



Social Policy in Times of Crises

Michael Kpessa-Whyte

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, while originally a health crisis, has become a crisis of education, housing, employment and labour market, food security, social security, care and so on. These crises have exposed the vulnerability of our societies, compelling us to rethink how economic and social activities are organized to promote human well-being, which is the ultimate concern of social policy (see Box 1). In our attempts to address the COVID-19 pandemic, what lessons can African countries draw from a history of crises across different times and places?

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL POLICY

“Collective interventions to directly affect social welfare, social institutions and social relations[...] concerned with the redistributive effects of economic policy, the protection of people from the vagaries of the market and the changing circumstances of age, the enhancement of the productive potential of members of society, and the reconciliation of the burden of reproduction” (Mkandawire, 2011).

Box 1: Definition of social policy

SOCIAL POLICY AND CRISES: CLOUDS AND SILVER LININGS

Social policy has a close relationship with crisis; there have been times when social policy has been used to address and to pre-empt crisis, and there have been times when social policy has

been the victim of crisis, seen as expendable in the face of more “urgent” concerns.

SOCIAL POLICY AS A RESPONSE TO CRISIS

The industrialization of Western nations in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century brought about not only massive economic growth but also numerous challenges for human well-being. These included changes in family and community life, an increase in the urban and aged populations, the creation of a landless working class, and a rise of cyclical unemployment.

To address these crises of well-being, and perhaps also to protect their economic and political power, Western governments introduced several measures to ease the hardships of their citizenry (see Figure 1). It is interesting to note that in Britain, a now well-established welfare state, social programmes only came into being after the devastating impact of World War II.

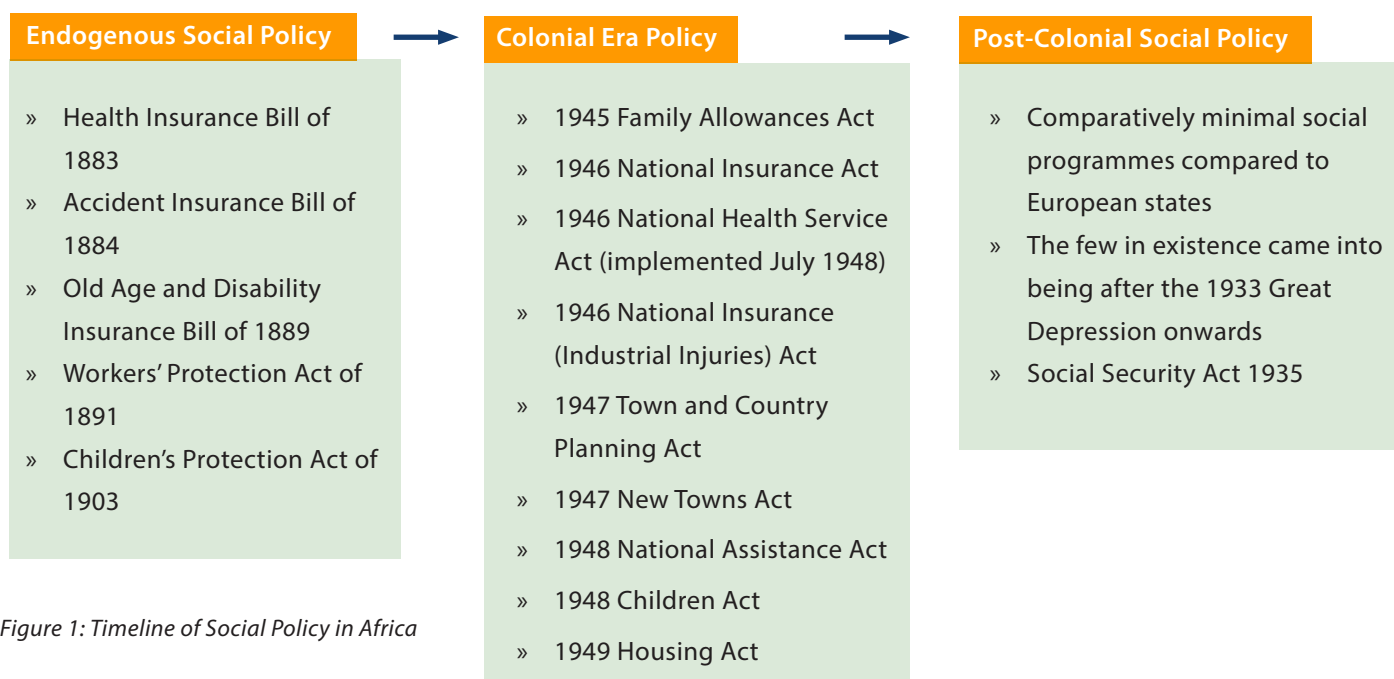


Figure 1: Timeline of Social Policy in Africa

SOCIAL POLICY AS A MEANS TO PRE-EMPT CRISIS

In the wake of independence from colonial rule, countries across the African continent were confronted with ethnically diverse populations challenged by poverty, non-literacy, and a lack of basic necessities. In order to encourage social change and pre-empt political, economic and social crises, post-colonial African governments proactively used social policy to promote both

national-building and “modernisation”, through ambitious social policy programmes. For instance, Tanzania paid special attention to sending secondary and university students away to geographically and ethnically unfamiliar towns in order to foster national unity. Universal education, free healthcare, incremental housing and social security programmes were also hallmarks of this era.

SOCIAL POLICY AS A VICTIM OF CRISIS

In the late 1970s, countries in the global North experienced high inflation and high unemployment, leading to economic recession, while the oil crises of the mid to late 1970s hit oil-importing African nations extremely hard. Economic difficulties led globally to severe cuts in social policy programmes in the 1980s. In Northern countries, increasing pressure on welfare programmes, combined with concerns about intergenerational equity, resulted in cost-cutting measures and the rise of a market logic to social provisioning. African nations were also convinced in the 1980s that generous social provisioning was an obstacle to the pursuit of socio-economic development, and most governments relinquished the state's role as the main provider of social services as they subscribed to Structural Adjustment Programmes. The commodification of education, health, housing, social security, among others, took firm hold during this era.

CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

Crises can be a launching pad to the creation of better social policy regimes. The COVID-19 pandemic gives African countries the opportunity to introduce creative social policies with wider coverage, better targeting mechanisms, and improved implementation. This is the time to consider social investments in home-schooling and e-learning for education and in tele-medicine and other technologies for healthcare; to develop flexible employment terms and conditions, including the ability to work from home; and to design and invest in housing for low-and no-income citizens who are most vulnerable during lockdowns and other social restrictions. Social assistance, insurance and care programmes should also be re-designed at this time to be more inclusive of informal sector workers.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE Q&A SESSION

- Social policy is broader than social protection; social policy goes beyond attention to the vulnerable to give all citizens the opportunity to improve their well-being and participate fully in society.
- Policymakers and practitioners who claim to lack the financial resources for social policy programmes and interventions can learn from the early African nationalists who were able to creatively finance social interventions for their citizens.
- The third tier of SSNIT was designed to offer informal workers a place in the national social security programme on a voluntary basis. However, this mechanism has failed to attract the desired number of contributors from the thriving informal sector. SSNIT could widen the contributory pool by the selling or renting SSNIT properties to informal sector contributors.
- New ways of carrying out educational, employment and health care activities in a post-COVID-19 world must be properly studied and designed to prevent unintended consequences. For instance, any re-design of educational policy to promote homeschooling and e-learning must be mindful of the further burden it may place on women and girls.

REFERENCE: Mkandawire, Thandika (2011). Welfare regimes and economic development: bridging the conceptual gap. In V. Fitzgerald, J. Heyer and R. Thorp (Eds.), *Overcoming the Persistence of Poverty and Inequality* (pp. 149-171). Basingstoke: Palgrave

“ Finance is always used to scare away good ideas from finding their way into policy and programmes.”

Dr. Michael Kpessa-Whyte (25 February 2021)

Speaker



Dr. Michael Kpessa-Whyte is a Senior Research Fellow with the History and Politics Section at the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana, Legon. He is a political scientist in the tradition of Comparative Public Policy and Political Institutions. His research interests include social policy and socio-economic transformation in Africa; aging and retirement income security (pension) policies in Africa; and public policy and democratization in Africa.

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Dr. Kpessa-Whyte is the author of several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters; and he teaches various undergraduate and graduates courses relating to the study of African politics.

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- The Evolution of Social Policy in Africa: Up to and Beyond COVID - Professor 'Jimi O. Adesina
- Social Policy in Times of Crises - Dr. Michael Kpessa-Whyte
- Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy Beyond COVID-19 - Professor Dzodzi Tsikata

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