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The Journal publishes analyses of social development issues as they affect the poor and marginalized. It deals especially with concerns relevant to sub Saharan Africa and is addressed to development and social workers, planners, policymakers and academics in a variety of fields.

Published twice annually, the Journal seeks to enhance understanding of the social development processes so as to contribute to the planning and implementation of appropriate intervention strategies at different levels. Its goal is to discover how to target projects that are relevant to those most in need and how to maximize popular participation to create egalitarian and productive communities.

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EDITORIAL

MUCH DEBATE AND activity in Africa in the last decades has dealt with questions of land use and land ownership; revolving around matters of equity, productivity and economic stability in the individual countries. It is unnecessary to repeat well-known general facts about the impact of colonialism on patterns of land ownership (though less is known of its impact on productivity): what is now of interest is a careful, empirical examination of the detailed ways in which the different systems, land reforms, agricultural extension strategies and methods of agricultural production over the centuries have affected, for better or worse, the social welfare of the people.

Those who like to think of the African experience as a timeless repetition of the same practices will be surprised to learn that Africa has never, in recorded history, been short of experiments—whether home-grown or imposed—on systems of land tenure and agriculture. No country lacks this history, although some still have to excavate it with painstaking care and draw the relevant lessons.

Kassa Belay shows that a variety of approaches to providing extension services in Ethiopia have succeeded each other, resulting in a less than optimal use of resources and organization of inputs; to the alienation of both extension workers and the farmers whom they are supposed to support. Research and extension work has been inadequately co-ordinated and the lack of a genuine participatory approach in providing extension services, together with structural shortages—in particular, access to land and the shortage of working capital—has alienated farmers from modern agricultural methods.

Dondeyne et al., researching in south east Tanzania, provide a study of the interface between cultural, matrilineal patterns of access to land and the development of social and economic stratification in the area under study. Dondeyne starts by pointing out that secure access to land is one of the most important features underpinning sustainable agricultural practices. This security is not always obtained when customary systems of tenure apply, particularly when people of different ethnic backgrounds are living and intermarrying in a relatively small
area. The Tanzanian case is of great interest to social reformers, having undergone not only the imposition of British land tenure systems but a long period of socialist reform—villagization—and, subsequently, a number of further policy changes. The study focuses on the access to land of women who are thought to be particularly disadvantaged by the current mêlée of land tenure systems. Nevertheless the authors conclude that women appear to be discriminated against, not as far as access to land is concerned, but more often by having to move away from their homes (in the case of marriage, divorce or widowhood), thus losing control of their lands to other kin. They warn, however, that as population density increases, access to land is increasingly difficult and the strong clans are more likely to control the land in their territory, thus increasing social stratification. On the other hand, they predict that if current legislation results in greater security of tenure, this may also lead to more sustainable use of the land.

This latter conclusion points to a more general and poignant observation: that the different goals—equity and productivity—may be in serious conflict: improving equity may reduce productivity; and vice versa.

Participatory development is the subject of Blessings Chinsinga's article. His starting point is that the debilitating effects of structural adjustment policies has been the focus of donor-driven poverty alleviation programmes meant to develop the capacity of reforming societies to deal with poverty and related social stress. Chinsinga points out that it is now commonplace that the success of these programmes depends on their being rooted in participatory local development. In this strategy, planners and officials have to surrender their authority and leadership to the local group, whose task it is to define the objectives and management structures of a particular programme. If such programmes are to succeed, experts and donors can be involved only as facilitators and resource-persons. Within this context Chinsinga proceeds to examine the 1994 poverty alleviation programme in Malawi, documenting the complete failure of senior officials to take the role proscribed. Poverty alleviation in Malawi, as elsewhere, will be successful only if senior government officials are able to institutionalize
it at grassroots and to do this they need to understand the concept as transformational in intention.

Two studies from Botswana are included in this issue. Barbara Ntombi Ngwenya shows that funeral societies in Botswana can be seen as much richer institutions than a mere form of economic support during times of bereavement. She analyses the ways in which different burial societies are organized to support the ceremonies, discussions, donations, needs and capabilities of different members of the social group (particularly close family members) that take place around a bereavement and how they reduce the anxiety of bereaved kin members by taking on a "co-parenting" role. She describes how sibling groups in the bereaved family support each other, enhancing social ties and bring about new sensibilities of caring and compassion. Far from seeing death as an unmitigated source of stress, then, Ngwenya shows some of the ways in which it can used to heal and enhance social relationships within a group.

Modie-Moroka’s article continues her study of women prisoners in Botswana with a discussion of the socio-demographic characteristics of her sample of women in prison—their age, marital status and level of education, their work history, the reasons for their imprisonment, their experiences of violence and substance abuse and their physical and mental health. Like other contributors to this issue, Modie-Moroka uses both qualitative and quantitative data in her research, arguing that life histories gathered using open-ended interview techniques are necessary to understand the quality of the subject’s experience. This is particularly important in studying women, whose conception of the self is relational and less bounded than that of men. She uses her findings to argue that there is a network of social, cultural, economic and ideological factors that puts poor and marginalized women at risk of criminal behaviour.

Two articles on quite different matters conclude this issue. One is Kaseke’s conceptualization of the lack of access to formal social security as a form of social exclusion. Formal social security systems introduced during the pre-Independence period were designed to benefit wage-earners who were white. Although at Independence these systems lost their racist character, they continued to exclude non-wage earners: that
is, the majority of the country and nearly all women. As the numbers of the unemployed and those in poverty have grown in overwhelming numbers the last 20 years, more and more people are excluded from social security. Kaseke argues that a radical policy-shift must take place to incorporate all members of the society into a tiered pension scheme providing different kinds of cover.

Chuks Mba notes that many countries in Africa suffer from a lack of demographic data that is not always reliable, up-to-date or sufficiently rich for many uses. Demographic information is important to planners and policymakers and a host of scholars, including social scientists and students of social change, economics and history. As the accuracy of age reporting forms the cornerstone of the usefulness and reliability of this data it is possible to form a general opinion of the reliability of census data if age reporting appears to be accurate. With this preamble, Mba focuses on Lesotho, an country remarkable in Africa for having a history of regular census-taking that dates back to 1875. Using a variety of statistical analytical tools, Mba examines the age reporting for Lesotho and finds that, while there are some distortions, the data are fairly accurate and there has been a modest improvement in age-sex reporting over the ten years from the 1986 to 1996 censuses.

Acknowledgements

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