficiaries become active participants.

## **The Nature of Social Policy in Uganda**

Social policy is perceived in terms of the institutions involved in the making and delivery of social services. As a result, the key social policy players in Uganda include various Government Ministries/Departments, local and international Non-governmental Organisations, including churches and mosques; Bilateral and multi-lateral agencies; and of recent, local community initiatives through Community-Based Organisations (CBOs).

Most of the social policies/interventions initiated by the above players are either residual, institutional or community-based. In certain aspects, all these elements exist in certain social interventions, albeit in varying degrees.

Residual social policies are based on the belief that there are two natural ways through which an individual can satisfy his needs, viz, the family and the market (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1958). These normal channels have been inadequate due to civil wars that have characterised most of post-independence Uganda, morbidity and mortality, especially AIDS-related, and due to disruptions by natural forces such as earthquakes in Western Uganda and floods in the recent times in most parts of the country.

On the other hand, interventions which have been initiated within the institutional redistributive model depict a deeper connection between social conditions that negatively impact on wider community and social structures. They attempt to offer a wider array of interventions for addressing adverse socioeconomic issues. There is a deep-rooted value premise in the institutional redistributive policies that adverse social conditions result from a combination of individual limitations and

unacceptable social conditions, and, therefore, the environment is much the cause of such undesirable conditions as individual failings.

Finally, there are community-based interventions rotating around local initiatives. These aim at empowering communities in general, and in particular, aiding community members in difficult circumstances within their communities. In many African countries as Taylor (1992) noted, communities, especially rural, have realised that central authorities cannot sufficiently address their socioeconomic conditions of living. What is therefore evident as Dearlove & White (1987) observed a decade ago, either by choice or by necessity, the state was noted to be withdrawing from the rural areas in terms of the provision of adequate development services, although control function often continue to persist. The vacuum left by the state shedding-off of the role of service provision, has culminated into the evolvement of local coping strategies.

## **The Scope and Role of Social Policy in Uganda**

Delineating the scope of social policy in Uganda remains a daunting challenge. Most key social policy players in Uganda perceive the discipline as just the provision of social services which are just instruments of social policies. A point of consensus in the findings was the perception of social policy as a process through which the state maintains an element of stability and at the same time seeks to improve conditions for members of the population. Besides considering social policy as a process, it was conceived as actions or programmes designed and implemented by non-governmental agencies and the state, or with state support to enhance personal human development. This kind of perception influences what policy-makers consider to be the role of social policy, including redistribution of resources according to moral criteria, and empowering the marginalised groups such as women and children.

The narrow perception of the role of social policy as reflected above is indicative of its relegation in the development process. The role of social policy in the development process cannot be emphasised, for well-developed and implemented social policies act as a strategy for achieving sustainable development. This basic strategy for achieving development is largely unrecognised in the Ugandan situation due to much emphasis put on economic policies by the country's decision makers.

In sum, we note that despite the role of social policy in the overall process of development, the Ugandan government has not seriously come to terms with the dramatic social crises which have emerged as a result of adopting the market model in her social sector. It is therefore not by conscious efforts that a deteriorating

"social side" of development resulting from the impact of market-driven economic development actions occurs (Moralez Gomez, 1993). In all, a deteriorating "social side" is a clear manifestation of serious inequities in the Uganda social sector.

## **Social Policies and Equity Issues**

Government social interventions are silent on the issues of equity, although in some certain instances the government attempts to address the inequity that results from the implementation of certain macro-economic policies. It is in this respect that government, with funding from the World Bank, launched a Programme for Alleviation of Poverty and Social Costs of Adjustment (PAPSCA). This programme aimed at addressing some of the most urgent social concerns of the country's most vulnerable groups. The strategy to achieve the programme's aim was to strengthen the institutional capacity of government agencies in identifying, formulating and implementing intervention in health, education, water, small-scale projects and infrastructure (Yahie, 1992).

Despite the conscious efforts designed to ensure equity in the provision of social benefits to the population, numerous problems tend to be encountered in the whole process of policy formulation and development. Some of these problems are as a result of actors being over-stretched in terms of resources due to increased size of the clientele population. For instance, organisations aiming at the promotion of well-being for orphans and widows have experienced increasing numbers. It is also true that corruption among different actors, especially state actors, distorts the element of equity in the implementation of social policies in the country.

Thus, equity as a principle of social policy is often compromised by a number of considerations. Equity still eludes social policy because the donors and, or, government pursue goals motivated by outside conditions rather than the local ones; or at times the whole process of policy formulation is so much dictated by rational choices that interveners forget the beneficiaries' needs (Sewaya, 1992). In addition, macro-economic policies seem not to be compatible with the principle of equity, especially in the traditional fields of social policy.

## **The Process and Agents in Social Policy Practice in Uganda**

Processes involved in policy initiation and formulation differ from agency to agency depending on what they are mandated to accomplish. In relation to social interventions initiated by government in the social sector, they tend to follow a similar process. In all, the development and structuring of policy follows a sequence that begins with the introduction of the new idea and results into a new set of programmes.

In Uganda, the central authorities charged with policy formulation comprise of senior personnel working in government ministries/departments; ministries acting individually or Senior Ministers acting through the Cabinet; and the Parliament in its legislative role. The kinds of decisions which these groups can make do vary. Most civil servants can only make day-to-day decisions within the limits of existing policies.

Once social policies are developed/formulated, they may be translated into programmes. Funding of most programmes in Uganda is externally generated in the form of loans, aid and donations. Policies which receive external funding are rather dictated by international policies rather than local circumstances and concerns which can aggravate the local adverse social situation. Due to failure of financing the implementation of locally-formulated policies, a large proportion of the process of policy formulation and development has been "hijacked" by the funders. Although the local decision-makers can be involved in the process, their participation tends to end with problem identification.

## **Social Policy Research in Uganda**

Quite a number of researchers exist in Uganda. Most researchers have specialised skills within their specific disciplines and have acquired advanced research skills through training, practice and experience. This human resource base is spread across universities, government departments, bilateral agencies, NGOs, and private firms. However, most of their research expertise lies in general development policy, conceptualised, executed and analysed within the realms of the individual disciplinary specialities. The number of researchers who are trained within the social policy field and have the concomitant skills to understand social policy research is very low.

Due to limited resources, the government rarely commissions social policy research on its own. When social policy-related research is commissioned through government ministries, it is often a component of a donor project or programme supported by bilateral and or multi-lateral agencies.

Given the predominance of foreign funding in the Ugandan social policy research domain, it is not surprising that a large component of the research agenda is foreign-determined. For action-oriented research, the terms of reference regulate the type of study. For academic social policy research, funders set broad themes from which the researchers are expected to evolve more focused topics. Thus, areas of human development that have attracted most research funding are mainly those which are globally sanctioned. Social policy research on a global level has cycles.

It peaks and drops depending on the the themes defined by funders and policy-makers as pressing social conditions. Unless the social condition(s) has become fully politicised and debated and the parameters for potential action acted upon, there is little likelihood that research funders will release funds for study of that condition.

## **Obstacles to Social Policy Research**

There are two types of obstacles to social policy research and research in general in Uganda: those concerning funding and those regarding the execution of social policy research.

In terms of the "supply" side of funding social policy research, this study revealed that the government has little interest in funding research because its policies are more dependent on political motivations and donor demands than outcomes of empirical investigations. The deceptive simplicity of social phenomena tends to make most policy-makers and implementors believe that there is no need for funding social policy research since the causal relationships appear to be apparent even without conducting empirical investigations, as it is the case with "hard" issues such as economic growth, science and technology.

The lengthy time it takes many funding agencies to approve and release research funds, and insufficient number of fora for researchers to critically discuss their research and relevant issues in Uganda also constitutes obstacles to social policy research. Research in Uganda is also undermined by low salaries paid to most academics, who constitute a large proportion of social policy researchers. In addition, there is poor infrastructure for social policy research in most research institutions such as computers and associated relevant software.

Other obstacles include those inherent in the research process. The process of applying for, processing, and receiving research clearance from both the National Council of Science and Technology and from District Authorities, hinders (social policy) research. The difficult, lengthy and bureaucratic process eats into the time period set aside for research. Finally, another obstacle comes from the grassroots populations who compromise most of the primary research respondents. They typically are so frustrated by failed government projects and programmes and by the unfulfilled promises for delivering social services that they do not differentiate between researchers and policy-makers and implementors. They, thus, tend not only to withhold vital information but also become uncooperative and at times hostile to the researchers.

## **Dissemination of Social Policy Research Knowledge**

Action-oriented research commissioned as consultancies is usually disseminated to the commissioning agencies through debriefing and research reports. However, it is extremely rare for the respondents, or the targeted beneficiaries of the subsequent policy actions, to be invited to attend such workshops. Nonetheless, some research findings especially those that challenge current verities may work their way into official consciousness (Aaron, 1979).

Unfortunately, when research diffuses to the policy sphere through indirect and unguided channels, it can dispense invalid as well as valid generalisations. Many of the social policy understandings that gain currency are partial, oversimplified, inadequate or wrong (Weiss, 1986). There are no procedures for screening out poor research results. Sometimes, unexpected or sensational research results, however, incomplete or inadequately supported by data, take the lime-light.

Further, funds for knowledge dissemination are rarely provided by the research funders. At the same time, the institutions that should be playing a role in knowledge dissemination lack the channels to do so.

This scenario is different for commissioned social policy research. The findings of these studies are usually utilised in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes. Interestingly, while social policy research findings may be only occasional adopted into policies, there are instances, paradoxically, when social policy-related research is used for purposes that have little relation to the substance of the research. It is not the content of the findings that are invoked but the sheer fact that research is being done.

## **Recommendations**

1. Formation of a "Social Policy Association" which can lobby for placing social policy-related issues on the policy agenda.
2. Re-orient the social science research skills into more focused social policy research skills through seminars and workshops.
3. Include the social policy research focus in the research methods training programmes in higher institutions of learning.
4. More interaction between social policy-makers and researchers is needed to erase the mutual suspicion and to build a relationship of trust and cooperation.



## Conclusions

Our study shows that social policy has yet to be distinguished as a professional field in Uganda. Most social issues are hardly placed on the policy agenda. The little that has been achieved in relation to human development is basically attributed to the intervention of non-governmental agencies. The state is not only in a "spectating" position, but is also steadily curtailing its involvement in the social sector.

The influence of external agencies on the social policy process renders the state quite un-authoritative in matters of human development. Policies that are externally funded comply as much as possible with the interests of funding agencies. Rather than addressing the social policy process, we found the involvement of government in the social policy process, including research, to be very lacking.

Although the national research capacities for social policy in terms of human resources, training programmes and institutions are overwhelmingly based in the general field of social policy focus, presently, social policy research is being carried out but its methodology and analysis is often not policy-oriented.

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