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The International Year of the Family: Reflections from an African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the factors that are impacting negatively on the welfare of African families. This comes in the wake of the International Year of the Family which sought to draw the attention of governments to the need to develop appropriate and sustainable strategies for enhancing the welfare of the family. It is postulated that the economic crises facing many African countries represents the biggest single threat to the welfare of African families. Thus, this paper argues that finding a solution to the economic crisis is a prerequisite for safeguarding the welfare of the family. Other factors that are crucial in enhancing the welfare of African families include extending social security and population control services to the majority of the people. The author observes that African governments will need to transform their rhetoric into concrete programmes of action if there are going to be an spin-off benefits from observing the International Year of the Family.

Introduction

The African conceptualisation of the family centres around the extended family as an important unit of analysis and also as the basis for the sustenance of society. It is generally accepted, however, that owing to urbanisation, industrialisation and exposure to Western values there has been a gradual weakening of the extended family. A new value system which places greater emphasis on the nuclear family is rapidly emerging. The weakening of the extended family has meant the disintegration of the traditional social welfare system which revolved around the extended family. The functions of the family therefore continue to undergo modifications as a response to the constantly changing environment. The family has to rearrange itself organisationally in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the changing needs of its membership. This points to the necessity for governments to create enabling environments. The International Year of the Family, therefore, provides an opportunity for African governments to reflect on the factors that are impacting negatively on the welfare of African families and ultimately to develop strategies for enhancing their welfare.

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In response to the declaration of 1994 as the International Year of the Family by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Africa and the Organisation of African Unity urged member countries "...to develop long-term strategies in support of African families" (ECA/OAU Report, 1993:16). This call was made as a result of the realisation that there are many factors which are impacting negatively on African families. Perhaps the single biggest factor impacting negatively is the economic crisis facing African countries.

Africa has been experiencing an economic crisis since the early 1970's and economists argue that the reasons for the economic crises are both internal and external (Kadenge, 1992). The external factor points to Africa's vulnerable position in relation to the terms of trade and is manifested through a serious balance of payments deficit. The balance of payments deficit forces governments to borrow heavily in order to finance their imports and ultimately African countries end up rechanneling their export earnings to service the mounting debts. Consequently, resources are diverted away from projects or programmes that could improve human welfare. The internal factor, on the other hand, links the economic crisis in Africa to poor management of the economy through such factors as rampant corruption and inappropriate policies. The combination of internal and external factors has made African economies largely uncompetitive and unable to attract investment; consequently they have failed to generate the economic growth necessary to guarantee human welfare. It is not surprising that the welfare of African families has deteriorated as a consequence of the worsening economic crisis.

Economic Reform and its Implications for the Family

As a result of the economic crisis many African governments have embarked on economic structural adjustment programmes on the advice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. According to Kaluwa (1992:1) structural adjustment programmes are:

"...designed both to correct BOP (Balance of Payments) crises and restore medium to long-term growth prospects based on efficient resource use and act as catalysts for other foreign capital inflows".

The aim of structural adjustment is therefore to achieve sustainable levels of economic growth. The ultimate objective is to improve the standards of living of the people. The standard measures that are taken in order to achieve economic growth under structural adjustment include adopting appropriate fiscal and monetary policies, trade liberalisation and the removal of domestic controls.

Although there is controversy on the merits of structural adjustment as a strategy for economic reform, the absence of any clearly defined alternative strategies for economic reform in addition to implicit and sometimes explicit pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund has made it necessary for many African governments to embark on these economic reform policies. The concern now among those African governments which have adopted structural adjustment is on developing appropriate mechanisms to cushion the poor and vulnerable groups against the negative effects of structural adjustment. These cushioning mechanisms are necessary if the welfare of the family is to be guaranteed. Although there is a growing appreciation of the transitional costs of structural adjustment, there are no sufficient and effective measures put in place to protect people against these.

The transitional costs of adjustment impact negatively on the capacity of poor families to sustain themselves. The transitional costs include increases in the prices of basic commodities and thus putting them beyond the reach of the poor. These price increases are due to inflation and the removal of subsidies on basic commodities which is considered one of the important prerequisites in the reduction of the budget deficit. When price hikes are uncontrolled, the rate of inflation also increases, resulting in a drop in real incomes. Inflation erodes the purchasing power of consumers, particularly in circumstances where salary and wage increases are not in harmony with the rate of inflation. As a result of the shrinkages in the size of the pay packet, *"...it is common to see some servants turning their offices into mini-markets as they sell vegetables, eggs and other products in order to supplement the falling real incomes"* (Kaseke, 1992:5).

Secondly, transitional costs occur because governments are forced to reduce the size of the civil service as part of the efforts to reduce the budget deficit. In Ghana, for instance, 60,000 workers in the civil service were retrenched as part of the process of implementing the structural adjustment programme (Turok, 1991). In Zimbabwe, the government was expected to have reduced the size of the civil service by 25% at the end of the economic reform programme. With the removal of domestic controls on labour, employers in the private sector are also retrenching some of their workers as result of the competition generated by deregulation and liberalisation of the economy. The competition so generated has the effect of squeezing our uncompetitive enterprises, hence the need to retrench. It is this frictional unemployment which threatens the survival of families.

Thirdly, transitional costs also arise from the introduction of user fees in education and health. The introduction of user fees is necessitated by the need to cut back on government expenditure on social services as part of the efforts of reducing the budget deficit. Consequently, social services are treated as commodities which can be purchased on the open market, impacting negatively on poor

families as this makes social services inaccessible. The inaccessibility of social services is reflected in the increasing rate of drop-outs in schools and the decrease in the level of utilisation of health services.

In view of the social costs of structural adjustment, there is now a growing realisation that there is need to protect poor families and vulnerable groups. In an effort to protect the family, many African governments are calling for the establishment of Social Dimension Funds to cushion poor families against the social costs of adjustment. In establishing the Social Dimension Fund special attention needs to be given to effective strategies for targeting poor families and vulnerable groups. Effective targeting enables the intended beneficiaries to benefit fully from the Fund. The question of accessibility should also be addressed so that the intended beneficiaries can easily avail themselves of the services. The current position in many African countries is that welfare services are not within easy reach of the poor, particularly the rural poor, as there is an urban bias in the provision of welfare services. In order to deal with the problem of urban bias and at the same time make welfare services more accessible, African governments need to take welfare services to the rural people.

Despite the optimism about the capacity of structural adjustment programmes to facilitate employment generation in the long-term, there is no evidence to suggest that this optimism is justified. The unemployment crisis continues to deepen leaving many families without sources of support. The cost of doing business in many African countries is eroding the capacity of many enterprises to generate more jobs. This is largely attributed to too much reliance on imported inputs in the manufacturing process. It is therefore necessary for African governments to promote labour-intensive, small to medium sized enterprises in order to create more jobs.

Protecting the Family through Social Security

The majority of African countries do not have comprehensive social security schemes and therefore the people do not enjoy meaningful social protection. Although there are some social security schemes in operation, these are, however, disjointed and offer only rudimentary assistance. The negative social costs of structural adjustment discussed earlier on are exacerbated by the absence of formal social security provision. Workers who are retrenched from their jobs do not have any safety net to fall back on apart from the inadequate retrenchment packages worked out by their employers. It is therefore necessary to introduce comprehensive social security systems to cover all segments of the population. Comprehen-

sive social security systems should provide protection against such contingencies as old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, injury and death. Whilst the provision of social security worldwide is targeted at those in formal employment, the challenge for African governments is to extend social protection to the rural population, largely dependent on agriculture for its sustenance. The contingencies impact negatively on the welfare of the rural families because of their vulnerability. It has also been observed that where non-contributory forms of social security such as social assistance are in existence, the rural people do not usually benefit either because they are unaware of their existence or the schemes are inaccessible (Kaseke, 1988). Furthermore, if the rural people get assistance, the benefits are usually too low and therefore inadequate for purposes of meeting their basic needs. It should be noted that social security schemes, if properly designed and implemented, can be instruments for achieving both vertical and horizontal redistribution of income. Redistribution is necessary in African countries given the glaring inequalities in the distribution of income. This also points to the need for providing social assistance for the benefit of those unable to contribute to social security schemes. The redistributive impact is greater if the social assistance schemes are financed largely from direct taxation. Whilst it is acknowledged that African countries have very limited resources, it is still possible for them to provide meaningful social assistance schemes provided they get their priorities right. For instance, governments can reduce their military expenditure and rechannel the resources to finance social assistance schemes.

The introduction of structural adjustment programmes has also impacted negatively on the development of social security systems in Africa. Firstly, the massive retrenchment of workers reduces the number of contributors to social security schemes and this undermines the viability of these schemes. Secondly, both employers and employees find it increasingly burdensome to pay additional contributions in the face of falling real incomes and profits.

Protecting the Family through Control of Population

The enhancement of the welfare of African families is also dependent upon reducing the size of the family. The ECA/OAU Report (1993:4) observes that "...while most African countries are experiencing gradual declines in their levels of mortality, their fertility rates remain high or constant". The following table is illustrative of the high fertility and population growth rates in Eastern and Southern Africa:

Table 1: Eastern and Southern Africa: Some Demographic Indicators (1989)

Country	Fertility Rate	Population Growth Rate (1980 - 1988)	Food Production (1980 - 1988)
Angola	6.4	2.6	80
Botswana	7.1	3.6	69
Burundi	6.8	2.8	88
Comoros	6.6	3.1	97
Ethiopia	6.9	1.8	91
Kenya	6.7	4.1	103
Lesotho	5.8	2.8	72
Madagascar	6.6	3.1	92
Malawi	7.6	3.2	86
Mauritius	1.9	1.5	94
Mozambique	6.4	2.6	82
Namibia	6.1	3.1	92
Rwanda	8.2	3.4	72
Seychelles	3.4	0.6	—
Somalia	6.6	3.5	97
Swaziland	6.5	3.4	—
Tanzania	7.1	3.7	90
Uganda	7.3	3.4	85
Zambia	7.2	3.9	96
Zimbabwe	5.7	3.1	94

Source: UNICEF (1991) *Challenges for Children and Women in the 1990s: Eastern and Southern Africa in Profile*.

Table 1 shows high fertility rates in the face of declining food production per capita in various African countries. These fertility rates will remain high unless governments give sufficient attention to strategies designed to bring about rural and economic progress, as socioeconomic development is a crucial factor in efforts to reduce fertility. It is also common knowledge that there is an imbalance between population and economic growth rates with the economic growth rates lagging behind the rates of population growth. Consequently, the economy is unable to generate enough goods and services to sustain the growing population and this ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of life. African governments cannot

reduce their population growth rates significantly unless they revamp their family planning programmes. Revamping family planning services without improving the status of women would not produce the desired results. It is therefore necessary to introduce measures designed to improve the status of women. These would include creating opportunities for earning income and their participation in the decision-making process. As UNICEF (1991:35) observes:

"...women who have a fairly wide range of economic opportunities, who have full control over their lives (including their sexual lives) and who are educated (particularly in health and nutrition and family planning) are less likely to allow fate to dictate the number of children they will bear".

It is incumbent upon African governments to create an enabling environment which would facilitate the integration of women into the mainstream of society. This integration would serve to enhance the welfare of African families given their central role in the care of children.

The Potential for Change: An Overview

The issues raised by African governments in relation to the International Year of the Family are not in any way new. These are issues that have been discussed for over a decade now but without any discernible progress being made. The International Year of the Family provided a world-wide opportunity to reflect on the centrality of the family in safeguarding human welfare and to identify measures that can be taken to strengthen it in the face of social, cultural, political and economic changes taking place. It is accepted that the economic crisis facing Africa provides the single biggest threat to the survival and welfare of African families. It is also acknowledged that the causation for this crisis can be attributed to both external and internal factors.

In order to solve this economic crisis, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been advising African governments to embark on economic structural adjustment. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest that structural adjustment is the answer to the African economic crisis. As Moyo (1991) observes there is no African country which has successfully implemented a structural adjustment programme and the experiences of individual countries provide a dossier of the pitfalls to be avoided. Ironically, critics of structural adjustment have not been able to suggest a suitable and credible alternative. Although there have been efforts to reduce the indebtedness of African countries through such specific measures as writing off debts, no significant strides have been made in creating a

new economic order. It is obvious that as long as the economic crisis continues, the survival of African families remains threatened.

As far as the internal factors argument on the causation of the African economic crisis is concerned, it is highly likely that problems of corruption and inefficiency will continue unless African governments make themselves more transparent and accountable. Efforts to strengthen African families should be linked to the process of making African governments more transparent and accountable since this forces governments to translate statements of intent into concrete programmes of action.

In making any projections about the positive spin-offs from the International Year of the Family, one needs to determine the extent to which African governments are committed to the objectives of this declaration. If commitment is measured by statements of intent then one can safely assume that the majority of African governments are committed. However, if commitment is measured by the extent to which governments come up with concrete programmes of action then most African governments would fall far short. There is just too much rhetoric. The intentions of African governments in strengthening the family are noble but what is needed is to identify in concrete terms what needs to be done in order to strengthen African families.

There seems to be a tendency for governments not only in Africa, but in the Third World in general, to observe United Nations declarations as a way of affirming their membership and commitment to the United Nations but without making a critical analysis of what these declarations actually mean to their countries. In many instances, observing these declarations is seen as an opportunity to attract donor funding. Whilst there is nothing wrong in attracting donor funding it is, however, necessary to ensure that there is a definitive programme of action which can be sustained well after the withdrawal of the donor.

Conclusion

In Africa, the institution of the family is clearly under stress because of the economic crisis the region is experiencing. The stress has been exacerbated by the wave of structural adjustment programmes being implemented in many African countries. These structural adjustment programmes have social costs which impact negatively on families. There is a pressing need to develop mechanisms for cushioning the poor and vulnerable groups against these social costs. It is also observed that the impact of these social costs would be minimal if African countries had comprehensive social security schemes. There is therefore need to develop these in accordance with the varying capacities of the different African countries.

Perhaps of significant importance is the need to reduce Africa's fertility levels in order to ensure a balance between population and economic growth. The present rates of economic growth cannot sustain Africa's rapidly growing population. In order to ensure optimum results, the introduction of family planning services should be linked to deliberate efforts to improve the status of women in African societies. The protection of the family will remain an elusive goal unless African governments develop concrete programmes of action that are in harmony with African realities.

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