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## **World Bank Development Policies and Poverty Alleviation in Africa**

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**ABSTRACT** - In contemporary Africa, poverty is widespread and much effort has been devoted to its alleviation. How do World Bank policies affect the outcomes? What are the repercussions of these policies on the stability of African economies? This paper addresses these questions through the political economy approach and an analytical survey of the literature. Although Africa is the focus of study, country-specific data are also used where necessary in order to strengthen our arguments. From the adduced evidence, the World Bank supported adjustment reforms exacerbate instead of reducing poverty as they deal with growth-related problems at the expense of human-centred or development associated measures. This has created concerns that the reforms are an ineffective poverty alleviation instrument.

**KEYWORDS:** World Bank, Policies, Development, Poverty, Africa.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary Africa, poverty is widespread and much effort has been devoted to its alleviation. The success of this endeavour depends on the speed of economic and social development in the continent. Unfortunately, development has not really permeated Africa, a situation that is compounded



by global economic arrangements that have become more competitive and sophisticated than African economies can cope with (Ramakrishna, 2001). For instance, in 2001 Africa produced the same types of commodities and exported them to the same markets as it did in the 1970s and 1980s (Onimede, 2003). Thus, whereas Africa accounts for 12 per cent of world population, it boasts of only 1 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and 1.5 per cent of world trade (World Bank, 2003a).

Inaccessibility to social services, inequitable distribution of wealth, corruption, bad governance, civil strife, growing indebtedness, marginalisation in world trade and finance and the accompanying socio-economic malaise, which African countries are experiencing, are pointers to the root causes of Africa's poverty. Because conventional development models<sup>1</sup> appear suspect insofar as they have failed the African poor for whom development has become a mirage, it is imperative for Africans to rely more on their own initiatives for the economic recovery and hence poverty alleviation in the continent.

No doubt, the campaign against poverty has taken the center stage in Africa's development efforts. The huge resources African governments commit to poverty alleviation programmes notwithstanding, donor agencies have also shown profound interest in the same cause. Yet, poverty in Africa persists. The persistence of poverty in the continent, therefore, elicits concerns over the policies being pursued in its alleviation. Specifically, the World Bank<sup>2</sup> supported adjustment reforms have sparked considerable debate about their effectiveness as a poverty alleviation instrument in Africa. The aim of this paper is to contribute to that debate.

### **Conceptual Issues on Development and Poverty in Africa**

The controversy<sup>3</sup> surrounding the concept of development remains unresolved although its meaning in terms of improvement in the material and social aspects of life appears unexceptionable (United Nations, 2000). Be that as it may, development entails increases in real per capita incomes of a country over a long period of time coupled with equitable distribution of same in order to achieve improvement in the standard of living of the population (Meier, 1989; Iwayemi, 1993). This view is collaborated by Todaro (1992) and Stiglitz (2001) who assert that development involves the acceleration of economic growth and changes in structures, attitudes and institutions with a view to achieving the reduction of inequality and poverty.

Thus, development is modernisation with a human approach as emphasis is on distributive justice as basic needs are satisfied through the income generated and the fruits of development shared equitably among the

different segments of society. This humanitarian approach to development problems has compelled Harrison (1993) to regard development as a continuous and positively evaluated process of social and economic change that involves the totality of human experience. But development also needs to be sustainable, which leads Ake (1990) to argue that since people sustain development, it must be an integral part of their lives. This presupposes that sustainable development only occurs when the processes and the innovation are relevant to the aspirations of a people and are also assimilated and improved upon by them according to their desires.

In societies where development is absent, poverty is inevitable. This is revealed in the association between low levels of development and high incidence of poverty (for details, see Ajakaiye and Olomola, 1999). This is without prejudice to the measurement of poverty, which is based on either income or expenditure parameter (United Nations, 1997). Little wonder that Obadan (1996) refers to the poor as those people whose measured standard of living in terms of income is below the poverty line. Klugman and Braithwaite (1998) equally believe that poverty is the inability to maintain a minimum level of existence because an individual's income cannot purchase the basic needs of life. On the other hand, Demery (1993) and Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2001) stress the expenditure based measurement of poverty as that shows whether all outlays made by a household, consumption of own production and the imputed values of services derived from the ownership of consumer durables and housing are enough to put it above the poverty line. Therefore, although poverty manifests in conditions of low development, it is measurable by an income or expenditure level below which an accepted standard of living cannot be guaranteed.

As it is here presented, poverty is related to inability to sustain oneself materially. But current thinking increasingly recognises poverty as multidimensional, involving, for instance, lack of access to education, to health care and infrastructural facilities, the denial of opportunities and choices to take independent decisions, to command the respect of others and even remoteness to political power. Of course, deprivation in any one area reinforces, and is in turn reinforced by deprivation in others. For example, because the poor lack access to good shelter and health care delivery systems, they are often ill. Because of illness, they produce less and consequently earn less, which denies them access to basic needs of life (United Nations, 1999a). This vicious circle of poverty, which encompasses illiteracy, insufficient feeding and inability to meet social and economic obligations among other deficiencies is well documented in Fishlow (1995) and Dipholo (2002). Therefore, poverty is not only materially inspired, but also entails inadequacies in other aspects of life.

### *World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa*

In no other continent is poverty as severe as in Africa. There, the growth indicators are either weak or negative. For example, as world output grew from 1.4 per cent in 1993 to 4 per cent in 2000, Africa recorded a growth rate of 2.7 per cent in 2000 as against 0.7 per cent in 1993 (United Nations, 2002; UNCTAD, 2002a). While global GDP per capita rose from 4,382 million dollars in 1980 to 5,218 million dollars in 2002, Africa's share declined from 577 million dollars to 503 million dollars over the same period (UNCTAD, 2003).

The median annual growth rate of real GDP per capita in Africa also fell from about 2 per cent in the 1970s to -0.3 per cent in the 1980s and to -1.3 per cent 1990s. Gross domestic investments (as a fraction of GDP) equally declined from 21 per cent in the 1970s to 17 per cent in the 1990s (Elbadawi and Mwega, 2000). Africa has also failed to achieve improvement in external trade relations as its share of world exports declined from 4.62 per cent in 1980 to 1.86 per cent in 2001 (UNCTAD, 2002b). These declines naturally contribute to the falling standards of living across the continent.

Furthermore, the share of people in Africa living on less than 1 dollar a day was 47.6 per cent in 1990. Although that figure fell to 45.7 per cent in 2002, the number of African poor actually increased from 242 million in 1990 to 350 million in 2002 because of population growth (African Development Bank 2000; World Bank, 2003a). In other developing regions, the proportion of poor people in the entire population has been falling. For instance, in East Asia and Pacific, that proportion fell from 27.6 per cent to 14.7 per cent between 1990 and 2002. In Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia, it also fell from 16.8 per cent to 12.1 per cent and from 44 per cent to 40 per cent respectively during the same period (World Bank, 2003a). These data not only place Africa as the continent with the largest share of poor people in the population, but the perception is also strong that poverty is becoming an African instead of a global problem.

But Africa has not folded its hands in despair. During the 1960s through the early 1980s, efforts were made to industrialise the continent through the import substitution industrialisation strategy. Agricultural production and rural development also received some boost. The strong support, which the public sector attracted at that time was consistent with the prevailing paradigm about the state being the avant-garde of development. Unfortunately, these efforts yielded little success due to poor macroeconomic and sectoral policies. Indeed, over-valued exchange rates, large budget deficits, inward-oriented trade practices, nationalisation of enterprises and their conversion into state monopolies stifled competition vital for increasing productivity (World Bank, 1994). In addition, inadequate human capital, civil



strife, bloated bureaucracy, corruption and armed conflicts not only diverted scarce resources to unproductive ends, but also constituted obstacles to economic and political stability needed for growth.

The interplay of these forces has meant that for the African, development is illusory. This is best illustrated by human development index<sup>4</sup> (HDI), which has relatively low values in the continent. In 2002, only South Africa, Botswana, Gabon, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya and Republic of Congo had HDI of between 0.50 and 0.70. Other Sub-Saharan African countries had lower than 0.50 whereas most countries in Asia and Latin America posted values of between 0.51 and 0.80. In Europe and North America HDI values were much higher. In concrete terms, life expectancy presently in Africa is only 48.8 years as against more than 65 years in other regions. Adult literacy is below 60 per cent when compared with over 80 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean and almost 80 per cent in Europe (UNDP, 2003).

The World Bank Development policies in Africa are anchored on three pillars. First, they seek the transfer of financial resources and technical expertise to African countries in order to increase their productivity. Second, they favour rural and infrastructural development and third, they support the reforms of African institutions. But then, a pertinent question arises. This concerns the extent to which these policies influence poverty alleviation in the continent. The answer to this question rests on the assessment of their effectiveness in improving the quality of the lives of Africans.

The World Bank development cooperation with Africa began in 1951. From that time until the end of the 1960s, the World Bank's policy favoured infrastructure projects like ports, electric power and other public utilities. The evidence in support of this assertion is that between 1961 and 1965, 75 per cent of all lending was for electric power and transportation, while agricultural development received 6 per cent and only 1 per cent went to social services. As it were, lending for industrial and agricultural production and expansion of social services received little attention whereas growth in these sectors is critical for poverty alleviation. The World Bank's policy in the 1970s changed to lending for rural development, basic education, health care delivery and housing. The result is that by 1980, the share of infrastructure projects had declined to 39 per cent while that of agriculture and rural development increased to over 30 per cent of overall lending (Husain, 1995).

Nevertheless, in the agricultural sphere, concentration was heavy on large-scale mechanised farming and on the development of River Basin Authorities and Agricultural Development Programmes. Although these projects reduced out-migration of peasants during the dry season through

their engagement in perennial occupations within the project sites, the emphasis on large-scale capital intensive agriculture, as opposed to small-scale labour intensive peasant holding, forced peasants to evacuate their lands, which were in turn acquired by rich farmers.

Since the 1980s and sequel to the financial and economic crises which depressed many African economies, the World Bank has insisted on structural adjustment lending. This policy shift ties assistance to implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with support from the World Bank. Consequently, resources are focused on countries undergoing macroeconomic reforms that address stabilisation and economic management problems (Koeberle, 2003). In actualising this policy, the World Bank asserts that since all public programmes affect the poor either directly or indirectly, assistance to reduce poverty must be comprehensive. Secondly, since the nature and depth of poverty varies across countries, the approach must be flexible enough to allow for country-specific solutions (World Bank, 2002a). But Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) and Haque and Khan (2002) have made the case that the reform prescriptions are neither comprehensive nor country-specific, which explains the contradictory outcomes in poverty alleviation being recorded across Africa as the reforms proceed.

The key pillars of SAP include privatisation/commercialisation, trade liberalisation, deregulation of prices, withdrawal of subsidies and devaluation. An assessment of these policies shows that privatisation is succeeding in changing the ownership of public assets through transfers that have not only failed to stop the grabbing hands of the state, but also have allowed resources to be diverted to the grabbing hands of the new owners of privatised firms (Dyck, 2001) with grave consequences for equity and income distribution.

Trade liberalisation and deregulation of prices cannot push the economies of Africa forward because of weak structures of production and trade. Subsidies on strategic goods are critical for mitigating the effects of high producer prices on poor Africans and in countries such as Cote d' Ivoire, The Gambia and Tanzania fertiliser subsidies, for example, range from 50 to 100 per cent of their market values (Baffes and Meerman, 1998). The withdrawal of such subsidies is shattering an important cushion for the survival of the African poor in the affected countries.

In Nigeria, inflationary pressures and social unrest have marked the withdrawal of subsidy particularly on refined petroleum products since the inception of reforms. In 1990, for instance, due to subsidy withdrawal, the price of premium motor spirit (PMS) rose to 60 kobo per litre while automotive gas oil (AGO) and household kerosene (HK) sold for 50 kobo

per litre. By 1995, the further withdrawal of subsidy led to PMS being sold for 11 naira per litre, AGO for 9 naira per litre and HK for 6 naira per litre. In 1999, that same process ensured that the price of PMS went up to 22 naira per litre, while that of AGO and HK could not be increased due to stiff domestic opposition. By 2003, the price of PMS had gone up to 38 naira per litre and that of HK to 36 naira per litre (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2002 and 2003).

The increases in the prices of petroleum products induce inflation consequent upon rises in the cost of transportation and other activities. For example, the 10 per cent rise in the price of PMS in 2000 from their 1999 level pushed up the consumer price index by over 17 per cent that year (Federal Office of Statistics, 2000). The adversely affected are the prices of staple foodstuffs that keep the poor moving. The implication on their welfare cannot be over-emphasised as they grope under the weight of economic hardship. In its reaction, the Nigerian Labour Congress staged nation-wide strikes in 2003 and 2004 to protest increases in the prices of petroleum products. The protests invited police brutality, leading to killings and detention of union activists. The Nigerian government has not relented in its bid to completely deregulate the downstream sector of the nation's oil industry.

The incessant depreciation of the exchange rate of African currencies vis-à-vis the world's leading currencies has thoroughly weakened the former. For example, in 1980 the official exchange rate of the Ghanaian cedi to the dollar was 9.6. In 2002, that rate depreciated to 8,231.4. In Guinea, the dollar exchanged for 19.0 franc in 1980, but the franc depreciated to 1,971.0 in 2002. In Mozambique, one dollar was exchanged for 32.4 metical in 1980. But in 2002 the same dollar attracted 23,346.5 metical. The dollar was exchanged for 0.8 Nigerian naira in 1980, but in 2002 the dollar exchange for 128.8 naira. In Zambia, the dollar was exchanged for 0.8 kwacha in 1980, but the kwacha depreciated to 5,070.0 in 2002 (World Bank, 2003b; World Almanac, 2003).

This weakness in African currencies complicates the burden of planning and creates impediments to the procurement of materials required by local industries, leading to closures and underutilisation of capacities. Although no reliable data on unemployment exist for Sub-Saharan Africa, rationalisation of public enterprises and retrenchment of workers leads to deterioration in the employment situation. The increasing number of unemployed and underemployed leads to the emergence of the new poor who swell the ranks of the chronic poor due to loss of jobs. With high unemployment, the faces of Africans are etched with greater sadness than they were before SAP with a notable rise in violence and frustration related crimes.



The African crises was caused by macroeconomic distortions coupled with exogenous shocks. The adjustment reforms address the distortions without effectively dealing with the external problems. Granted that African economies grew at some 3 per cent annually between 1990 and 2001, an achievement attributed to the reforms (World Bank, 2003b), the increasing foreign indebtedness and deteriorating terms of trade have swamped that growth. For instance, the continent's debt stock rose from 228.3 billion dollars in 1990 to 334.3 billion dollars in 2000, while debt service stood at more than 16 per cent of export earnings in 2000 (United Nations, 1999b; African Development Bank, 2001).

African countries spend over 14.5 billion dollars annually repaying their debts. A country like Nigeria originally borrowed about 20 billion dollars between the late 1970s and 2002. Due to high interest rates and reschedulings, the debt has multiplied over and over again to the extent that by 2002 the country has already paid back 38 billion dollars and still owes 28.6 billion dollars (Aluko, 2004). In the case of Tanzania, the country spends nine times as much on debt repayment as on health care and four times more than an education (Bentsi-Enchill, 1999).

After improving somewhat during the commodity boom of the 1970s, Africa's terms of trade have continued their customary weakness and plunged by 0.5 on average between 1980 and 1990 and 0.3 between 1991 and 2002 (IMF, 2003). The deterioration in Africa's terms of trade in 1994 alone was responsible for the loss of 34 billion dollars in export earnings that year (Jubilee 2000, 2000). Thus, adverse terms of trade fuel the drain of Africa's resources, which negatively affects its capacity for capital accumulation.

Neither foreign direct investments (FDI), official development assistance (ODA), the highly indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative nor the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) have been sufficient to offset the debt overhang in Africa. The destination of FDI is to more healthy economies. This explains why Africa attracted only 17.1 billion dollars of FDI, representing 2.3 per cent of the 735.1 billion dollars FDI in 2001 (UNCTAD, 2002b). With private capital growing faster than official ones, the share of official financing has fallen from over 50 per cent in 1980s to 20 per cent in 2000. Correspondingly, net ODA flows fell to 0.29 per cent of donors' gross national product (GNP) in 1994-1995 and fell further to 0.25 per cent of their GNP in 2000-2001 (Daouas, 2001).

At current levels of about 50 billion dollars annually, there is a large gap between the development ambitions of the international community and the resources being provided through ODA. The Washington Consensus<sup>5</sup> assumes that there is nothing wrong with the existing development assistance

relationship. But from an African perspective, underfunding of ODA undermines the growth prospects, even if it helps fill the investment-savings gap (Manuel, 2003). And the World Bank has not been active in canvassing for the transfer of the 0.7 per cent of the GNP of developed nations endorsed by the United Nations as bench-mark for development assistance.

Admittedly, the HIPC of 1999 envisages that 100 billion dollars of poor countries debt would be written off through the World Bank and IMF. This could provide some succour as the 23 beneficiary African countries have so far received 25 billion dollars in debt relief. However, the affected countries still spent 1.7 billion dollars in debt repayments in 2002 although that amount was almost 1 billion dollars less than what they paid in 1998 (Links, 2004).

Since 1999, PRSP have become the dominant vehicle for World Bank development policy in Africa. They are prepared by affected member countries through a participatory process involving domestic stake holders as well as external development partners and ties assistance to poverty reduction (World Bank, 2002b). By 2003, 30 Sub-Saharan African countries had committed to the PRSP process and 11 of them had completed the full PRSP (IDA/IMF, 2003).

However, the PRSP have several flaws. For instance, while all full PRSP supported trade liberalisation, they are limited in addressing the negative impact of past trade reforms and do not clarify the link between those reforms and poverty reduction. Gender issues and the access of the rural poor to economic assets are equally under-emphasised. More importantly, they represent the perception of donors about what is good for Africa.

Overall, the impact of SAP on poverty alleviation in Africa is controversial. The World Bank insists that SAP has led to major gains being posted particularly in growth of GDP, which benefits the poor through the trickle down effect. It believes that structural adjustment is consistent with poverty alleviation in that the incomes of the economically active poor are raised as their productive capacity increases through their involvement in the adjustment process. Farmers in Ghana and Uganda are cited as benefiting from reforms as biases against agriculture in the two countries have been eliminated, thereby raising farm prices, rural incomes and consequently alleviating rural poverty (Christiaensen, Demery and Paternostro, 2003).

But the experience of some other African countries suggests otherwise. In Nigeria, for example, SAP has tended to complicate the country's economic crisis as it exacerbates existing pre-adjustment problems, creates new ones specific to its own contradictions whilst the state employs force to

### ***World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa***

cow the people as it implements the unpopular policy. In the case of Egypt, Fergany (2002) stresses that in the absence of the institutional environment needed to ensure the declared capitalist efficiency and humanising distributive justice, SAP has resulted in increasing poverty and higher unemployment, leading to widening disparity in income and intensifying social and political colonisation particularly between rural and urban Egypt. In Malawi, SAP perpetuates economic and social instability as people swallow the bitter pills of structural adjustment and the economy remains one of the poorest in the world after nearly two decades of reforms (Chirwa, 2000).

Therefore, the performance of SAP, be it in the industrial sector, or with regard to employment and trade has been disappointing. This is because SAP is basically a monetarist approach to economic management, hence demand management instruments dominate its pillars. Yet, the production structure in Africa is heavily import-dependent and subject to other rigidities, which should invite more structuralist than monetarist strategies in the reform process. This explains why SAP has not yielded the expected results.

And so, while policy reforms are necessary for economic growth, they are not a sufficient condition for poverty reduction. As the World Bank (2004) admits, success in poverty alleviation depends not just on growth, but on the ability to translate that growth into basic services. Unless growth is combined with increased investments in social services to attain improvement in living standards, poverty would remain as Africa is witnessing. Consequently, we can argue as Rama (1997) has argued that those who criticise SAP on grounds of its human development cost have a point. By and large, the welfare cost of reforms has made the expression "adjustment fatigue" very popular in Africa as market fundamentalism continues its onslaught against Africa's economic recovery and poverty alleviation programmes.

### **Conclusions**

The primary mission of the World Bank is poverty alleviation and so its development policies should be assessed on their results and impact on human welfare. People living in Africa are the most mired in poverty. As such, Africa has no choice than to quicken the mobilisation of its domestic resources and seek external interventions in its poverty alleviation efforts. The World Bank has been supportive, but the elevation of adjustment reforms to the status of a long term development strategy instead of a short term emergency measure has dramatically exposed the adjusting states to the vagaries of the market. For sure, macroeconomic stability and growth have been restored in many African countries, thanks to reforms, but the human



development cost has been heavy. This creates concerns that the reform process is an ineffective poverty reduction tool.

Adjustment reforms have not yielded the desired poverty alleviation dividends since desired improvement have not occurred in the lives of Africans. However, they could help to push the economies of Africa forward on condition that poverty alleviation and not accounting records is their point of reference. The underlying message is that World Bank development cooperation with Africa need be strengthened with human centered strategies and not inflexible reforms moreso that the capability of African governments to sustain them is ferment in the political economy sense.

In this regard, the fallacy of neo-liberal imagination that the market and state can only exist in opposition to each other requires speedy rejection. What is more, the damage done to African economies by transforming them into a subcontracting position for more powerful political economies equally requires urgent correction. This calls for humane approaches to the adjustment mechanism in order to extend the reform processes beyond the confines of market efficiency. This would also enable the World Bank to adequately address the welfare of Africans in its development policies since people are the ultimate end of development.

### **End Notes**

1. Economic growth is the basis of these models, exemplified in the works of Nurkse (1953), Rostow (1960) and Kuznets (1966) among others. Because these models are neo-classical oriented, resource allocation through the market and capital accumulation are central in their considerations. By way of trickle down effect, the benefits of growth would get to the poor. The high premium placed on price-led adjustment mechanisms inevitably underrates the strength of social and institutional factors in development (for details, see Castro, 1983; Wallerstein, 1987; Cheru, 1993 and Isbister, 2001).
2. The World Bank is an acronym, which mainly embraces the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Development Association. Its main goals are promoting economic development and reducing poverty. Although it is a development organisation, it is equally a profit making institution. Thus, its objective is not to maximize profit but to earn adequate income in order to sustain its development activities, which it finances through borrowings on the international capital markets.
3. The explanations offered in this paper about development do not in any way dislodge the controversy, which is deeply rooted in political economy.

*World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa*

- Western economic thought stresses that development has eluded the developing world because of low savings and the attendant shortage of accumulated capital for investments. The Marxian opposition to this view argues that underdevelopment is the result of colonialism, imperialism and unequal exchange. We have not attempted to wedge into this controversy. What is important for our analysis is that the African economies are underdeveloped, which encourages poverty.
4. The human development index ranges between zero and one and measures the arithmetic average of a country's achievement in longevity, educational attainment and per capita GDP (for detailed discussion, see Cashin, Mauro and Sahay, 2001).
  5. The Washington Consensus consists of the reform policies endorsed by the principal economic institutions located in Washington. It summarizes the prescriptions contained in the reform packages, which centre on market fundamentalism. In essence, the Consensus rules that all income redistribution directed at reducing poverty is plunder as it lowers growth, which is required for development (for details, see Williamson, 2000).

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***World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa***

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***World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa***

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***World bank development policies and poverty alleviation in Africa***

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