

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PUBLIC POLICY IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

The subject of public policy is discussed in the context of current national, regional and global challenges. Hitherto, the dominant tendency in such discussions has been to abstract public policy reform issues, divorcing them from the historical, political and economic context of the countries under investigation and according them absolute and universal values and norms. In a world so bifurcated between developed and developing, between globalising *northern hemisphere* and a globalised *southern hemisphere*, both the concept of public policy and the context of reform require deeper scrutiny if they are to be relevant and assist in the current discourse about the future of Southern Africa in particular and Africa in general.

### BROAD DEFINITIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS OF POLICY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR CONTEXT

Public policy is largely a political and social process in the context of the state which, in turn, might therefore be viewed as a public policy arena itself. In this regard, policy is a reflection of a given set of power relations in a given context, period or epoch. At best, a (good) policy is the outcome of the (good) relationship between the state (or those who govern) on the one hand and civil society (or those who are governed) on the other. At worst, a (bad) policy is the reflection of the (bad) relationship between the state and civil society, in which case, such policy might be viewed as no more than an imposition on the part of the (dominant or strong) state over the (dominated and weak) subjects. Therefore, the policy direction in a particular sector or given situation is invariably an expression of the dominant interests in the society.

As a concept, public policy is also an ideological construct, representing the attempt by the ruling class to mask the reality of class relations and disguise the dominant role of the state. Therefore, public policy is no more than the justification – i.e. the ideology – of a ruling class in a given situation such as that which might be termed a *policy* specifically, a policy framework, or, generally as might be represented by the government or regime of the day.

The nature and context of the state is that which necessarily determines the quality and direction of public policy. A strong state is one which is not oppressive and dictatorial; it is one which draws its strength from the confidence reposed in it by the civil society as a whole, and, as such, is responsive to the public will, accountable and transparent.

## PUBLIC POLICY AND REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

Globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation constitute the three core elements of the economic reforms of the newly-emerging global economies. Describing the comprehensive nature of the recent wave of globalisation, Recardo Petrella, provides an insight into the different dimensions of the globalisation process. He writes, “the principal characteristics of globalisation consist of the following:

- the globalisation of financial markets;
- the internationalisation of corporate strategies, in particular their commitment to competition as a source of wealth creation;
- the diffusion of technology and related research and development and knowledge worldwide;
- the transformation of consumption patterns into cultural products with worldwide consumer markets;
- the internationalisation of the regulatory capabilities of the national societies into a global political economic system;
- the diminished role of national governments in designing the rules for global governance.<sup>4</sup>

Arising out of this definition are many analytical and policy questions that can be addressed in the context of its impact on the African region. In particular, the diminished role of national governments in designing rules for global governance indicates the limitations of developing countries in formulating public policies that can solve their unique problems. Consequently, they are always in conflict with the principles of globalisation in the process of addressing their unique problems.

Many studies on globalisation are now revealing its negative consequences. Panchamukhi has shown that globalisation has resulted in increasing disparities between developed and developing world, deterioration in the terms of trade, development of new forms of protectionism by the developed world, and more importantly the frustration of policy autonomy by the developing world.<sup>5</sup> The lack of policy autonomy is demonstrated by the imposition of many of the structural adjustment programmes in the African region with concomitant consequences on governance and public administrative systems.

As pointed out in another work<sup>6</sup>, it is, therefore, important to view the post-colonial state in terms of both the *external* and *internal* dimensions. The *external* dimension refers to the complex relationship of historical, political, socio-economic and even cultural factors that are an integral component of the *post-colonial state*. The *internal* dimension refers to the *post-colonial state* itself, within a given geographical or territorial location, the class composition thereof, and the relationship between it and the post-colonial society in general. Clearly, the concept of *post-colonial state* raises important questions about the nature of the relationship between the *external* and *internal*. Suffice it to state that the external takes precedence in that it is first and foremost an integral component of the post-colonial state, and therefore, necessarily

and inevitably influences and pervades even the dynamics of the *internal*. The *internal* is not organic, neither in its origins nor in its dynamics; at least that is inevitably so in this historical conjuncture, whether we call this *neo-colonialism*, the era of the dominance of international capital, or relentless *globalisation*.