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Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) and Social, Economic and Political Stability of the Least Developed Countries Since 1980s

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ABSRACT

This paper discusses the view that the World Bank led Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), have undermined the socio-economic and political stability in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) since the 1980s. In the second, third and fourth sections, the paper briefly reviews emergence, short-lived benefits and controversies surrounding the structural adjustment programs. In the fifth section, the paper reviews in detail the failure of the structural adjustments in various social, economic and political sectors. In the sixth the section, the paper provides country case studies of the failure of implementation of the structural adjustment programs. A review of the past studies revealed that the structural adjustment programs have failed to address the socio-economic and political crises of the least developed countries. This paper therefore provided recommendations for the least developed countries and the lending institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) to adopt in order to fulfill the goals of the structural adjustment programs for an accelerated national growth of the countries.

Keywords: Structural Adjustment Programs, Least Developed Countries

1. INTRODUCTION

After independence in the 1950s and 1960s, most least developed countries had high hopes for rapid economic growth and development (Babatunde, 2012). The leaders in the least developed countries formulated strategies and plans with a focus on addressing economic challenges and catching up with the developed nations. One of the key strategies was the adoption of State-driven development through Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI). The import substitution strategy was meant to enable the countries to locally produce goods which had previously been imported from developed countries. The agricultural sector was assigned the secondary role of supplying raw materials and providing extra revenues to finance developments projects across other sectors (Heidhues & Obare, 2011). Economic integration and social protection approach to development widely characterized the post-independence development agenda (Babalola, Lungwangwa & Adeyinka, 1999). According to Gera (2007), such strategies were important to the least developed countries to address problems like deficits in the balance of payments, underdevelopment, inflation, poor health service, low levels of education and poverty that the countries had been facing since the1960s.

However, available statistics suggest that the strategies did not produce the desired results and the developing countries continued to experience the social, economic and political challenges they were facing. In the early 1970s the economic growth of the countries began to slow down and by the mid-1970s, the countries experienced lowest economic performance (Heidhues & Obare, 2011). The shrinking economic performance was reflected in the poor growth of productive sectors and a declining level of investment, waning exports, mounting debt, deteriorating social conditions, inefficient use of resources, budget deficits, erosion in institutional and human capacity and a decline in income and living standards. In contrast, the rest of the world was growing at an annual rate of 2% in the same period (Babatunda, 2012).

2. EMERGENCE OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS (SAPs)

2.1 Brief history, goals and regions supported by Structural Adjustment Programs

In response to the economic crisis of the least developed countries, the international donor institutions, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, begun to consider interventions in least developed economies that would facilitate faster economic growth and poverty reduction. This led to the creation of the Structural Adjustment Programs. The Structural adjustment programs consisted of loans provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to countries that experienced economic crisis from the 1980s (Logan, 2015). The goal of the programs was to adjust the countries' economic structure, improve international competitiveness, reduce inflation and restore their balance of payments. The programs typically centered around increased privatization, liberalization of trade and foreign investment, deregulation of the market and balancing the government deficit

(Opusunju & Akyuz, 2015). Structural adjustment loans were distributed to developing countries, located primarily in East and South Asia, Latin America and Africa (Logan, 2015; Opusunju & Akyuz, 2015).

2.2 Conditions for financing of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)

The lending institutions, through the "Washington Consensus", required the recipient countries to meet the following "conditionalities" for the Structural Adjustment Programs (Khol, 2006).

Table 2.1: Structural adjustments program conditions

1	Fiscal policy discipline and transparency
2	Redirection of public spending from subsidies toward broad-based provision of key pro-growth, pro-poor services like primary education, primary health care and infrastructure investment.
3	Tax reforms which broaden the tax base and lower marginal tax rates, while minimizing dead weight loss and market distortions.
4	Competitive exchange rates; devaluation of currency to stimulate exports.
5	Liberalization of trade and inward foreign investment with particular emphasis on elimination of quantitative restrictions.
6	Privatization of state enterprises.
7	Deregulation – abolition of regulations that impede market entry
8	Legal security for property

Source: Literature review, 2025

3. SHORT-LIVED BENEFITS OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS

Logan (2015) indicated that the structural adjustment programs were effective to some extent in achieving their developmental goals for the least developed countries. Though short-lived, the programs enabled countries to transition from inefficient economic policy that is highly regulated by the state, to one featuring open and diverse markets, competitive, progressive and privatized. For example, Hammouda (2004) indicated that the proportion of manufactured products in total exports increased from 6.4 per cent to 22 per cent between 1980 and 1982 in Tunisia, Mauritius, Egypt and Morocco. Moreover, the Structural Adjustment Programs enabled least developed countries to grow with average annual rates of 4 per cent in 1980, 2.9 per cent in 1982 and 3.3 per cent in 1983. In Angola, Logan (2012) states that exports increased and there were signs of economic growth within the free trade areas. By the mid-1980s, the developing countries rebelled against the Structural Adjustment Programs (Babatunda, 2012).

4. CONTROVERSIES SORROUNDING STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS

There were many controversies about structural adjustments programs in the least developed countries. The criticisms have been at a number of inter-related levels. Critics have challenged the basis of SAPs and pointed to the fact that SAPs are not owned by the implementing countries. In Africa, for example, instead of making economies grow fast, structural adjustment actually had a contractive impact in most countries (Thompson, 2010). Economic growth in the least developed countries in the mid 1980s and 1990s fell below the rates of previous decades (Logan, 2015). Critics argue that rigid fiscal targets stipulated under structural adjustment loans often took precedence over social spending and the institutional weaknesses of developing countries. Sectors such as agriculture, health and education rapidly declined as the state support was critically withdrawn from them (Heidhues & Obare, 2011). More concerns emerged focusing on the following criticisms of the structural adjustment programs (Noorbakhsh, 2006; Sulaiman, Migiro, & Aluko, 2014; Opusunju & Akyuz, 2005).

4.1 National Sovereignty

Critics claim that structural adjustment programs threaten the sovereignty of national economies because an outside organization is dictating a nation's economic policy (Sulaiman, Migiro, & Aluko, 2014). According to the critics, SAPs are unnecessary given that the state is acting in the best interest of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Critics further pointed out that the lending institutions interfered with the political systems of the recipient countries. Since the solvency of many least developed countries was uncertain, governments asking for credit had to agree to certain structural adjustment measures (Azeng & Yogo, 2013). Another core problem with the structural adjustment programs was the condition for disproportionate cutting of social spending in the least developed countries. The primary victims of such budget cuts were the disadvantaged communities in the developing countries. Governments ended up being stuck in debt traps and spent less money on these essential services as they serviced the international debts (Kaiser, 2018).

4.2 Neo-colonialism

Critics viewed structural adjustment programs as the modern procedure of colonization (Williams, 2003). By minimizing the ability of governments to organize and regulate their internal economy, pathways were created for multinational companies to enter states and extract their resources (Thompson, 2010). Critics also portray conditional loans as a tool of neocolonialism. The rich countries offer bailouts to poor ones in exchange for reforms that open them up to exploitative investment by multinational corporations. Since these firms are owned by the rich countries, the colonial dynamics are perpetuated, albeit with nominal national sovereignty for the former colonies (Williams, 2003). Moreover, many developing countries were limited to production and exportation of cash crops and restricted from control of their own more valuable natural resources, by the free-trade and low-regulation requirements of the structural adjustment programs (Williams, 2003).

4.3 Privatization

One of the common policy requirement of the structural adjustment programs was the privatization of state-owned industries and resources to increase efficiency, promote investment and decrease state spending (Gueorguieva, 2000). State-owned resources were to be sold whether they generate a fiscal profit or not. Critics have condemned the privatization requirements, arguing that when resources are transferred to foreign corporations and national elites, the goal of public prosperity is replaced with the goal of private accumulation. Indeed, in many developing nations, privatization was marred by malpractices and manipulations involving regime politicians and well-connected individuals. In Uganda, Tangri & Mwenda (2001) documented a number of scandals that tainted privatization with serious accusations of corruption and cronyism by the government officials. In Argentina, privatization of extractive industries as a result of the structural adjustment programs led to rise in unemployment and forced people into the labor market in which they were underpaid in poor working conditions.

4.4 Austerity

Finally, critics hold the structural adjustment programs responsible for much of the economic stagnation that has occurred in the borrowing countries. The programs emphasized maintaining a balanced budget, which forced governments to create austerity programs. The casualties of balancing a budget were often social programs. For example, if a government cuts education funding, universality is impaired, and therefore long-term economic growth. Similarly, cuts to health programs allowed diseases to devastate some areas' economies by destroying the workforce. According to Rowden (2009), the IMF's monetarist approach towards prioritizing price stability and fiscal restraint was unnecessarily restrictive and prevented developing countries from being able to scale up long-term public investment in the public health. This led to chronically underfunded health systems, dilapidated health infrastructure, inadequate health personnel and demoralizing working conditions (Conway, 2010).

5. SECTORAL REVIEW OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FAILURE OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS

5.1 Economic Sectors

5.1.1 Agricultural Sector

Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s were designed to increase diversification of the agricultural sector towards the production of goods with high comparative advantage as opposed to goods with declining economic benefits, while at the same time restoring competitiveness of domestic production by reducing high costs (Barry, Salinger & Pandolfi, 2000). However, several studies have shown the opposite. For example, a study by Mbithe, Mwabu & Awiti (2017) indicated that structural adjustment programs had a negative and significant long run effect on per capita agriculture. Lipton & Ahmed (2007) found no systematic improvement in rural agriculture and livelihoods because of the adjustment measures. According to the authors, by concentrating almost exclusively on the issues of pricing, the adjustment policies ignored the other critical factors, in particular, the technological development needed to translate improved incentives into more sustainable and productive farming systems. Another study by Hazell *et al.* (1995) noted that the adjustment reforms had a negative impact on the agricultural sector, with agricultural income declining with 8 percent from its value in the 1990 and surplus produce decreasing by 16 percent in the same period.

Figure: 5.1: Declining trend of Agricultural output (Mbithe, Mwabu & Awiti , 2017)

5.1.2 Natural Resource sector

According to Reed (2000) the net result of the studies and reviews between 1975-2000 show negative impacts on natural resources resulting from Structural Adjustment Programs exceed positive impacts. Though the effects may not be direct at all times, the Structural Adjustment Programs have been an important contributing factor to observed problems facing the natural resources. In the forestry sector, for example, economic models show that higher aggregate natural resource product prices encouraged deforestation and logging in unmanaged forests. Specifically in Ghana, the adjustment programs succeeded in creating more forestry-related employment opportunities that increased deforestation. In the wildlife sector, a study by Richardson (1996) found that the structural programs reduced the capacity of the sector to manage the wildlife effectively as a result of public expenditure cut-backs for the sector. The adjustment programs have not enabled the natural resource sectors to meet the development requirements of environmentally sound producing sectors (Gueorguieva, 2000). The programs have disadvantaged the natural resources in both real and comparative terms.

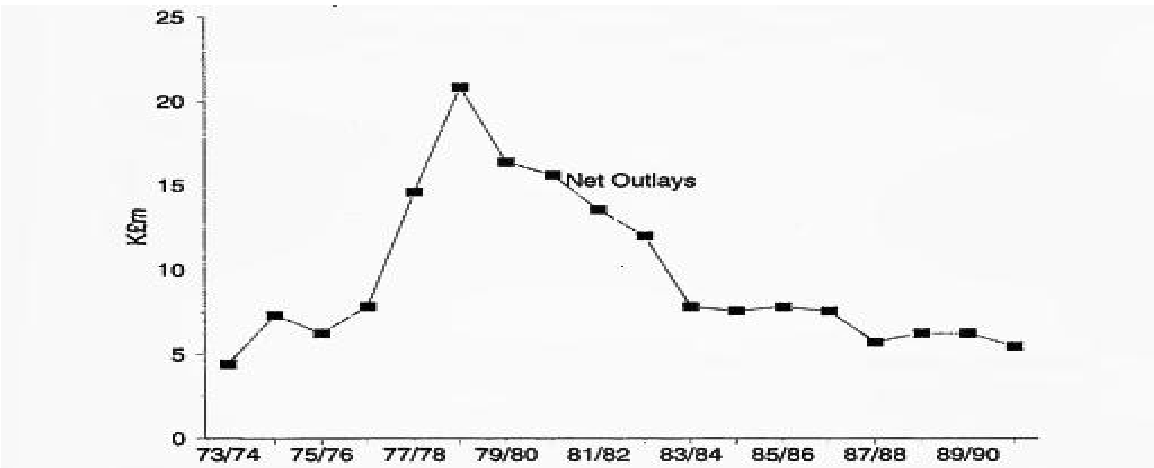

Figure: 5.2: Declining trend of Wildlife Tourism output in the post SAPs (1973-1990)

Source: Southey & Nderitu, 1993

5.1.3 Trade, investment and Financial Sector

The structural adjustment programs led countries to a downward path in trade, investment and financial performance (Christiaensen *et al.,* 2001). This was in contrast to the earlier anticipated positive performance of the markets of the least developing nations. Krugman (1988) identified that the structural programs caused shocks to trade and financial performance of most developing countries. Many empirical studies have concluded that the structural adjustment programs have typically had a negative effect on trade, investment and financial growth in least developed countries, especially those in Africa (Easterly, 2000). In fact, some scholars such as Klasen (2003) found that any improvement in trade and financial performance in the developing countries were not linked to structural adjustment related macroeconomic policies. Decline in agricultural production, price distortions, especially through high exchange rates, price controls and subsidised credits resulted in inefficient resource allocation that eventually led to the collapse of trade, investments and poor performance of financial sector.

5.2 Social Sectors

5.2.1 Health Sector

Thomson, Kentikelenis & Stubbs (2017) found a detrimental association between structural adjustment policies and healthcare outcomes in the least developing countries. The researchers note that the beneficial effects of the structural programs in the health sector are outweighed by the detrimental effects. In some cases, the "conditionalities" of the structural adjustment programs put governments under explicit or implicit pressure to cut social spending in order to meet fiscal targets, thereby reducing the fiscal space in which healthcare systems can operate (Noorbakhsh, 2006). Consequently, countries experienced medical supply shortages, loss of human capital and replacement of defunded health services with ineffective traditional healthcare practices. Moreover, the wage bill ceiling often created incentives for health workers to move elsewhere, producing 'brain drain', as seen in many African countries (Conway, 2010).

5.2.2 Education Sector

Like other sectors, the education sector has not benefited from the Structural Adjustment Programs. Trends reveal that fiscal measures introduced by least developing countries during the SAPs had devastating effects on public expenditure on education, the purchasing power of teachers, quality of education, access to education, and gender gap in the provision of education at all levels. Between 1984 and 1988, for instance, Nigeria and Zambia experienced about an 8 % reduction in the share of education in the national budget. The public spending per student in the two countries fell by 32.96% and 60% respectively (Babalola, Lungwangwa & Adeyinka, 1999). Similar trends were observed in other countries. In Kenya, Kamau (2005) & Pamba (2012) observed that lower spending in the educational sector by governments resulted in the deterioration of quality of teaching and research. Educational institutions also operated under adverse conditions such as poor of physical facilities, overcrowding and lack of resources for required materials teaching, learning and general maintenance of school infrastructure.

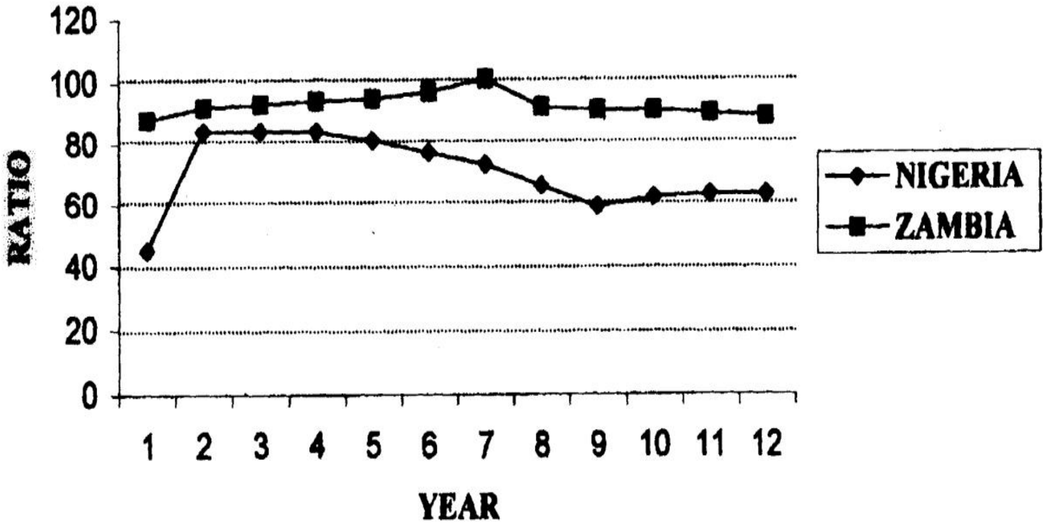

Figure 5.3: Declining gross school enrollment ratio in Nigeria and Zambia, 1975-1990

Source: Babalola, Lungwangwa & Adeyinka (1999).

5.2.3 Poverty Reduction

According to many research and policy reports, the structural reforms have barely succeeded in reducing poverty in the least developing countries. The developing countries could not improve international competitiveness with the substantial cuts in real wages in manufacturing (Rono, 2002). The increased foreign competition brought about by rapid import liberalization led to the closure of industries, with an even greater impact on jobs, pay and poverty. Adoption of SAPs had a regressive effect on the standard of living of the populations in developing countries. In Sudan, Suliman (1999) found that the number of poor families was 2.7 million in 1986. By 1994, that number was 3.4 million. The percentage of population below the poverty line was 77.8% in 1986 and in 1994, the percentage increased to 91.41%. More evidence show that the SAPs have increased the gap in income distribution, thus increasing poverty. In Uganda, data on income expenditure distribution for 1994 show that the bottom 20 per cent of the rural population received only 3.5 per cent of the income whereas the top 20 per cent captured more than 80 per cent of the income. The result of the SAPs on the economy of developing countries has been the stagnation in real per capita income growth, which is linked to the rising absolute poverty and unemployment (Kousari, 2012).

5.3 Political Sectors

5.3.1 Public Sector Reforms

As Zuniga (2018) states, studies show that aspects associated with structural economic reforms have exacerbated corruption risks and other economic crimes. This is reflected by the rising level of grand corruption, political corruption and petty corruption that characterized many least developed countries after adoption of the structural adjustment programs. According to Heidhues & Obare (2011), general corruption was cited as one of the major causes of stalled development during the structural adjustment period. Moreover, rent seeking and bureaucratic inefficiencies tended to thrive in the privatization processes, promoted by the greedy elites.

5.3.2 Political Stability

The empirical findings of a study conducted by Sulaiman, Migiro, & Aluko (2014) found that imposition of austerity associated with stabilization created domestic political instability, high level of corruption, mismanagement of public funds and pluralistic nature of the society which gave rise to a high level of ethnocentrism. High risk of political instability were found to be common in Africa and Latin America and Caribbean, regions where Structural Adjustment Programs were supported by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Moreover, budget austerity and the negative consequences to the workforce quality and increased unemployment led to political crises, social unrest and violence that led to social disintegration. According to Azeng & Yogo (2013), lack of government credibility, coup plots and high inequality in the distribution of the expected costs and benefits of reforms were observed in a number of least developed countries.

6. COUNTRY CASE STUDY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FAILURE OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS

6.1 African countries: The case of Kenya

An analysis of the experience of Kenya in operating structural adjustment programs illustrates well the debate taking place on the appropriateness of structural adjustment programs in the least developing economies. The country faced major economic crises in the 1980s even after implementation of the structural programs (Kabubo-Mariara & Kiriti, 2002). Kenya is regarded as a prime example because of non-success of these policies. Just like other developing countries, Kenya's economic structure made no gains from the adjustment programs and this forced the government to focus on other policies that would promote sustainable development. The structural adjustments have failed to create the conditions for sustainable recovery of GDP growth to the levels attained in the 1970s. Poverty has been increasing while social indicators have shown negative trends in the adjustment period (Rono, 2012).

6.2 South Asian countries: The case of Pakistan

Pakistan has been implementing the various Structural Adjustment and Stabilisation Programmes of the IMF and the World Bank. However, Pakistan's track record in implementing the SAPs has not been very good. Most of the programmes were discontinued because Pakistan failed to implement them (Kemal, 2003). The deflationary policies to stabilise the economy and structural changes in the production processes and financial sectors resulted in a loss of output in the transitional period. The real sectors of the economy suffered badly. The growth performance throughout the 1990s was poor and declined from 6.5 percent to 4.7 percent. Investment fell to just 13.9 percent of GDP while unemployment rate fell by 7.8 percent in 2000. Reduction of the budget deficit led to expenditure cuts which adversely affected the poorer sections of society. Since the structural adjustment bout, public sector employment decreased while wages have frozen. Moreover, overall unemployment in occupations with a high incidence of poverty increased and the real wages of both skilled and unskilled labour fell sharply. The negative impact of structural adjustment policies outweighed the positive benefits in Pakistan (Khan, Nawaz & Hussain, 2011).

6.3 Latin American Countries: The case of Peru

In Peru, the intended results of structural adjustment programs failed to create new social and economic opportunities. The failure of the SAPs to meet their desired result extended the insufficiency of social welfare institutions, which were initially considered to be important for a smooth transition towards market oriented economic growth (McCutchan, 2010). The policy instruments utilized under the structural programs reduced the ability of Peru to provide adequate social insurance and safety nets as government budgets were cut drastically and the role of the state receded from the market. From the early 1990s to 2003 inflation in Peru accelerated to hyperinflationary levels unprecedented in any country during peacetime. During the same period, GDP and GDP per capita fell by more than 30% (Kohl, 2006).

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the structural adjustment programs have failed to address the economic crises of the least developed countries. Past studies have revealed the failing trend of the structural programs in different regions where they are being supported and implemented. It is therefore important for the recipient countries to build up and strengthen new capacities and institutional infrastructure to promote the implementation of the structural programs. The political economy must be restructured by the least developing countries for effective implementation of the structural programs. Obstacles that prevent facilitation of the SAPs as well as ensuring healthy competition, while focusing on the market conditions and social welfare, will ensure that the programs are successfully implemented. For example, the least developed countries should embrace strategies that promote credit flows, adequate funding, innovation and technological use for a sustained and accelerated economic growth. Before the structural programs fail, it is important for the least developed countries to review the benefits and effects of the programs in every public and private sector, to determine if they are contributing to the overall socio-economic and political goals of national development.

On the side of the funding institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund needs to carefully examine the political contexts of the countries where the structural programs are being implemented. As some researchers have noted, political realities are one of the major barriers to implementation of the adjustment programs. This is because most governments in least developed countries are insecure, corrupted and repressive and may not give much priority to economic adaptation or to have the legitimacy necessary for the adjustment policies to be executed and sustained (Logan, 2015). The IMF and World Bank also need to explore new and innovative ways to increase focus on poverty reduction which in turn requires more monitoring of social and poverty indicators, improving ownership of the structural programs and helping in generating a consensus for the adjustment and reform policies by the recipient countries.

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