

Reflections on Social Policy in the African Context: An Introduction

Over the last forty years, the neoliberal counter-revolution in Development Economics was a contagion that quickly spread to Social Policy. At its inception, the counter-revolution was a revolt against the ‘welfare state’ in its normative and institutional framings. Frederick von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (2007 [1944]) was an early salvo in this connection. By the 1980s in the global North, this involved efforts to retrench the state and restructure welfare provision. In the global South, and especially in the African context, this involved a comprehensive reconstitution of the way the state ‘thinks’ and acts concerning the economy and its citizens. From the idea of a state that ‘thinks’ in terms of a comprehensive obligation for securing long-term development and the wellbeing of its citizens, what emerged was a ‘night-watchman’ state, more recently recast in the language of the ‘capable state’ – one more focused on securing the space for private investors than the wellbeing of its citizens. The neoliberal counter-revolution sought to extend market transaction logic to every domain of life, not merely economic, but also social and political. Economic policy became increasingly disconnected from social policy, with a public policy orientation averse to socialised provisioning, solidaristic risk pooling, (inter-class) redistribution, and universalism. Social policy became largely residual.

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Two broad contending forces have always shaped social policy. On the one hand, we have those who see its objectives as mopping up the diswelfares of the market and institutional failures. On the other hand, are those who see social policy as having an encompassing reach and coverage, integrated with economic policy, and underpinned by norms of equality and solidarity. The former takes a residual approach, with the market as first port of call for social provisioning. Public welfare is a port of last resort focused on the deserving poor who cannot meet their social provisioning. The latter addresses diswelfares in both the ways we pursue development and design production activities and respond to needs at various stages of the life-cycle.

Over the last thirty years, in response to Africa’s development challenges and diswelfares its citizens face, a more residual take on social policy has mainly become hegemonic, with powerful external and local actors using the continent as the site of a range of social experiments. Much of this has been driven by anti-development thinking that imagines the solution to

poverty as primarily a matter of ‘just give money to the poor’ – even as the ‘poor’ are defined in highly restrictive fashion to cover a smaller proportion of the population experiencing severe entitlement failure – or direct distribution of earnings from mineral wealth to citizens (a question of ‘oil to cash’). Missing from such propositions is a structural approach to understanding the bases of entitlement failure, poverty and inequality. There is a general refusal to engage with the maladjustment of Africa’s economies, deepening their structural weaknesses. The economies are no less subject to the vagaries of external forces in the second decade of the twenty-first century than they were in the eighth decade of the twentieth. The social dislocations and citizens’ diswelfares, even in the context of improved growth on the back of the commodity supercycle, have not shown a commensurate reduction. In most instances, the diswelfares have deepened. Wealth-based inequality measures have worsened in much of the continent, and the poverty rate (measured at \$3.10 PPP/day) is above 70 per cent of the population in several countries. It is a public policy regime sustained by an alliance of domestic and external actors.

If we understand the relations between state and citizens as a web of rights and obligations, the state’s retreat from socialised and universal social provisioning undermines

its legitimacy, reinforces its more coercive face in its engagements with citizens, and undermines social cohesion. Leaving citizens to fend for themselves in the marketplace makes them subjects of the vagaries of the market. Neither is there evidence that reducing social policy to social assistance, which is narrowly focused on the deserving poor in increasingly dualistic social policy regimes, eliminates poverty or ensures quality services for the poor. The concern is getting the poor to 'cope with chronic poverty, destitution, and vulnerability' (World Bank 2018: 5).

Beyond this, of course, is the lack of appreciation that social policy (or even social protection) is not simply about the relief of poverty. Progressive social policy is fundamentally about ensuring human flourishing. It does this by enhancing the productive capacity of citizens through public investment in education, health care, housing, etc.; reconciling 'the burden of reproduction with that of other social tasks' (Mkandawire 2011); protecting people from the vagaries of life throughout the life-cycle; paying attention to the distributive outcome of economic performance; and advancing social cohesion or the nation-building objectives that are so vital in the African context. It does all these more efficiently through a 'prophylactic' approach of preventing vulnerability rather than waiting to attend to it after people have fallen through the cracks.

Whether in the more progressive welfare regimes in the global North, or the postcolonial experiences of the global South and Africa, successful advancement in human wellbeing has always involved the integration of social and economic policies and constructing social policy regimes focused on its multiple tasks. Public

provisioning of education, health care, housing as social investment, based on solidarity and advancing equality, supports economic development. Economic development grounded in the same norms of solidarity and advancing equality ensures the resources necessary to extend social policy. The objectives of social policy measures are not only prophylactic but aimed at being transformative of the economy, social relations, social institutions, and deepening democracy. This approach to social policy is defined as Transformative Social Policy (TSP). It is a take on social policy that frames several of the articles in this special issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*. CODESRIA Books recently published the full set of papers from which this special issue draws with the title *Social Policy in the African Context*.

This special issue is a collection of seven articles that reflect on different dimensions of social policy in Africa. Katja Hujo's article is concerned with rethinking social policy in the African context from a perspective of its transformative role and power. She highlights the 'transformative role of social policy in opposition to the residual or secondary role' accorded to social policy in mainstream academia and the international 'development' community. While there was a 'social turn' in international development discourse from the 1990s onwards – initiated by the 'social dimensions of adjustment' to the current debate on inequality – Hujo emphasises the residual take on social policy in this 'social turn'. The 'turn' was in the context of the policy failures, mass entitlement failures, and rising inequalities that accompanied the neoliberal project of using countries of the global South (and Africa in particular) as open laboratories for a socio-eco-

omic experiment in public policy. International opposition to the neoliberal experiments was most evident at the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development, which suggested 'a more integrated approach linking poverty reduction with social inclusion and employment creation as an alternative to the neoliberal model.'

Hujo frames TSP as an alternative to the neoliberal social policy framework, focusing on enacting transformative change. While the former deploys social policy instruments 'to alleviate the worst forms of poverty' and its symptoms, the latter addresses the 'root causes of poverty, inequality and unsustainability.' TSP deploys social policy as a complement to economic policy 'to guarantee market stability, productivity and innovation, social reproduction, equal opportunities and more equal outcomes across class, gender, ethnicity, age or location, state legitimacy, social cohesion and integration.' In rethinking social policy in the African context, Hujo argues for framing the discourse around four axes: a combination of a rights-based entitlement and productivist take on social policy, the need for sustainable financing of social policy, integrating environmental challenges and inequality in framing social policy, and the politics of social policy making.

Newman Tekwa's article focuses on a critical aspect of TSP – the transformation of social relations, particularly gender relations. Tekwa offers TSP as an evaluative framework. A component of the flagship research project on the Social Policy Dimensions of Land and Agrarian Reform, at the South African Research Chair in Social Policy, it focused on the fast-track land reform programme (FTLRP) in Zimbabwe. While the FTLRP

delivered on the redistributive task of social policy and provided the basis for enhancing the productive capacity of the beneficiaries, its implications for the transformation of social relations, in particular gender relations, is the focus of Tekwa's contribution. As Mkandawire (2011: 150–1) argues, a major task of social policy is 'the reconciliation of the burden of reproduction with that of other social tasks.' This social reproduction task of social policy is essential for the transformation of gender relations. With the weakening of public infrastructure investment in Zimbabwe, a corollary of the economic crisis, women's care burden increased. Women in male-headed households spend more time than men on unremunerated household chores. In particular, women in the A1 schemes (small-scale land allotments) 'reported an extraordinarily longer working day of more than 12 hours' relative to women in the A2 schemes (medium size land allotments). Ownership of time-saving household consumer items and outsourcing household chores to hired helps reflect the internal class dimensions of the care burden among women in the A1 schemes relative to the A2 schemes. Whatever the redistributive and production impact of the FTLRP, evaluation from the perspective of the task of social reproduction demonstrates a major blind spot.

Clement Chipenda explores land reform as a social policy. It is the second of the projects within the Social Policy Dimensions and Land and Agrarian Reform research programme. In the OECD-centric debate on social policy, land reform hardly features. This is bewildering considering that the concern of social policy is in securing and enhancing human wellbeing and the objectives of social policy include

redistribution, enhancing people's productive capacity, and social protection, among others. These objectives for enhancing human wellbeing are self-consciously behind most land and agrarian reform programmes. Chipenda's article reports the findings of a study of the post-2000 land reform programme in Zimbabwe in the country's Goromonzi District. The article discusses the new agrarian structure in the aftermath of the land reform programme and explores social policy outcomes of the reform. The land reform programme has been significantly redistributive and compared with the residents of the adjoining communal areas has placed larger acreage of land assets in the hands of the beneficiaries. Chipenda illustrates the ex-ante protection that access to land offered its beneficiaries in terms of relative food security, and a more intangible sense of rural homestead or *musha*. Chipenda highlights the phenomenon of livestock as 'social insurance' and as a resource that protects owners of livestock against external shocks. A reconceptualisation of land reform as a social policy instrument contributes to the bodies of knowledge in both the fields of land reform and social policy.

In her article, Marlize Rabe explores the myth of male breadwinners in South Africa within the context of high levels of unemployment in the country. While prevailing social norms expect men to be income earners and breadwinners in their households with women expected to be responsible for a considerable share of paid and unpaid care in families, the labour market situation exposes these as myths. The prevailing social assistance regime also privileges women as recipients, if not the beneficiaries, of the social grants system.

The combination of prevailing high levels of unemployment and modalities of social grants suggests that men are becoming financial liabilities within households. To remedy the situation, Rabe argues, is not simply a matter of creating employment opportunities to allow men to recapture their roles as breadwinners; rather what is required is a TSP approach that ensures dual-earner households, and getting men to take up more equitable care responsibility within the household.

In his article, Omoruan offers an analysis of the national social health insurance scheme that was launched in Nigeria in 2005. Ostensibly, the objective of the Nigerian Social Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) includes bringing quality health care within reach of all Nigerians and reducing out-of-pocket health expenditure. In contrast to the universal publicly provided health care that prevailed in the country up to the late-1970s, the NHIS introduced an individual health insurance scheme in line with neoliberal thinking on injecting market transactional logic into as many domains of social provisioning as is feasible. Contrary to the promises of the NHIS, coverage remains extremely low (at 3 per cent of the population), the scheme is fragmentary with multiple health care plans and low levels of risk pooling. The prospect of expanding coverage remains limited due to premiums being unaffordable to most of the country's residents.

In the final article in this special issue, Kolawole Omomowo and Jimi Adesina explore mutual support institutions and practices in two urban townships in South Africa as the basis for social policy learning in the African context. Mutual support practices covered in the study reported by Omomowo and Adesina

range from proto-social insurance schemes such as burial societies, rotating savings and credit schemes to community-based mutual support during celebrations and funerals. As indicated in the article, people join self-help groups ‘to achieve what they would not have been able to achieve alone.’ Social solidarity, trust, mutual obligation, and reciprocity are vital to the functioning of the mutual support of social institutions. If Titmuss (1956) highlighted social, fiscal and occupational welfare as dimensions of the ‘social division’ of welfare, this study suggests that we should add ‘community welfare’ to the dimensions of how humans secure wellbeing. If the antecedent of mutual support institutions and practices stretch back to the ‘cattle lending’ and community solidarity practices of the precolonial era, their contemporary forms and practices represent nimble responses to the precarity of the prevailing capitalist environment. The normative underpinning of the mutual support institutions provides the basis for the design of locally sensitive and responsive social policy architecture beyond the residual neoliberal take on social policy design.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue are extracts from the longer book, *Social Policy in the African Context*. Some of the articles place an accent on the TSP framework as a handle on policy making, as an analytical and heuristic device, and as an evaluative device. TSP stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing neoliberal-inspired fragmented and stratified social policy architecture which underpins the ‘social protection’ discourse being paraded and merchandised across the continent. Unlike the neoliberal-inspired take on social policy, TSP is concerned with addressing the root causes of

poverty and vulnerability rather than its symptoms. Rather than a residual take on social policy intended to mop-up market and institutional failures, TSP is concerned with social policy that works in tandem with economic policy, underpinned by shared norms and values, that seeks to enhance productive capacity while paying attention to how the proceeds of economic growth are shared. Hujo’s four-axial framing of rethinking social policy for twenty-first century Africa becomes important in this regard.

The need to pay attention to gender relations even in old social welfare systems or for policy instruments that work quite well in addressing other tasks of social policy is clearly demonstrated by Tekwa. Social policy regimes and instruments are never gender-neutral. The important message of his article is the imperative of embedding gender sensitivity in social policy designs.

The sectoral look at the social policy domain – one in the domain of health, the other in regard to land reform – by Omoruan and Chipenda offers insights into the role of the market in social policy making and the tapping of multiple tasks of social policy. The neoliberal logic of the push for a social health insurance approach to delivering quality health care services, as Omoruan’s article shows, is a glaring failure. The health insurance scheme is fragmented, unaffordable to the overwhelming proportion of the population. Chipenda’s article on land reform points to a neglected but important policy instrument. Land reform simultaneously presses multiple tasks of social policy – enhancing the productive capacity of the beneficiaries among the A1 farmers, addressing protection ex-ante, and being redistributive. The challenge for Zimbabwe is something highlighted – the im-

perative of getting social policy and economic policy to work in tandem. Without paying attention to economic policy, the potential for social policy to deliver on the welfare of its beneficiaries will be undermined.

Rabe addresses some dimensions of a transformative approach to social policy. In the context of the labour market and modalities for delivering social assistance in South Africa, the myth of the male breadwinner becomes glaring. However, the response to the labour market challenges of unemployment and precarious employment will not be the reconstitution of the male breadwinner model but in efforts to enhance a dual-earner household model and greater male involvement in household care work. It requires combining productive (labour market) work and social reproduction (care work).

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