In Search of Inclusive Development: Social Policy in the Sub-Saharan African Context

En busca de un desarrollo inclusivo: La política social en el África Subsahariana

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**Abstract**
We explore the findings and lessons from the sub-Saharan Africa research project on Social Policy in a Developmental Context. First is the imperative of time sensitivity: the social and economic policies nexus differed significantly before and after the deployment of adjustment programmes; second, is the diversity in social policy outcomes; third is the lack of fit between economic growth indicators and social policy outcomes in many countries. Leadership and policy matter—the latter more so in its local and international dimensions. The policy orthodoxy of the last 25 years is fundamental to the massive entitlement failure in the region.

**Resumen**
En el presente documento se analizan las conclusiones y lecciones del proyecto de investigación conducido en el África Subsahariana sobre Política social en un contexto de desarrollo. En primer lugar está el factor del tiempo: el nexo entre las políticas sociales y económicas cambió considerablemente antes y después de la aplicación de los programas de ajuste; en segundo lugar, se aborda la diversidad de los resultados en materia de política social; en tercer lugar se analiza la incoherencia entre los indicadores de crecimiento económico y los resultados que obtuvieron muchos países a nivel de la política social. El liderazgo y las políticas son temas de importancia, en especial la dimensión local y la dimensión internacional de las políticas. La ortodoxia que se ha seguido en la formulación de políticas en los últimos 25 años ha sido un factor fundamental del fracaso generalizado en materia de derechos en la región.
Introduction

This presentation provides a reflective overview of the eight studies commissioned as part of the UNRISD project on *Social Policy in Late Industrializers: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Challenge of Social Policy*. The studies focused on sub-regional and thematic social policy concerns. We end with further reflection on six essential elements or *imperatives* in rethinking social policy in sub-Saharan Africa. The imperatives, as is our research project, are based on three normative concerns: inclusivity, development, and democracy—where ‘public reasoning’ (Sen 2004) is the basis of public and civic relationships.

The work of the Africa Group was shaped by a specific conceptual and methodological framework. We understand social policies to be specific and deliberate policies (enacted and pursued) that positively impact on social well-being and security. The critical areas of focus therefore were education, health and sanitation, and social security. The latter we defined more widely to include social insurance, pension schemes, and policies directed at reducing socio-economic vulnerability. The idea of a tolerable, minimum level of livelihood and decency is intuitive and socially constructed; and normative (ideological) rather than technical. These define the links between economic and social policies; the desirable system of social relations and governance; and the specific instruments for achieving the perceived minimal level of well-being.

It was also clear at the design phase that our studies would need to be sensitive to the gaps that may exist between macroeconomic policies, social policies and social policy outcomes; between the intended and unintended outcomes of social policies and social forces that impact on this. The widespread collapse in industrial output, escalation in poverty prevalence, and the disintegration (at least severe shrinkage) in administrative capacity might not have been the *intended* consequences of adjustment policies but the collapse resulted nonetheless. Yet, the variation in social development outcomes, among the adjusting countries point to the importance of human agency in mitigating the worst impacts of a debilitating policy environment and a country’s ability to manoeuvre. Even among non-adjusting countries, social development outcomes have proven to be quite varied.

Our project was concerned with another dimension, namely paying attention to the nuanced exploration of the social and political contexts of social policies and their outcomes; it required attention to the nature of ‘elite’ politics and those of allied social forces; the configuration and orientation of social forces within the ‘civil society’ that shape (initiate, contest, enact) social policies. There is, however, no *a priori* assumption of virtuous ‘civil society’ forces confronting vicious state forces.

A final dimension is the issue of *time sensitivity* and spatial disaggregation in making sense of social policy “transitions” and outcomes. From our study, we could identify at least three distinct phases: (a) late colonialism, (b) post-colonial contexts until 1980 or early 1980s, and (c) post-1980; and the variations within each phase. In countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa their post-colonial period coincides with the post-1980 phase for most of sub-Saharan Africa.
Ruling ideas, Sovereign Rentier Capitalism, and Time Sensitivity

Garba (2005) identified three ruling ideas that have shaped economic and social policy thinking and practice in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. The first he identified as the nationalist discourse and paradigm of social policy; the second strand is broadly associated with the works of Maynard Keynes; the third strand is associated with Neoclassical Economics. Two concerns shaped the nationalist discourse, across the ideological divide: these are the concerns with economic growth and national unity. The “eradication of the ‘unholy trinity of ignorance, poverty, and disease’ was a central component of the nationalist agenda” (Mkandawire 2005a: 13), and economic growth was seen as a means for doing so. If the nationalist projects of nation-building and growth provide the agenda or ends, the means were shaped by a changing pattern of ruling advice. Garba identified these with the politics of ‘sovereign rentier capitalism.” The ‘capital’ that sovereign rentier capitalist institutions offered was not only financial (aid or investment) but intellectual—policy advice. The “most ingenious strategic move of (the sovereign rentier capitalist) is its successful marketing of itself as a donor” (Garba 2003; 2005, fn.26). The overall objective has been “control over policy making” (Garba 2005: 24; Toye 1991).

Concerning time sensitivity, the period from 1960 to 1980 witnessed a significant improvement in a range of social development indicators. An analysis of investment and savings suggest that, for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, much of the domestic investment from 1960 to 1980 was financed largely by domestic resources (cf. Figure 1). The contrast with the next twenty years (1980 to 2000) could not be sharper: the coefficient of regression for the 1960 to 1980 period ($R^2$) is 0.978, in contrast to 0.253 for 1980 to 2000.1 Removing Nigeria from the dataset used for the analysis did not alter the trend or the shape of the graph; at least not for the period between 1960 and 1980. The post-1980 period showed two patterns. One is significant volatility in GDS and GCF; the other is that gross capital formation outstripped gross domestic savings. The post-1980 period, we should be reminded, has been the season of ‘stabilization,’ adjustment, and donor monopoly of the policy landscape; the period of neoliberal ascendancy.

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1 Gross Capital Formation is the dependent variable, and Gross Domestic Savings the predictor. (Data source: World Bank’s 2002 World Development Indicators CD.)
Changing Dynamics of Education Provisioning

The survey of changing education policy environment noted the influence of the wider, dominant, perception of education in the early post-colonial period. Education was not only about the national strategy for raising literacy levels and providing the human resources needed for the economic growth objective, it was the individual’s means of securing better livelihood.

The crisis that was to become emblematic of the early 1980s emerged differently in the countries. The impact of the policy response to the crisis on social policy differed significantly from one country to another. Nigeria witnessed a collapse in public spending on education in the 1980s. In Ghana and Zimbabwe there were efforts to protect social spending. In Botswana growth in the economy was accompanied by an increase in social spending. An assessment of the education dimension of social policy objectives raises the twin issues of gender disparity and the role of agency in the pattern of achievement.

There is evidence, however, of adverse impact of the adjustment years. In countries where there has been a dramatic rise in student enrolment this has been ‘financed’ by overcrowding, decline in quality of teaching and the neglect of research activities. While a “user-fee” was promoted on the grounds of equity of access and the need to shift resources away from tertiary to primary education, there is little evidence that the fiscal objective of restraining public spending has been a primary objective. Several countries have seen a significant rise in user-charges.

Changing Dynamics of Healthcare Provisioning

The comparative studies on the changing dynamics of health and related services show similarities and distinct divergences when compared with the education sector.
Here as in the case of the education sector, two patterns of social provisioning emerge: the pre- and post-1980s. It was perhaps in the area of health care provisioning that the aggressive retrenchment of the state and cuts in social expenditure had its genocidal effects. The erroneous assumption of orthodox adjustment was three-fold: one was to assume that there was a market in health care service to take care of the impact that the fiscal retrenchment of the state would create; the second was to assume, as unproblematic, resource endowment for all the citizens for procuring their health care needs in the new market place; the third is to assume that public resources spent subsidizing the citizens were a waste. The consequence has been particularly grim across most of sub-Saharan Africa. People did not as much fall through the net of social provisioning; they died!

In countries already faced with rapidly declining household income levels and rising tide of poverty, the imposition of user-fees or ‘cost-sharing’ had the effect of mediating citizenship with capacity to engage in the market. The crisis in the health sector is emblematic of the horrors of neoliberal fundamentalism and the politics of the resurgent new imperialism. The HIV/AIDS pandemic and the phenomenal way in which it has spread across much of sub-Saharan Africa is emblematic of the massive entitlement failure of how the retrenchment of health provisioning capacity undermined the capacity of many of the countries to cope with the pandemic. As the impact of the efforts to retrench the public realm in social provisioning has become clear, and the user-charges have turned out to be more ideological than a financially sound mechanism, new efforts are being made to find new mechanisms for funding national healthcare needs. What is instructive about the schemes in Ghana and Nigeria is that there is no defined contribution from which to fund the scheme.

**Social Policy, Poverty Nexus, Entitlement Failure and Social Cohesion**

The current pursuit of the claimed objectives of reducing poverty and inequality, through a raft of targeted mechanisms, is paradoxical in the light of the existing body of knowledge, about the relationship between institutional frameworks or models of social policy on the one hand, and poverty and inequality on the other hand. Extensive studies on targeted social policies have demonstrated that even in the most administratively robust state with extensive surveillance systems, targeting suffers from extensive problems of Type I error and Type II error. Our study drew important lessons from South Africa.

In many ways, the last 20 years have highlighted the crisis of citizenship and statehood in most African countries. The implications of the widespread deprivation and social development crisis, highlighted in our study are evident in the rising number of state implosions and genocidal conflicts. I do not wish to suggest that the adjustment policies created these horrendous events. However, I would suggest a link between the retrenchment of state capacity for social provisioning and the tide of crisis of statehood. The state/citizens relationship is a web of obligations and privileges; citizens’ stake in a polity is affected by the extent to which the state is seen to be responsive to the needs of the citizens. The retreat of state from social delivery (healthcare, education, human security, etc) undermined the relevance and the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of its citizens.
Rethinking Social Policy Beyond Adjustment

I wish to conclude this presentation by highlighting six imperatives of rethinking social policy in sub-Saharan Africa, beyond adjustment.

First, it is difficult to see one’s way through the objective of poverty reduction, for instance, without improving the productive capacity of the economies. In 14 of the 16 sub-Saharan African countries, classified as having low human development and for whom data exists, more than two-thirds of the population live in poverty (UNDP 2002). While a lot more can be done even at lower levels of economic growth, as noted earlier, social policy objectives become sustainable when under-girded by sustained improvements in economic development, and vice versa. The synergy between the two is enhanced by active policy to reduce social inequality—often using fiscal and social policies. There is a need to return to the progressive nationalist conception of social policy—i.e., not as a gratuitous favour done to citizens by investments in development and nation-building.

The prevailing discourse (from NEPAD to the Blair Commission Report) mistakes ‘trade discourse’ for ‘development discourse.’ When President Youweri Museveni asserted that what we Africans want is not aid but to ‘trade our ways out of poverty’, I agree with him intuitively. The question, however, is “With what? Coffee?” Successful economic development involves not only quantitative growth in the economy but structural changes—and that requires a shift towards industrial output. Maligned as ‘industrial policy’ is in the neoliberal discourse, the examples of China and India, and that of the earlier industrialisers demonstrate the centrality of dynamic industrial policy for “trading our ways out of poverty.” These countries came to dominate global trade not on the basis of primary commodities but manufactured output. Moving in this direction requires African countries to mount a vigorous challenge against the current global trade regimes—multilateral and bilateral. The shrinking of the trade and industrial policy space is not a natural aspect of ‘globalization;’ it is a consequence of conscious steps taken by the powerful countries to advance their own interests and those of their transnational corporations. The proposition of the late-1970s for a regional development approach, where African countries seek to internalise the engine of their development remains valid; it compels us to return the Lagos Plan of Action.

Second, it is important to rethinking social policy in its nation-building functions—a central concern of the nationalist discourse. The last two decades remind us of the imperative of nation-building: from Sierra Leone to Somalia, Rwanda to Sudan; from Nigeria to the DRC, the foundations of many African states are under threat. Enhancing citizens’ stake in their polities is about social citizenship! The Afrobarometer studies (IDASA, Cape Town) show that across Africa, citizens make a direct link between their livelihood and democracy. The retrenchment of state capacity not only affects its capacity to deliver on social policy but the basic task of the physical security of its citizens.

Third, a move away from targeting and mean-testing in social policy is important not only because of the stigma and humiliation associated with targeted social policy but because we know that: (a) where social policy has been developmental, improved social well-being, and enhanced social cohesion, it has involved encompassing, universal access; (b) it tends to secure wider social commitment to the policy. (c) And, a state/citizen nexus based on mutual exchange of obligations and privileges has a greater chance of securing social stability, which itself is valuable for sustained
economic development. This must be within a wider conception of the public domain. A key finding of our study is that while the social policy debate in the North had been couched in state vs. market terms, the experience of sub-Saharan Africa requires that we transcend this dichotomy. A significant proportion of social provisioning was (and still is) at the community level (community schools, community health-centres). It is a public realm that is slightly accounted for by Peter Ekeh’s (1975) “primordial public”—although a hugely problematic concept. Some of these were about religious and voluntary organisations: from your faith-based organisations to town-associations that build schools, clinics, and groups of women who contribute money so that the son of X who has been admitted to a school in a far-away city could pay the fees and have something to eat. Immigrant networks in the urban areas share scarce resources to ensure that new arrivals do not fall into destitution, and so on. It is a framework that has been greatly undermined by the neoliberal project of the last 25 years—and not compatible with it.

Fourth is the imperative of reconstituting the state in its policymaking capacity, ability to run the state, administer society, and define the parameters of economic activities. There is an urgent need to end the creeping policy-atrophy of the last 25 years, and the band of “technical aid experts” whose wage bill could be anything between two or three times the host country’s civil service, public teachers and healthcare workers. “Without the state, markets… cannot function” (Evans 1995:3). The “embedded autonomy” of a competent civil service has always been integral to successful developmental agenda. Reconstitution of the state has to be part of a wider reconstitution of the public realm in which horizontal and vertical relationships are driven by participatory democratic ethos, not the perfunctory technocratic notions of “good governance.” Horizontal in the relationship within the civil society; vertical in the interactions between state and society. Framing the issue in terms of leadership alone will not do or capture the crisis of the militarisation of social consciousness, violence, or casual impunity in civil behaviour.

Fifth, social policymaking has to be profoundly sensitive to the gendered nature of labour market, the interactions between the formal and care economies, and the broad social relations. To illustrate with labour market-based entitlement, this requires sustained employment record, something that is inherently disadvantageous to women whose formal sector careers are interrupted by marriage, childrearing, or the burden of unpaid care economy. Rethinking social policy may involve a pro-natal approach, but women need to be treated as distinct persons rather than as bearers of procreational and nurturing roles. Often, attempts at targeting women reinforce the gendered roles of wives and mothers. The Progresa/Oportunidades programme in Mexico is a case in point (cf. UNRISD 2005). For all its intention to provide cash transfers, food handouts, ensure that children attend school and health centres regularly, the scheme ended up reinforcing the traditional idea of the women as mothers and hindered their autonomous labour market participation.

Sixth, leadership matters, so does policy. The reconstruction of social consensus and a developmental project are fundamental, both call for visionary leadership that is locally grounded in African realities; it calls for putting at the heart of our collective social contract social justice, equity, and the vicarious indignity that we should experience when others in our societies contend with the indignity of poverty and destitution. Social mobilization around these values can only proceed on the basis of justice rather than charity, active citizenship, and leadership in and outside the state. Major advances in social policy outcomes have been achieved, in and outside Africa,
with limited resources, while countries with relatively high per capita GNI have been stuck with high poverty levels.

References


