

Rethinking social policy in Africa

A return to a broader vision of social policy is, according to the author, essential to rethinking social policy in Africa. Here, he outlines and explains six fundamentals for such rethinking.

By: 'Jimí O. Adésínà, Professor of Sociology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. He coordinated the Africa section of the global UNRISD research project on 'Social Policy in a Development Context'.

The different regimes of stabilization and liberalization over the last 25 years in Sub-Saharan Africa social policy thinking can be classified into two broad segments. The first phase was inspired by Structural Adjustment orthodoxy, typified by a contraction of state social spending. Scant regard was paid to social policy; where it featured it was on the claimed basis that growth was enough to guarantee social well-being. The second segment followed overwhelming evidence that not only was adjustment not producing growth it was wreaking havoc across Africa's social landscape; and there were the popular protests against the policy. The initial response was to focus on the 'Social Dimensions of Adjustment' and provide 'safety nets' to address 'short-term market failure'. It continued to privilege the market-transactional basis for social provisioning, user charges for 'cost-recovery' in accessing publicly social services. Even so, evidence that adjustment was not working mounted, so did popular protests, and the contention of the policy terrain with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) within the United Nations: poverty was mounting and social indicators continued to regress. It prompted a search for 'explanations' and 'alternative approaches' to liberalisation. Joseph Wolfensohn's Comprehensive Development Framework, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and Poverty Reduction Growth Facilities are the outcomes – again without shifting the ontology of the market.

We know that the revenue contribution from user-fee charges is often negligible (about five percent) while substituting for budgetary allocation, and there has been a massive crisis of entitlement failure. Across a range of social development indicators, the gains of the first two decades of post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa were reversed; today we are struggling with Millennium Development Goals to reinvent what was achieved before but largely in a 'project' format rather than the comprehensive and inter-sectoral planning that underpinned much of what was achieved in the 1960–1980 period. Uganda's significant improvement in primary school enrolment has been at the expense of unworkably large average classroom size – between 100 and 120 pupils in a class! It is in sharp contrast to how universal primary education was rolled out under the Action Group government in 1954 in Western Nigeria.

I would suggest that fundamental to rethinking social policy in Africa is a return to a

broader vision of social policy. This is important for its long term efficacy, to the developmental agenda, inclusivity, and active citizenship. Below, I outline six imperatives of such rethinking.

Six fundamentals for rethinking social policy

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 which 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 but 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 rethink 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 means-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; and (c) 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.

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 that of the host country’s civil service, public school teachers and healthcare workers. Without the state, markets cannot function. The ‘embedded autonomy’ of a competent civil service has always been integral to a 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 nor will it capture the crisis of the militarisation of social consciousness, violence, or casual impunity in civil behaviour.

Fifth, 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.

Sixth, social policymaking has to be profoundly sensitive to the gendered nature of the labour market, the interactions between the formal and care economies, and the broad social relations. To illustrate with labour market-based entitlement, this requires a sustained employment record, something that is inherently disadvantageous to women whose formal sector careers are interrupted by marriage, childrearing, or the burden of the 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 Progresas/Oportunidades programme in Mexico is a case in point (cf. UNRISD 2005). For all its intentions to provide cash transfers, food handouts, ensure that children attended 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.

Selected reading

Elson, D. and N. Catagay, 'The Social Content of Macroeconomic Policies'. In *World Development* vol. 28, no. 7, 2000.

Espin-Andersen, G., 'Social Welfare Policy: Comparisons'. In Smelser, N.J. and Baltes, P.B. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001

Korpi, W. and J. Palme, 'The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State Institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries'. In *American Sociological Review*, vol.63, no.5, 1998.

Kuhnle, S. and S.E. Hort, *The Developmental Welfare State in Scandinavia: Lessons for the Developing World*. Social Policy and Development Programme Paper no. 17. Geneva: UNRISD, 2004.

Mkandawire, T. (ed.), *Social Policy in a Development Context*. London: UNRISD & Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Mkandawire, T., 'Targeting and Universalism in Poverty Reduction' (mimeo). Geneva: UNRISD, 2005.

UNRISD, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*. Geneva: UNRISD, 2005.