

**Implementing Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa:
Some Implications for Social Work Practice and Training**

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Introduction

The main elements involved in the African economic crisis include deteriorating levels of public and private investment, mounting foreign debt, inflationary budget deficits, incapability of maintaining public expenditure on social services (in particular health and education) and the maintenance of infrastructure generally. This is made worse by drastic declines in production in key sectors and increasing rates of unemployment and overall poverty.

Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) are only the most recent in a long series of similar attempts at resolving this economic crisis in Africa during the course of the last three decades of post-independence. Structural adjustment programmes (and previous policies, eg those termed "stabilisation programmes" and "economic reform programmes") have had immense impact on the countries undertaking the reforms, and in many cases have created further hardships for vulnerable groups within these countries, however these groups are defined.

This paper considers the issue of the implementation of structural adjustment programmes in African countries. The aftermath of these programmes is so profound that almost every aspect of life is affected. As such it is important that social workers become aware of the resulting consequences and consider the implications for their own practice. It is also necessary to consider ways in which knowledge about structural adjustment and its social effects can be incorporated in the curriculum of schools of social work in Africa.

What is Structural Adjustment?

Structural adjustment programmes usually have the same basic elements (see Robinson, 1991:2):

- (1) Public deficit reduction, mainly through expenditure reductions rather than revenue increases, including the removal of subsidies, increases in "cost recovery" (ie user payments for social services), reduction in the extent of public participation in the economy through streamlining and/or privatisation of parastatals, and reduction in the size of the civil service.
- (2) Monetary austerity, through reduction in the public sector borrowing requirement, increased interest rates and credit restraint.
- (3) Devaluation of the exchange rate, unification of multiple exchange rates or other arrangements, and institution of a system of regular exchange rate changes to maintain export competitiveness.
- (4) Trade liberalisation, through removal of quotas and administered trade restrictions, harmonisation and reduction of tariffs and specific assistance to exporters.
- (5) Bureaucratic streamlining, particularly in respect of investment approval, together with reduction in Government control over prices, wages and employment conditions.

- (6) Introduction of policies aimed at the "Social Dimensions of Adjustment" (SDA), in recognition of the fact that fiscal and monetary austerity, devaluation, removal of price controls, etc, are likely to have an immediate adverse impact, particularly on vulnerable groups.

This blend of policies is a mixture of stabilisation (short-term reduction of balance of payments and public deficit problems, the concern of International Monetary Fund) and "structural adjustment" *per se* (concerned with longer term sustained economic viability and growth, the domain of the World Bank). These measures are seen as critical to revitalising the economies of African countries, to improve the efficiency of resource allocation, and to promote growth and employment. However it is also recognised that SAPs also create economic hardships, both for the majority, but especially for the very poor and most vulnerable groups in society.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social consequences of Structural Adjustment

Social workers will have to deal with the consequences of these programmes, at least in their initial stages - although it does not seem possible to distinguish "short term" from "long term" as the effects of structural adjustment may create difficulties over many years. Such consequences as increased poverty brought about by devaluation of currencies, a widening income gap between rich and poor, increasing malnutrition with the removal of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and a spiralling rate of inflation (at least in the beginning phase of the programmes) will create hardships for both the traditional "vulnerable" groups and indeed for the majority generally.

As Ishengoma (1991:3) points out, the vulnerable groups of the population, such as children, severely handicapped people, and the elderly, cannot be drawn into the productive system and are likely to suffer very much from the consequences of adjustment policies. They require some form of support, although there is no clear plan of action in most adjustment measures to ensure their integration into society. There should be therefore complementary policies to protect such groups during periods of adjustment until resumption of growth permits low income households to meet their basic needs independently. The programmes should include, for example, employment creation schemes and nutrition support for the most deprived groups.

The United Nations positively links the deteriorating social and economic situation in Africa, but also Latin America and much of Asia, to the adoption of structural adjustment measures. For example the United Nations Children's Fund has documented how foreign debt and structural adjustment programmes have contributed to rising infant mortality, closed health clinics, empty schools, growing malnutrition and the spread of preventable diseases. UNICEF have noted that over the course of the 1980s, average incomes fell by 10% in most of Latin America and by over 20% in sub-Saharan Africa, while in many urban areas, real minimum wages have declined by as much as 50%. UNICEF has noted (1990:8):

"...it is essential to strip away the niceties of economic parlance and say that...the developing world's debt, both in the manner in which it was incurred and in the manner in which it is being "adjusted to",...is simply an outrage against a large section of humanity".

The negative social impact of SAPs arises from the fact that the stringencies of the programmes severely affects vulnerable groups and that special measures to protect these groups have often only been added as an afterthought. Many programmes have not included an awareness of the social consequences of adjustment as a pivotal part of the planning process. An exception to this situation, and perhaps the best example of attempting to cope with the social dimensions of adjustment is the Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment (PAMSCAD) in Ghana.

Is there an alternative to SAPs?

Whether SAPs are or are not effective is the subject of intense debate. Many may feel there is little alternative in a situation of chronic underdevelopment, brought about in part by mismanagement of national economies. Others may point to the structural inequalities in relationships between North and South, where, through massive annual interest payments, developing countries are placed in a situation of permanent debt bondage. However the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has recommended an alternative to the orthodox adjustment programmes, called the "African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation" (AAF). One fundamental difference between the AAF and SAPs is that the AAF's first goal is not the accumulation of foreign exchange for debt repayments, but long-term economic development in the interests of the majority. For example, whereas SAPs chiefly aid export crops, the AAF advocates devoting between 20 and 25% of public investment to improving rural infrastructure, broad-based agricultural productivity and rural employment. The specific goals of the AAF programme for economic self-reliance include:

- a) enabling peoples to feed themselves, by achieving a proper balance between the production of food for domestic consumption and the production of agricultural exports;
- b) lessening import dependence, moving away from the present situation in which too many essential items, intermediate inputs and capital goods are imported;
- c) re-alignment of production patterns with consumption so that people consume more of what is domestically produced in the areas of food, clothing, housing and basic services; and
- d) managing debt and debt servicing in order to allocate scarce foreign exchange according to development priorities.

(see UNECA, 1989, cited in ECEJ, 1990:74).

Although the proposals suggested by the AAF strategy might be preferable to the SAPs, it is questionable whether African countries have ever really been given a chance to implement a self-directed strategy, and the possibility of this in the future appears bleak. If the economic crisis is now so severe that structural adjustment has become essential, the issue becomes one of making the most of this approach, as it appears unrealistic that other alternatives are available at this time (see Robinson, 1991:3).

Social Work - a Marginal Activity?

Social workers in some respects see themselves as a vulnerable group. There is the feeling that they play a very marginal role in society, usually of a remedial nature, are never consulted by policy makers and planners and have not developed their own professional status and authority in society (this view was expressed forcefully by several participants at the 1991 Harare Workshop on the Social Implications of SAPs). Partly this remains the fault of social workers themselves. Their very preoccupation with "vulnerable groups" is itself a marginalising process as social workers will always find themselves dealing with casualties after the event. If social workers are to take on issues such as structural adjustment and to be heard by policy-makers, they must take on an advocacy role, if possible in the planning stages of these programmes. This means that social workers must work even harder to gain professional credibility and public exposure, so that they are taken more seriously by their own Governments.

Social Development Orientation in Social Work

There is a need to encourage a social development orientation in social work which should be proactive rather than remedial and which should be oriented more towards group and community work methods than casework (although casework is still a vital aspect of methodology). In addition social workers should be more concerned with the plight of the majority in African societies following the adoption of SAPs, which inevitably means an orientation towards those living in the rural areas, who often constitute over 70% of the population in a given country. Social workers should be concerned with issues of poverty, deteriorating health conditions, the homeless, street children, women in development (WID) and the need for income generation. Specifically this will also mean that social workers should attempt to engage with groups and communities in ways that promote participation and empowerment.

Social Work Roles and Structural Adjustment

- (1) Social workers need to assist people as much as possible to be self-reliant and to enhance their capacity to generate income for themselves and their families. A post-SAP society is likely to be a poorer society for the majority, at least in the "short-term". It becomes important therefore that social workers use their skills in project appraisal, project proposal formulation, development of income-generating projects, etc, to assist people in survival.
- (2) Social workers need to formulate a concrete action plan aimed at working with those groups further marginalised by the SAP process, for example the elderly and children.

- (3) Social workers need to establish a higher profile for their profession with those involved in decision making and planning. This will mean promoting the profession generally and developing stronger National Associations of Social Workers, linked to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).
- (4) Social workers need to engage in research into the consequences of the adoption of SAPs. A particular area of interest is to try to develop research tools that can assess the impact of SAPs on the population generally, or groups within a particular country. There is a need to try to separate the consequences of general poverty from that relating directly to the results of SAPs. In certain cases there may be beneficial effects resulting from SAPs and again social work research could aim to identify these and examine the particular reasons responsible for success rather than failure.

Implications for Social Work training

As most African countries have either embarked on structural adjustment policies, or are in the process of doing so, and as the consequences can be severe for the population generally, it seems appropriate that social workers should familiarise themselves with the topic of structural adjustment and the various issues involved with this. Social workers themselves need to be trained in order to understand the complexities involved in macro-economic policies such as SAP, and in turn impart their knowledge to students, or at least be in a position to discuss the issue with students, some of whom may be better informed than themselves!

This has relevance in terms of the curriculum as students need to be made aware of issues concerning the introduction of SAPs. They should be familiar with the topic of structural adjustment, not only in terms of its effects on vulnerable groups, but its rationale, social and economic implications, etc. This knowledge, combined with a social activist/lobbyist role and a concern to become involved as professionals (perhaps through national professional associations, initially as student members) might provide the needed impetus to involvement in mainstream social policy and planning. Social workers must develop their public persona much more than they have to date. Placing the social responsibility of social workers in dealing with issues related to structural adjustment firmly on the curriculum, provides the necessary first step in this process.

This will have implications for the training of social work students who will need to be encouraged to consider innovative ways of working with the rural poor and engaging with communities. More emphasis on fieldwork training and practical experience generally would be useful in this context.

Fieldwork training

Practical fieldwork training has an indispensable role to play in developing an awareness on the part of social work students regarding the social consequences of SAP. This can be achieved by encouraging students to analyse situations of poverty and deprivation in ways that extend beyond the immediate individual, family, group or community concerned. Students should be

encouraged to reflect on and analyse situations, rather than simply responding to the "presenting problem" in an uncritical way. Effective supervision in field practice situations will assist students to enhance their critical skills in this regard.

Development of a curriculum

The curriculum should aim to cover the following five critical areas:

1. To provide an overall understanding of the concept of structural adjustment.
2. To understand the historical background prior to the adoption of these programmes, ie gain an awareness of the reasons why countries have opted for SAPs.
3. To understand the implications of adopting SAP and in particular the consequences this will have for the majority, as well as the "vulnerable groups" in society.
4. To identify appropriate social work roles in relation to assisting these groups.
5. To facilitate the acquisition of relevant skills which may assist clients/client groups suffering the effects of structural adjustment.

Use of the curriculum

The curriculum could be used as a discrete or separate course on its own, or more likely as one module within an established existing course (such as Social Policy, Socio-economic Development, or similar type of course). In being treated as a separate topic on its own, this has the advantage of giving some weight to the subject and encouraging a more comprehensive overview.

Alternatively the material generated through the curriculum could be infused into existing courses on the Certificate, Diploma, Degree or other programme. The idea of the infusion approach is to recognise the complexities of the "social dimension" of SAPs and to examine how structural adjustment has affected individuals, groups and communities on a multi-dimensional level. For example there is no reason why the effects of structural adjustment should not be examined as a topic within methods courses - ie Casework, Groupwork and Community Work. In addition other courses such as Human Growth and Development, Community Health, Integrated Social Work Methods and similar courses could all include sections relating to the consequences of structural adjustment on the particular situation under consideration.

Perhaps the most useful approach is to develop a mixture of these two - a specific module on the subject of SAP and an attempt to infuse our knowledge of the social effects of SAP into the curriculum generally.

Core and elective courses

In devising the curriculum, social work educators should consider whether knowledge on issues relating to structural adjustment should be contained within core, or foundation courses (ie compulsory course areas), or within elective courses, where the student has a degree of choice in selection of the course area. My submission would be that the input on SAP should be in the core area, due to the fact that the consequences of SAP will be profound and experienced at all levels of the social system.

Linking with training on Human Rights

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) are presently cooperating in the production of a curriculum on Human Rights training for Schools of Social Work. Although consideration of human rights issues may traditionally be seen as a concern that involves the civil and political rights of individuals, increasingly social workers are also concerned with the social and economic circumstances which brings about an infringement of human rights on a broader level. SAPs are a part of this situation as the social consequences resulting from the programmes may exacerbate the already serious economic situation in these countries. Increasing inflation, retrenchment and "cost sharing" measures create even harsher burdens on the poor majority.

In the context of the Third World, human rights are infringed on a massive scale that leads to death and disability for many. Human rights are inevitably linked to personal and collective survival, dignity and development. Poverty, lack of access to basic social services, malnutrition and inequitable distribution of resources generally should be issues of concern to social workers everywhere.

The development of a Human Rights Curriculum is therefore a very similar exercise to the development of a curriculum concerning the issue of structural adjustment. Both are concerned with basic issues of social justice and equity. The International Federation of Social Workers has stated that:

"...social work has from its inception been a human rights profession, having as its basic tenet the intrinsic value of every human being, and has as its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity" (Declaration of Ethical Principles, IFSW, 1988:2).

Gender issues

The issue of gender needs to be carefully considered within the curriculum. Although women should not be separated as a "vulnerable group" on the same level as children and the disabled, it should be recognised that they will inevitably bear a heavier load in relation to their family-caring and other responsibilities. However the effect of structural adjustment on men, the increasing stress of trying to earn a living wage, fear of redundancies and actual redundancy will also create problems for them as a group. Gender is an important variable to consider in any social work curriculum and in a similar way should be considered in a curriculum relating to the effects of SAP.

Conclusion

The development of a curriculum, which can address some of the issues resulting from the adoption of SAPs by many African governments, is an urgent task for social work educators. There are several dimensions to this task, some of which are listed below:

1. The need to develop a coherent identity and vision for the profession of social work in Africa. In particular to

- encourage a social development perspective for social work and to find ways to further the involvement of social work in social policy and planning.
2. The need to develop a concern for basic human rights on social and economic levels (ie social justice and equity) and to link this with issues relating to structural adjustment.
 3. The need to train the trainers - to inform social work educators, practising social workers and students with regard to the background, rationale and implications of structural adjustment programmes.
 4. The need to promote innovative, creative and dynamic ways of working with those affected by structural adjustment and to incorporate these methods in the social work curriculum.

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