



Social Policy in Post-apartheid South Africa

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Introduction

There is no doubt, or rather there is consensus, that social policy is very important for any society. It is also often argued that social policy should work in tandem with economic policy. As a working definition, for this paper, social policy has to do with policy interventions in the public sector aimed at directly improving wellbeing in a society. Social policy can be thought of as a series of public policies that ensure that the quality of life in a society improves. This involves ensuring that there is cohesion in a society (i.e. that the society is functional and there are decent levels of trust as well as social networks and social capital are effective), hence social policy also has a role in nation building (or rather social cohesion). The notion of a nation is generally debatable. However, perhaps simplistically, nation building can be viewed as a “process aimed at ensuring cohesion among different peoples in a particular nation state” (Gumede, 2008: 9). According to the 2004 Report of the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa, social cohesion refers to the “extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish” (p.227).

The paper starts with background or what could be termed context, discussing the different views regarding the interface between social policy research and evidence-based policy making as well as discussing perspectives pertaining to what social policy can do and how could social policy researchers and government officials interact. That is followed by a discussion of the role of social policy as far as development is concerned. The paper then deals with social policy making in South Africa while reflecting on various initiatives aimed at ensuring that the post-apartheid South has comprehensive social policy.

Background

To start with, Weiss (1977: 540) discusses two models which highlight on one hand, the indirect “framing” role research can play in the policy process and on the other the political nature of research use. South Africa’s research and policy landscape has also been grappling with the two models Weiss (1997:542) highlights in the making and re-making of its social policy.

Furthermore, the context of the interaction of research and policy relates directly to issues of knowledge and power, as Jones et al. (2012:3) argues. Jones et al. also discuss the different types of competing knowledge that can inform the policy process, drawing on theorists who tend to view the production of knowledge as an expression of power relations [see for instance, Autes (2007:6); Foucault, (1991:10)].

Some argue that what counts and should count as evidence also includes evidence gained from practical experience and community-based or “citizen” knowledge (Jones et al. 2012). This is as opposed to “scientific” models which demand “objectivity” and claims to universal validity, which often fail to acknowledge the politicized and subjective nature of research findings. Thus, when thinking about the influence of research-based evidence in policy and within policy debates, it is necessary to account for other forms of evidence such as no argument made in relation to policy is based on no evidence. So, arguably, the task is to think about what evidence policy is based on and where is the evidence produced from and the reasons for privileging one evidence over the other. Furthermore, in how the interface between research and policy should be approached, Maphalla (2013:84) recommends that academicians in Africa must start positioning themselves to connect and bridge the gap between the research output and policy audience. Enhancing the evidence basis for the tough choices that policy actors have to make is one of the major contributions that social policy researchers in higher education can make in Africa by answering the questions of so what, why and for whom does their research evidence apply.

The policy space has complex interactions because of multiple actors championing competing and sometimes conflicting interests. Some argue that research findings have a higher chance of influencing policy when policy actors are engaged in every stage of the research process.

Building relations with policy actors in the research design phase ensures that the findings align

with the need of the actors. A few scattered academicians here and there cannot achieve this. There is need to increase the community of multipliers in higher education who will continuously undertake rigorous research in order to produce compelling, convincing and credible evidence that will help policy makers to make informed decisions touching on the many socio-economic issues pertinent for Africa today.

Indeed, there seems to be a growing appreciation from both scholars and policy makers that there exists complex relationship between evidence and its use in policy and management decision making. Increasingly, scholars have acknowledged that policy making is inherently political, influenced by a number of imperatives (including budgetary, administrative and contextual limitations) other than scientific evidence on what works or does not. As Gumede (2011) discusses, policy is political too.

Role of Social Policy in Development

Social policy is undoubtedly very important for development, perhaps more so than many other policies. Development referred to in this paper has to do with advancing wellbeing; socially, culturally, political and economically. Simply put, socio-economic development has to be inclusive (see Gumede 2018 for a detailed discussion of this). Taking this broad view of what development is, and not dealing with the debate about the different conceptions of development, what is the role of social policy in development? First, let me briefly unpack what social policy is (from the different scholars/sources), bearing in mind that there are different perspectives and no single agreed definition of social policy. Hall and Midgley (2004: 3) make a point that “defining social policy is not a straightforward task...the term [social policy] is fraught with potential ambiguities and confusion.” I use the working definition of social policy indicated earlier (or aspects of social policy that I consider critical or the fundamental goal of social policy).

To start with, the World Bank, in the Concept Note: Rethinking Social Policy for the World Bank conference in Arusha Tanzania (12-15 December 2005), viewed social policy as “a series of public policies designed to promote social development...” Adesina (2009: 38) defines social policy as “collective public efforts aimed at affecting and protecting the social wellbeing of people within a given territory.” Interestingly, Mkandawire (2001: 12) views “social policy as an

instrument for ensuring a sense of citizenship is an important instrument for conflict management, which is in turn a prerequisite for sustained economic development...” Social policy, as Mkandawire has been arguing and demonstrating, is critical for development. For instance, Mkandawire (2009: 141) makes a point that “social policy [is] important in the nation-building project.” More specifically, Mkandawire (2001: 1) defines social policy as “collective interventions directly affecting transformations in social welfare, social institutions and social relations... [And] access to adequate and secure livelihoods and income.” Mkandawire and Adesina have also been emphasizing that instead of just talking about social policy, the focus should be on transformative social policy – transformative social policy has to do with processes for transformation, as in transforming social relations and institutions.

In the context of transformative social policy, Mkandawire (2009:6) explains that social policy has three important primary roles (1) productive functions (i.e. producing human capital), (2) redistributive and (3) protective roles. Adesina (2015: 112) explains that “the transformative role of social policy stretches from the economy to social relations and social institutions.”

Furthermore, according to Adesina (2015: 113-114), “transformative social policy involves a wide range of instruments to raise human well-being, transform social institutions, social relations and the economy...The transformative role of social policy is not simply in relation to the economy but social institutions, social relations, and human capability and functioning.”

Literature also emphasizes that social policy has (1) intrinsic (normative) and (2) instrumental functions. When it comes to nation building, for instance, social policy can transform social relations while it has a normative function to ensure that there is balance in all population groups in a particular society (especially in societies like South Africa).

Interface of research and policy in South Africa

African states and their agencies are faced with a number of issues from socio-economic to ecological complexities and global change, which require a lot of decisions that have the potential to impact greatly on society and economies. They are under increasing pressure to develop policies that consider a wide spectrum of scientific knowledge. It is acknowledged that in South Africa, as elsewhere, a gap typically exists between the scientific or research community and the policymaking community, due to a number of underlying reasons at both

ends. This gap often results in a unidirectional push of evidence by researchers to policymakers, with a hope that policymakers will take up these findings and use them in policy identification, formulation or implementation.

Therefore, the policy-research nexus remains a highly contested political space in South Africa in ensuring that relevant policies are developed and strategic priorities are on the agenda. Before 1994, the apartheid regime depended on science councils as government research agencies in generating selective evidence to prove pre-determined outcomes. Lehohla (2015:20) makes this point for instance how the Bureau of Statistics in South Africa privileged collection of information from whites that it did to other racial groups in the country. This compromised the independence of research evidence, especially evidence generated by social scientists.

Leubolt (2014:18) notes that after apartheid, social policies were crucially reformed. As a result, liberal influences strengthened – especially regarding the perceived necessity of “targeted social policies”. Apartheid social policies were associated with unjust privileging based on racism. Therefore, the abolition of such privileges did not generate a big wave of protests. Although universalization was a central concern, it was mainly pursued by liberal rather than by social democratic strategies, i.e. the central concern was to render social policies more “pro poor” and not to universalise former privileges. A multitude of reforms were enacted during the final decade of apartheid: State policies were universalised on a basic level, while the better-off were consigned to their own fates (i.e. the market). In some instances, this even included aggravating conditions for “coloureds” and “Indians”, while the conditions for Africans only slightly improved.

Argued by among others Midgley, Tracy & Livermore (2000:5) for instance, progressive traditions of social policy acknowledge the three roles that social policy is supposed to play in any society. First, it plays the social function which lies in reducing the impact of lifecycle risks through social insurance and alleviating poverty through social assistance. In this way social policy helps people to stabilise their lives and support their families. Second, it plays the political function which refers to its stabilising effect, whereby, social justice and greater equality become vital factors for building trust and social cohesion, and contribute to political stability Economic

& Social Commission for Western Asia (2009). Third, the economic function of social policy hinges on widening the productive capacity of a society through the inclusion of marginalised areas and social groups in the growth process, and through investment in improved health and education. This function of social policy also extends to health, education and labour market policies, and supporting social development which is based on the integration of social concerns into all aspects of public policy (Economic & Social Commission for Western Asia, 2009).

Godfrey et al. (2010) argue that researchers have questioned why “some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks [are] picked up on and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear”. In the South African context, a recent study conducted on research dissemination and uptake in South Africa indicates that researchers at universities and science councils often feel frustrated when conducting research for government departments because they are not given feedback about what happens to their research outputs once these have been completed and submitted. This points to a lack of communication and cooperation between the research and government sectors in South Africa. While researchers are given the mandate to produce knowledge, as identified by themselves or the government departments that provide research funding, their engagement with the policymaking process often ends with the submission of a final technical report. This further highlights the current trend of “unidirectional evidence push” thinking by researchers, which entails that policymakers understand the relevance of the research findings, know how to use these findings, and implement these findings within policy.

Social policy making in South Africa

To start with, I have defined public policy – largely influenced by the policy making context of South Africa – as “all formal and publicly known decisions of governments that come about through predetermined channels in a particular administration” (Gumede, 2011: 166). Policy making has evolved since 1994 in South Africa. One salient characteristic of policy making in South Africa is that government has been trying to ensure all spheres (i.e. local, provincial and national) and all departments collaborate, through a cluster system established in 1999. Departments that deal with a particular sector convene in a particular cluster. For instance, mainly the departments of social sector come together regarding social policy.

Over and above the Presidential Working Groups (where non-state actors contribute to policy making by working with government through the Presidency), there is a Presidential Coordination Committee that ensures the interlinkages between the national and provincial levels of government (in addition to the Ministers-Members of Executive Committee – MIN-MECs). Cabinet – a committee made up of the President, Deputy President and Ministers – is however the final arbiter of all policy decisions. Parliament also plays a role in policy making. Then there is a National Council of Provinces which deals with policy issues that have particular relevance for the provinces. It is important to highlight that public participation is legislated (in terms of the South African constitution) as a critical component or process of policy making in South Africa.

In essence, therefore, government departments play a big role in policy making. As a result, Ministers are key policy actors. Similarly, the cluster system played a very big role during 1999-2009. The disbanding of the Policy Coordination and Advisory Services in the Presidency in 2010 affected the cluster system, also because policy coordination/thinking took a back seat and Implementation Committees were set up as part of the cluster system (Gumede, 2017) – there was shift in emphasis to implementation. The institutionalisation of monitoring, evaluation and planning (through the creation of new government departments) is another critical factor implying the changes that have taken place since 2010 (changes that are associated with the Jacob Zuma administration). That said, as argued in Gumede (2017), there are largely continuities and changes in emphasis in the policy making landscape since 1999 (1999 being the year when many policy making processes were initiated and institutions were established or formalised). Many reforms, institutionally and otherwise, were influenced by the policy making architecture that existed in the late 1990s and during 2000s. In turn, these were shaped by the goals of a democratic society articulated in the 1996 South African constitution. Departments were reconfigured and new sections established during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Another factor that could have influenced the work of government, also including social policy initiatives, relates to the notion of developmental state. I have defined a developmental state as the one that is “active in pursuing its development agenda, maintains strategic relations with

stakeholders, and has the capacity and is appropriately organized for its predetermined developmental objectives” (Gumede, 2011: 180). Although it was much later – around 2005 – when government officially proclaimed that South Africa must become a developmental state, the desire for South Africa to be a developmental state can be traced to the 1992 Ready to Govern discussion document and especially in the 1998 discussion document on State, Property Relations and Social Transformation. It can be argued that the African National Congress (and government) grappled with the notion of developmental states more intensely in the late 1990s – the articles in the 2001 *Umrabulo* (1st Quarter, Number 10) suggest that there had been debates within the ANC about the notion of a developmental state. In one article (of the 1st Quarter, Number 10, of 2001) for instance, the late Peter Mokaba (who was the ANC Youth League President during 1991-1994 and former Deputy Minister in the Nelson Mandela administration) argues that “the South African Developmental State must lead and directly intervene in the black, particularly African, economic empowerment efforts on a programmatic basis.”

Among other initiatives, the 2002 Report of the (Vivian) Taylor Commission and the initiative aimed at Comprehensive Social Security in the mid-2000s were critical in shaping South Africa’s social policy. Through the Taylor Commission many interventions aimed at transforming grants or social transfers to be aspects of social policy were undertaken. Linked to this was the need to better understand the economics of social protection, hence training that some Department of Social Development (DSD) officials underwent over and above training in basic economics. The Taylor Commission and the initiative aimed at Comprehensive Social Security as well as aspiration for a democratic developmental state implied that social policy had to be at the center of socio-economic development. The said initiatives also implied that economic and social policies should work in tandem. There was however not clear understanding that social policy can address both the national question and social questions. It would seem that more attention was given to addressing social questions (say through grants, community development, social work, etc). The national question – as part of nation building or social cohesion – would require that social policy is explicitly an instrument for ensuring citizenship and that it deliberately transforms social institutions and social relations.

One of the main features of developmental states is: embedded autonomy. The concept of “embedded autonomy” is about cooperation, negotiation and consensus building around the developmental project. Writing in 2008 (Gumede, 2008), I argued that among the main characteristics of democratic developmental states (i.e. developmental ideology, the autonomy of the state in setting and directing economic goals, institutional capacity, and social capital) South Africa had the following features: determined developmental elite; relative autonomy; the effective management of non-state economic interests; and legitimacy and performance. Arguably, the leadership in government in the 1990s and 2000s could be viewed as the proverbial determined developmental elite given the many efforts that went to managing non-state economic interests. The Presidential Working Group system, as described earlier, symbolizes many of the efforts to work with the non-governmental sector. Departments led many of the initiatives that came out of the Presidential Working Groups. For instance, many projects were undertaken between DSD and religious leaders – there was also a Religious Leaders Presidential Working Group.

It would also seem that the Scandinavian social democracies greatly influenced interventions towards social policy in South Africa. In fact, the ANC’s view of developmental state in the context of South Africa is that elements of social democracy are critical in the creation of a South African developmental state. It could be in this context that grants or social transfers became prominent. This policy approach often confused with welfarism, as one interview indicated, was actually about a shift from “cradle to grave” to “changing the destiny of beneficiaries” (“looking beyond welfare”) – grants, for instance, though viewed as palliative measures, were meant to address market failure and retirement reforms were part of efforts towards a comprehensive social policy in South Africa. Essentially, the plan was to shift from palliative measures to interventions that can interrupt the inter-generational transmission of poverty.

Towards comprehensive social policy in South Africa

Indeed, significant efforts in the 1990s and 2000s went to ensuring that South Africa has a comprehensive social policy, including various institutional reforms. There were also efforts at ensuring that capacity for social policy making was strengthened. The need for social policy to

play a role in cushioning the poor (as well as people with disabilities, the children, the women and the elderly) and the link between social and economic policies were emphasized as well as working with various role players in society and the different spheres of government. DSD and the late Minister of Social Development (Dr Zola Skweyiya) led in these efforts.

As such, the various aspects of social policy (i.e. education, health & social services) are in place although not effective due to lack of follow through and weak implementation capacity. But when it comes to transformative social policy, it is lacking – and the various roles and functions of social policy have not been deliberately pursued. One issue worth highlighting is that change from the Thabo Mbeki administration (and through the caretaker Motlanthe administration) to the Jacob Zuma administration affected policies (as well as implementation) – the reforms that were being pursued (also especially regarding social policy) did not continue, the approach to social security shifted (instead of implementing a comprehensive package a piecemeal approach was followed in cases such as health insurance), changes in senior public servants and Ministers affected the policy thinking and implementation, and differences in ideological orientation (or preferences if not lack of understanding of pertinent issues) affected many promising initiatives. In addition, as indicated earlier, the disbandment of the Policy Coordination and Advisory Services in the Presidency created a coordination gap that exacerbated the problem of follow through and continuity.

For the advancement of socio-economic development, more thinking should go to both social and economic policies as well as the interface between the economic & the social. The starting point should be revisiting the initiatives (i.e. comprehensive social security reforms) that were being finalized at the point of recall of former President Mbeki. Indeed, the reconfiguration of institutions is necessary (i.e. departments to take into account the importance of social policy and its relationship with economic policy) – and coordination is critical (so is planning, monitoring & evaluation).

Conclusion

The paper discussed the importance of social policy and what social policy is as well as initiatives undertaken towards a comprehensive social policy in South Africa since 1994. I also covered aspects relating to evidence-based policy making in South Africa. The two initiatives that are of relevance for social policy in relation to evidence-based policy making in South Africa are the: (1) the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) and (2) the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD). These two initiatives started in mid-2000s under the leadership of the (erstwhile) Policy Coordination and Advisory Services in the Presidency. The goal of these two related initiatives was to assist government in better understanding the various socio-economic dynamics in South Africa communities and households in order that proper policies are designed and implemented. Social policy and the interplay between social and economic policies were seen as critical, hence the view that these two initiatives are relevant for this paper.

The central argument or conclusion is that although some aspects of social policy exist, transformative social policy is lacking. As indicated earlier, transformative social policy has to do with processes for transformation, as in transforming social relations and institutions. It can be argued that many challenges that face South Africa today epitomise a social policy failure, fundamentally. If South Africa had a comprehensive social policy, interfacing with economic policy sufficiently, many of the social cleavages would not be as pronounced. It is therefore necessary to ensure that South Africa not only ensures a comprehensive social policy but that a transformative social policy is in place and properly implemented.

Lastly, of fundamental importance though is that clarity about the kind of society South Africa should be and the commensurate plan are overdue, including the social compact/pact needed because most of the intractable challenges facing South Africa require collaborations among all different partners and citizenry.

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