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Social Policy and Research Environment in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This paper has discussed a number of issues on the nature and state of social policy practice and research in Zambia. One interesting observation is that there is no specific conception of social policy in Zambia, but rather conceived in terms of instruments of social policy such as health and educational services. Though the government policy is to promote stakeholder participation, there is no strong evidence of active participation in the policy formulation process. Similarly, policy implementation does not reflect policy guidelines partly due to inadequate human and financial resources; inadequate technical data; and political interference. It has also been noted that in the recent years, social and economic policies have not been conceived as complementary in nature. Economic policy has assumed a centre stage against the backdrop of adverse economic conditions. Social policy has been conceived in terms of mitigating the negative impacts of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) which has been instituted to restore economic prosperity.

With regard to the state of social policy research, the problem areas for research, and the methods and techniques employed, have been appropriate for social policy practice in Zambia. However, problems relating to data analysis, presentation of findings and utilisation in policy formulation and implementation need to be addressed for social research to become an important tool for social policy practice in Zambia.

Introduction

There are various conceptions of social policy. As an aspect of public policy, social policy is conceived in general terms as being concerned with all the organised efforts of a society to remedy or prevent problems for the well-being of its members in both a residual and institutional sense (Ziter, 1993). In this paper an holistic conception of social policy has been adopted. It is conceived as being concerned

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with the development of a just, equal and prosperous society. This means that social policy is not only concerned with the sectors usually defined as "social" such as health, education, social welfare, and social security; but also includes sectors more commonly identified as "economic" such as employment, infrastructure and housing (World Bank, 1993).

Historically, social policy formulation, implementation and evaluation in Zambia have been mainly the domain of the central government. However, this approach has been criticised for excluding the lower organs of government and other stakeholders in the private and community sectors. It has also been criticised for encouraging over-dependency by the people on government hand-outs. Despite this criticism, social policy formulation and implementation, based on incremental responses to social needs, have played a critical role in addressing a number of social problems. For instance, during the first decade of Zambia's independence, pragmatic social policies were formulated aimed at extending social service provision to those areas which had been severely neglected by the colonial administration. There was heavy investment in education and health sectors; promotion of social equality; and narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. The guiding principle for social policy formulation and implementation during this period was the philosophy of Humanism, which stressed communal response to social issues and commitment to the equitable distribution of national resources.

However, the social policy benefits of the first decade were short-lived. The trouble began to set in during the mid-1970s. The fall in the world's copper prices; high oil prices; increasing international economic protectionism; and inappropriate domestic macro-economic policies have had negative impact on economic growth and social policy environment. In an effort to restore economic prosperity, the government adopted economic measures generally referred to the economic structural adjustment programme (SAP). Under this programme, the government of the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) has adopted the strategy of 'disengagement' regarding the provision of social services. This is manifested through policy measures such as cost-sharing (user fees); reduction in budgetary allocation for social services in real terms, cash budget system of public finance; and decontrolled pricing regime. The strategy of the government is predicated on the principle that the welfare of the public is primarily the responsibility of the individual, families and the communities in which they live (Tembo, 1993). The role of the government will be limited to the formulation of policies and programmes aimed at "creating an enabling environment" for economic growth. The assumption is that the economic growth will generate job opportunities which will enable individuals and families to become economically and socially self-sufficient, and reduce poverty. As a consequence of the foregoing, the function of social policy, as will be discussed later in this paper, has been sidelined by that of

economic policy, despite the unprecedented insurgence of mass poverty brought about partly by the structural adjustment programme. The fact that social and economic policies should complement each other for a sound and balanced national development seems to have been missed.

This paper reviews the social policy and research environment in Zambia over the past ten years. It discusses a number of issues including the key players in social policy formulation and implementation; linkages between social and economic policies; and the strengths and gaps of social policy studies. The paper is based on a recently completed study on the nature and state of social policy practice and research in Zambia.

The study on the nature and state of social policy practice and research in Zambia was qualitative in nature in order to collect data that reflected the actual situation on the ground in terms of the state and nature of policy practice. Data was collected through a series of unstructured interviews with the people most knowledgeable about and involved in social policy issues. The sample was drawn from the government ministries and non-governmental organisations in four provincial centres, mainly Lusaka; Ndola; Kasama; and Chipata. A total of 34 organisations were included in the sample. Key policy makers and administrators were the informants in each organisation. Secondary data was obtained through an extensive review of relevant documents. In addition, an inventory of social policy research was made focusing on the methodologies employed and the major findings.

Policy Formulation and Implementation

It has been observed that there is no specific conception of social policy in Zambia and that social policy goals are enunciated at a level of such generality that they do not become working objectives. Even the social sector itself has not been fully conceptualised. Most policy actors conceive social policy in terms of provision of social services such as education, health, and housing which are basically instruments of social policy. Similarly, the study indicated that although efforts have been made to promote popular participation in policy implementation, the government does not foster broad-based participation in the social policy formulation process. For instance, the civil societies have no direct effect on the formulation of policies. They only play an advocacy role, which in some cases, has proved to be fruitful.

In terms of policy implementation, there are some gaps observed between policy and programmes, as implementation does not reflect the policy guidelines partly due to the inadequate data and financial resources to facilitate policy implementation.

Several factors contributing to the inability by the government and the civil societies to respond adequately to the needs of the Zambian society have been identified. The factors which are both political and technical in nature include the following: inadequate financial material and human resources; difficulties in operationalising policy objectives and absence of implementation guidelines; poor co-ordination and fragmentation in service delivery; inadequate institutional framework for policy formulation and implementation; inadequate conditions of service for civil service personnel; and political interference in the management of programmes and projects.

Linkage Between Social and Economic Policies

There is a strong relationship between social policy and economic policy. The relationship is based on the fact that, while economic policy promotes economic development objectives for the development of the economy, social policy promotes social development objectives such as the development of an equitable society. To achieve this objective, social policy prioritises poverty reduction, increased employment and societal cohesion (Moser, 1993). In this context social and economic policies provide complementary perspectives as to how social institutions, including markets, function. While economic policy is concerned with the efficient allocation of economic resources for increased productivity, social policy is concerned with the manner in which both the structure of society and its institutions determine the participation of different social groups in the development process.

However, the analysis of the linkage between economic and social policies in Zambia has established that the economic difficulties the country has been experiencing during the past two decades have created an unfavourable environment for social policy. The on-going economic structural adjustment programme has undermined the capacity of the government to deliver social services. This is manifested in the reduction of government expenditure in the social sector in real terms in the recent years. Apparently, the reduction is based on the treasury model which contains assumptions which do not accurately reflect the relationship between economic policy and social policy. A top-down perspective has been adopted and the relationships are assumed to run from the economic sector to the social sector.

Despite this trend, however, the government expenditure has increased in some sub-sectors of the social sector such as education and health. These sub-sectors have also enjoyed favourable expenditure from the donor funds. In addition, there has been a dramatic change in the social service delivery system in the recent years.

Most of the services are being provided through civil societies because they are evidently more efficient and accountable than government institutions and organisations.

Social Policy

Social research is an integral part of social policy formulation and implementation because it establishes the facts upon which informed policy decisions could be made. However, there are some strengths and gaps in the current state of social policy research practice in Zambia.

The major strengths relate to the subject matter for research; research orientation; and the implications of the research findings. The focus of most studies undertaken between 1980 and 1995 had been on the growing incidence of poverty in Zambia in its various manifestations. This has been a subject of great concern by the government and the civil societies. For instance, in 1993, the government established a national study fund to promote research on the incidence of poverty in Zambia and therefore, the subject matter for research has been relevant to social policy. Similarly, most of the studies could best be described as 'applied' oriented research with extensive use of survey and case study methods and techniques. The objective of most of the studies had been to analyse the problems and make policy recommendations on how to resolve the problems. In this context, the studies could have facilitated policy formulation and implementation. Similarly, the methods and techniques used could enable one to have a better insight of the problems of concern.

The major gaps are those relating to data analysis; presentation of findings; and the impact on social policy formulation and implementation. For most of the studies data analysis was inadequate. the findings were presented in the form of summaries of interview data, with no reflections on the data collected through other stated techniques such as participant and non-participation observations and focus group discussions. Similarly, the structure and contents of most of the study reports were grossly inadequate. For instance, information was amiss on the rationale for the sample sizes drawn, techniques of data analysis used, and possible limitations of the studies. Such information is necessary to enable one to make an intelligent judgment of the validity and reliability of the findings. The extent to which the findings have been utilised in the formulation and implementation of social policies is equally debatable. There has been no strong link between the research studies and potential users of the findings, as such information is amiss in the study reports. Most of the studies therefore could best be described as 'supply' oriented and not 'demand' oriented. This is partly due to the fact that most of the studies were externally initiated and funded.

Conclusion

This paper has identified and analysed some pertinent issues on social policy and research environment in Zambia, arising from a recent study on the same theme. One interesting observation is that social policy in Zambia has been conceived in a narrow perspective, arising from the misconception between policy objectives and policy instruments. The other observation is that in the recent years, social policy and economic policy have not been conceived as complementary in nature in the context of national development. The economic policy has assumed a centre stage in policy formulation and of national development at the expense of social policy. Similarly, although social research has been recognised as an important instrument for social policy formulation in Zambia, the extent to which the findings have been utilised in policy formulation is highly debatable, as there is no strong linkage between research activities and potential users of the research findings.

Recommendations

- (1) There is a need to decentralise authority and responsibilities among the key social policy actors within the hierarchy of government ministries and department, as well as to foster community participation in the identification of needs and resources for implementation of programmes and projects.
- (2) There is a need to rationalise and strengthen the institutional framework for the formulation and implementation of social policies with specific reference to the inter-organisational co-ordination among government ministries, and between government ministries and civil societies. This should be coupled with a continuous process of monitoring and analysis of social policies to remove contradictory tendencies between sectoral policy instruments.
- (3) Apart from identification of new priority areas for social research through beneficiary assessment surveys, a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of social policy research on social policy practice needs to be undertaken. This is with specific reference to the utilisation of the findings on policy formulation and implementation.
- (4) As a long term measure, the structure and contents of the training courses in social research methods and techniques need to be reviewed and restructured to make them more effective and relevant to social policy practice. In the short term, seminars and training workshops should be organised to exchange information and experiences among research institutions and organisations in the social policy field on research methods and techniques, and application of findings to social policy practice.

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