

REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AFRICA:  
PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION AND  
TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA

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## Introduction

This paper will set prospects and evaluate the challenges of social reconstruction and transformation in Africa. In the background, the paper notes that the theme of social policy cannot be more timely at this time that Africa in general and Kenya in particular are beginning to emerge from decades of economic decline, political repression and mismanagement and a crisis of confidence in our paths to transformation and development. More than ever before Africa needs not only to reclaim development but also to face the challenges of social reconstruction, that is, rebuilding social institutions and support systems eroded by years of neglect and the efforts of both internal and external forces to undermine them. This involves putting in place sustainable economic development strategies that include frameworks of coherent and relevant social policies geared at building and rebuilding institutions in the region and recovering people's collective self-confidence, integrity and social integration. (Aina, 199:70) Larger roles of social policy should be understood not only in the development process but as they relate to such issues as inclusion and legitimation, democratization, citizenship and rights, social movements and social and state reconstruction.

The four key arguments that shaped these reflections around social policy and social justice are;

- ❖ That to be of any usefulness in the attainment of an emancipatory and transformational agenda in Africa, we need a more holistic and integrated notion of social policy beyond one that is tied to the mere delivery of social services
- ❖ That any examination of social policy outside the historical, political and epistemological contexts within which the social policies are being developed, thought or practiced is unhelpful and lacks little practical and theoretical utility
- ❖ That any effective and fundamentally sustainable and viable social policy cannot be divorced from social justice or a social justice perspective
- ❖ That social policy is only practically and politically effective when there are agents, social and political movements and institutions that are its carriers, promoters and reinforcers.

## Defining Social Policy

The notion and attempts to define social policy are filled with tensions and contradictions with regard to different perspectives and positions emerging from equally different political and theoretical traditions that mainly come out of western thought and practices. There are also tensions emerging from the fact that there is an established academic and policy

discipline of social policy with its own patterns of evolution and its diversity based not only on different locations such as Europe and North America but within different Knowledge and political traditions that at times pitch the Anglo-Saxon against the Latin, individualism against collectivism, the right against the left and even within the conventional left, varieties of social democracy against the different socialisms and Marxism. Also, most of this is very much a 20<sup>th</sup> century development around experiments and struggles with social and political movements such as socialism, welfarism, social democracy, Marxism and anti-colonial nationalist struggles and state building.

There are many factors blurring the view of social policy in Africa. First, Africa has not began to understand the differences between the early experiences of the post-colonial regimes and experiments in Tanzania, Ghana, Algeria, Egypt and other countries where development planning had more or less social policy and social development contents. Secondly, in most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experiments with social policy, there were fundamental gaps about the subjects of policy that included the neglect and ignoring of key issues and constituencies such as those of race, feminism, sexuality and the inclusion of minority ethnic and social groups and regions. Furthermore, notions of social policy were either sectoralist and fragmented or holistic and integrated. Some tremendously focused on specific elements of social policy such as housing, education, social security or health. This was not seen as integrated and holistic strategies of confronting human well being and development. Rather the sectoralization and in certain cases, fragmentation have emerged at the level of administration and delivery and have come up to influence both study and formulation. Part of the reason for this is the very narrow professionalization of the domain of social policy as practice and its reduction to the disciplines and fields of social work, social welfare and administration. All of which have their origins in the ideological and political traditions that have constituted 20<sup>th</sup> century social policy thought and practice.

Consequently, the proposition that our engagement with issues of social policy in the world today requires a new kind of political and social construction that builds on the lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experiments and failures is valid. Therefore the definition and reconceptualization of social policy must take into consideration two factors; the new developments in the study of social policy and recognition of the fact that we are in an age of greater transparency and accountability, and the fact that the very terrain of social policy was born with little or no universal acceptance of key values, objectives and procedures except for broad vague notions of the care of dependent and vulnerable groups and some rights and entitlement elements.

Hill and Brambley argue that the definition of social policy in a theoretically coherent way is a more difficult task than might have been expected. Within any one theoretical tradition there are problems of unsatisfactory boundaries; choices between narrower core definitions and broader, more unwieldy ones and satisfactory/ unconvincing elements in the 'story' e.g. altruism. Between the traditions there are a few common elements, apart from support for dependent groups.

The paper supports a more holistic and integrated approach to social policy and proposes a definition of social policy as systematic and deliberate interventions in social and economic life for the purpose of ensuring the basic needs and well-being of the peoples of a society. Social policy is also the expression and definition of socially desirable goals in accordance with the rights of citizens and the objectives of human development through legislations, institutions, administrative programs and practices and structures of incentives and sanctions. Social policy thus embodies policies and legislations and the area of study that engages the issues of non-directly economic interventions for the promotion of human wellbeing and development. It is broader than the more technical or professional domains of social work and welfare. In terms of coverage it includes a wide array of policy and administrative designs and strategies, incentives and sanctions that promote access to and remove obstacles from basic needs for the marginalized and poor. It ranges from certain strategic social services such as basic education, primary health care, social security and housing to other necessities such as citizen safety and security. Social policy is therefore not a neutral notion. It is intrinsically tied up with world views, some social vision and mission and a perspective on development.

In this view, social policy is about making of a better world through intentional systematic policy making, where equity and productivity are valued, where equality of opportunities is promoted and where the marginalised, the excluded and the oppressed can find freedom, inclusion and emancipation from the structural and other sources that reproduce their negative situation. Social policy although requiring the state both as its terrain and point of expression and implementation, does not have to be necessarily driven by state actors. Neither does it have to be directly driven by them, but as public policy, it has to be located in a formal space of the state that ensures compliance and institutionalization. In other words, although it requires multiple stakeholders and actors, the state is a significant actor.

## Perspectives of Social Policy

There are four perspectives that shape the way we understand and use the notion of social policy.

- The political/ ideological perspective
- The rights based approach to social policy
- The developmental perspective
- The social justice perspective

Following is the examination of how these perspectives are related to the conditions and contexts in Africa.

The notion and practice of social policy is to a great extent defined by the political and ideological traditions within which it is being used. This often affects what is being emphasised and how social policy is conceived. Depending on the ideology or politics, social policy can be considered as residual, sectoralist and instrumental in terms of building political legitimacy for certain governments or parties. It can therefore be modified or discarded without any significant unease as to issues of principles or values. In other cases, an ideological or political perspective of social could be related to the fundamental values of the political groups and their world views. In this context, social policy could be seen as inseparable from a fundamentalist set of ideological values and positions around issues such as the role of the state and the markets and the nature of social responsibility for social welfare. In some cases, these values and world views could come from a definition of social justice or from a conception of individuality and the individual's role in politics, society and the economy.

The rights-based approach was engendered from the definition of certain human needs and condition as constituting entitlements and rights which all citizens possess and reasonable society must meet. This approach locates social policy as the expression in policy terms of citizen's rights and these rights could be those deriving from basic needs or as part of a citizen's entitlements. The rights based approach often contain a legal approach deriving from international conventions and covenants to which citizens could attempt to seek resource in instances of extreme and other violations.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be called an era of development if one's focus is on the major structural changes that occurred in the conditions of a wide array of nations that were once either colonies or dependencies of a small number of predominantly western and European Nations. The structural transformations that have been called development need to

be seen in terms of a dialectical relationship between the different sets of nations that were undergoing different processes of negative and positive transformations in these relationships and structures that constituted the world economy at this time. The development perspective of social policy regards social policy as a central ingredient for the building of human capital and capabilities that produce and reproduce the developmental outcomes. Thus social policy is intrinsically tied up with economic policy in building the institutional capacity, the human capital, the utilities and the physical and social infrastructures that provide the added value for the significant economic and social transformations that generate development and their sustained growth. Social policy is therefore not an abstract or sentimental element of social relations but a concrete and essential ingredient for development.

The fourth perspective of social policy is that of social justice. This perspective at times overlaps with aspects of political/ideological perspective as the goals or ends that ideology and politics seek to achieve. Although traditions of social justice are not new in every culture and date back to pre-biblical times, there is emerging a resurgence of social justice mobilizing, organizing and theorizing. These are neither monolithic nor homogenous but they derive from values of equity, fairness, equality, responsibility opportunity, recognition and the will to tackle the root causes of structural and related factors that limit the attainment of collective human well being for the majority of the peoples. This position is vague because social justice thinking operates in a highly contested terrain even more so than social policy or even development. Social justice traditions exist in both the right and left political and ideological discourse, in philosophy, in both socialist and liberal thought.

The points made above are not that simple and clear cut. Even in the pursuit of social justice societies and nations need to develop priorities in contexts of scarce and contested resources. The challenges extended are depicted in the following questions:

- How do we determine priorities?
- Even in the context of the best intentions, is representational democracy sufficient?
- Democracy may be a necessary condition but does it integrate, recognize and respect minorities and minority rights?
- How do we make choices in our confrontation of injustices?
- Are there a scale of suffering and an order of emancipation?
- Can we rank injustices?
- What are the moral and political criteria?
- Is one injustice lesser than another?

The past twenty five years have been a motion from one crisis to another in Africa; from wars, famines, Floods, diseases such as HIV/AIDS to SAPs, the break down of peace, law and just order, the rise of poverty and increased impoverishment of all sectors of society. He thus concluded that no society emerges from generations of crises and traumas without a reconstruction process or discourse. He noted however that African peoples have not faced up their devastation; they deny their experiences and hide their recovery and healing under vague notions such as NEPAD or MDGs. What Africans need is their own Marshall plan for the reconstruction and development of their peoples. To do this, Africa must rethink, reclaim and rework social policy.