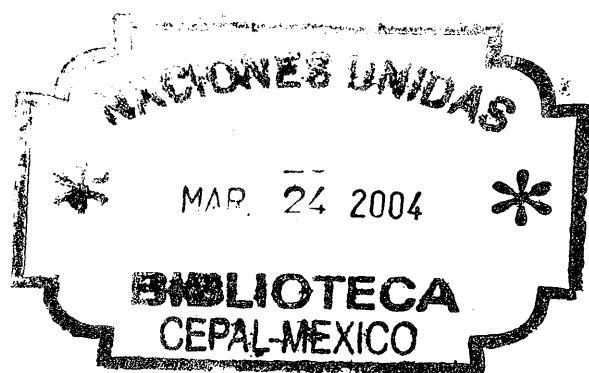


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# **Social Policy in the Caribbean**



UNITED NATIONS

**E C L A C**

**SOCIAL POLICY IN THE CARIBBEAN, ITS HISTORY AND  
DEVELOPMENT: THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL POLICY AND ITS  
MODERN INFLUENCES IN THE CARIBBEAN**

Prepared by  
Dr. Dennis A.V. Brown, Department of Behavioural Sciences,  
University of the West Indies, St Augustine,

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A lecture delivered to the ECLAC/CDCC Training Workshop in Evidence-based Social Policy Formulation for the Caribbean, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago 28-31 October 2002 and Kingston, Jamaica, 26-28 November 2002. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Organization.

## Foreword

In assisting governments to continue on a more rigorous approach to social development, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (ECLAC/CDCC) secretariat is pleased to present this paper on 'Social Policy in the Caribbean', as part of its ongoing work in strengthening capacity for evidence-based social policy formulation in the Caribbean.

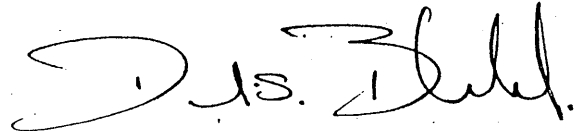
Evidence-based social policy is recognized as a necessary tool for Small Island Developing States, which because of their differing vulnerabilities would benefit from a more empirical approach to the myriad development issues presenting themselves in this era of globalization. Also, one of the most significant outcomes of the world conferences which took place in the final decade of the twentieth century was the acknowledgement by the global community that addressing the economic parameters of development alone was not going to result in the achievement of sustainable human development. To accomplish this overarching goal, governments agreed that it was necessary to address the social dimensions of development with equal vigour.

This paper arose out of a demand from member States for copies of the lecture that was presented by Dr. Dennis A.V. Brown, which formed part of the training in evidence-based social policy formulation conducted by the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat in October and November 2002. The training was aimed at enhancing the skills of senior technocrats who work in the social development field, so that they could better utilize social statistics and statistical indicators, to develop and assess social policies. The long-term goal of the training initiative was to strengthen capacity for the efficient and effective use of scarce economic and social resources.

Training in evidence-based social policy formulation forms one aspect of the project entitled: **Development of Social Statistical Databases and a Methodological Approach for a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for Small Island Developing States**. Through this project, ECLAC/CDCC secretariat has sought to meet the demand of member States for social statistical data that are reliable, accessible, comparable and which support social analysis, through the establishment of social statistical databases housed at the subregional office. It is envisaged that the social statistical databases will become the engine for enhanced

social policy capacity in the subregion and a vehicle for analyzing the social components of the development challenge.

The ECLAC/CDCC secretariat takes this opportunity to extend its gratitude to the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for their most gracious support in making this project possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Blanchard', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Daniel Blanchard  
Director a.i.

WP/2003/9  
27 October 2003

## **Social policy in the Caribbean, its history and development: The evolution of social policy and its modern influences in the Caribbean**

### **Introduction**

In this paper I wish to draw attention to the relationship between aspects of the broader societal milieu and the nature of social policy and its formulation in the Caribbean. Ultimately, social policy is something of a barometer that tells of the extent of recognition of the importance of the welfare of the general population on the part of those who govern the society. In this paper I point to the changing character of Caribbean society and the nature of social policy in the region. Specifically, I point to the movement of the society along a continuum defined by 'other centered-ness' and 'people centeredness', respectively, and the ways in which this has been reflected in the nature of its social policy. This movement has, in the contemporary era, been associated with the need for social policy to be based on evidence adduced through social research.

### **What is social policy?**

Social policy arises because the general well-being of the population is important for social order and economic productivity. It is one means of ensuring that some of the economic surplus generated by the members of the society is used in the maintenance of certain standards in the areas of health, education and the general welfare of the population. However, there is likely to be disagreement and dissention over what these standards are, what priority to attach to them and how best to attain them. This debate is likely to be framed by the immediate circumstances of the society but is also coloured by its historical traditions.

### **The historical context**

In the historical analysis I will lay the background for an understanding of some of the principles that are at work in the shaping of social policy in the contemporary Caribbean.

In this regard three things stand out. The first is the fact that for much of the historical period the well-being of the population was not the primary impetus behind the formulation of social policy in the region. The

second is the fact that the colonial policy makers were forced to take the people's views into account once their will had found expression in the form of social unrest. Third, is the change in understanding on the part of the colonial policy makers of the importance of evidenced-based social policy.

For purposes of this lecture I wish to paint with a rather broad brush and divide the historical period into pre self-government era, or prior to the early 1940s and the period between then and independence, which for most of the region was somewhere during the decade of the 1960s. The contemporary period would therefore be the post-independence period. I also wish to point out that while I touch on some of the significant inter-territorial variations that have characterized the historical process, my treatment of this dimension of the process hardly does justice to some of the real differences that have existed at the territorial level. My intention is to extract from the welter of history some of the general principles that seem to have been at work in the social policy formulation process.

Now, one way of making sense of the welter of historical events that comprise this process of the evolution of social policy is to understand that policy is very much a reflection of the sociopolitical setting within which it operates. In the history of most modern societies in the world this setting has been characterized by conflicts of interest between those who formulate and apply the policies and those to whom they apply.

The early history of the Caribbean, as we know, is dominated by colonialism, slavery and indentureship. Social policy in the region has its genesis in attempts at the amelioration of the inhumane conditions of human bondage. It represents an attempt to humanize social organization geared to the production of wealth for the use and benefit of persons external to the region.

Although it was never at the top of their priorities, there always was some concern for the welfare of the inhabitants of these lands on the part of its European masters. This concern varied across territory. As small as the Caribbean is there were significant variations in the attention paid to quality of life issues within it. One reason for this had to do with the interests of the Europeans themselves. It was never a conscious policy on the part of the Europeans to seek the economic or social progress of the inhabitants of the colonies as an end in itself. However, the result of addressing the interests of the Europeans would be that the particular colony and its inhabitants

were likely to receive some benefit. Attention to the problem of fevers among the British troops stationed on the plains of Kingston in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for example, gave impetus to not only the construction of a military barracks in the well-drained hills overlooking Kingston, but also impetus towards understanding the nature of these fevers and how to treat them. Similarly, Barbados, regarded as a home away from home, benefited from the early development of a good educational system built with the peace of mind of the European as the foremost concern.

Sometimes social policy came about because of some need that, if not addressed, would have simply overwhelmed the society and threatened its very existence. Staying in the area of health in the 1850s, for example, cholera was rife in the region. In Trinidad so many dead bodies cluttered the streets of Port of Spain that prisoners had to be let out of the Royal Gaol to remove them from the streets and assist in their burial. These kinds of events prompted the formulation of policies regarding proper garbage disposal and other types of sanitation. They marked the early expressions of a series of public health policies that were to have the cumulative effect of drastically reducing rates of morbidity and mortality throughout the region by the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Therefore, if you go back to the historical record you will find no dearth of social policies. What is being questioned is the impetus for the development of these policies. The general consensus seems to be that during this early period the goal of economic and social policy was development of the natural resources of the country for the benefit of the colonizer rather than for the explicit purpose of the betterment of the inhabitants of the colonies.

By the end of the decade of the 1930s this was to change. These years witnessed political disturbances in the forms of riots and demonstrations across the region. This expression of discontent was aimed at the colonial authorities and gave form to dissatisfaction with the economic, social and political circumstances facing the population. Globally, the world economy had fallen into depression during these years. This translated itself into reduced opportunity and increased constraint in an already oppressive social and economic setting. In the Caribbean these factors were compounded by the fact that during the previous decade, or so, migration opportunities to the Hispanic countries of the region that had existed since the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were no longer available. The British Government's response to these developments represents the first time that social policy considerations are undertaken with the interests of the people of the region as the primary consideration.



Still, this represented only the beginning of that process. The Moyne Commission, which was established to look into the causes of the disturbances was quite Malthusian in its orientation and attributed much of the blame for the disturbances to the fact that the people bred too much. Nonetheless, the people-centered approach was unmistakable. The 1943 population census of Jamaica, which was one of its recommendations, is outstanding for its comprehensiveness and exactness. This gives expression to the fact that for the first time the colonial authorities recognize that the peoples of the region represent a genuine nationalistic force. It therefore became necessary to collect information on a wide array of social and economic activities in order to provide the basis for comprehensive social planning. For the first time a Caribbean census allowed for the serious analysis of fertility, migration and education.

In the realm of economic policy the same pattern obtained. In the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the global level, there was a change from laissez-faire liberalism to imperialism. This was accompanied by a marked change in colonial policy. New opportunities for the development of plantations and mining as well as a new need for the justification of action on moral grounds in the international arena combined to create a more responsible colonial policy.<sup>1</sup> The promotion of economic progress gradually seeped into a colonial policy now driven by imperialist concerns rather than the earlier policy of laissez faire. Even so, economic development meant the development of natural resources rather than the well-being of the subject peoples. Their 'welfare', in the late colonial period, was to be attended to by the State in the form of special assistance packages that addressed specific conditions of social distress. In the context of a dying colonial era and the people of the region aspiring to nationhood this kind of approach was criticized for its attendance to welfare rather than overall development of the economy and the people.<sup>2</sup>

### **Additional factors that went into the shaping of social policy in the modern Caribbean: Political independence and the emergence of development theory**

Political independence signaled the birth of a new era in the area of policy-making in the region. The impatience of the masses of the population

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<sup>1</sup> It has also been linked to changes in western society itself viz. the entrance of labour into politics forced the move from LF. to the active promotion of economic progress and the permeation of public policy by notions of social justice.

<sup>2</sup> The primary critic in this regard was Arthur Lewis, who made the case in his, "Economic Plan for Jamaica". To some extent this approach has persisted in the post independence Caribbean State.

for social and economic improvement married with the new sense of nationalism in the educated classes produced a policy setting in which the socio-economic well-being of the people and the creation of the economic structures needed to ensure this became of paramount importance.

Social policy is usually influenced by some kind of theory of how best to organize society and economy in order to ensure optimum productivity and the prosperity and well-being of its members. In this regard, development theory proved quite important. In this section of the discussion I wish to look at some of the theories of development that informed social policy in the Caribbean from the late colonial period onwards.

In the immediate post-war period the prevailing theoretical orthodoxy was Keynesianism. This theory had been spawned by economic depression in the industrial world of the 1930s and was to heavily influence development theory later on. Keynesianism proposed the intervention of the State in the workings of the economy in order to ensure the avoidance of economic depression. Previous to this, the view had been held that the economy was a natural mechanism that worked on the basis of the same natural laws that governed the physical universe. According to this conceptualization, all policy makers had to do in order to ensure economic prosperity and social well-being was to make sure that the workings of the market were unfettered by the intrusion of human will. Lord Keynes in his formulation to address the problems of unemployment and economic stagnation in the industrialized economies had recommended short-term intervention by the State into the working of the economy in order to avoid these problems.

With decolonization, development theory emerged as an important subset of social theory. Development theory offered an account of the reasons for the relative backwardness of the newly independent countries. Throughout its existence it has been characterized by heated debate regarding the efficacy of the State, or the market as the best means to ensure that resources are allocated in such a way that they bring about economic prosperity and social well-being. Keynes' formulations were to provide much of the theoretical inspiration for the emergence of development economics, the first expression of development theory. The short-term intervention proposed by Keynes became long-term State involvement, at least in some versions of the new discipline.

Development economics converted the existing colonial economics into a set of policies and strategies that now placed the mass

of the people, and their demands for a better life at the centre of policy objectives in the newly-emerging nation States. Its arguments presumed the existence of something called 'market failure' and on this basis made the case for the full involvement of the newly-created State in a process of large scale planning. One of its foremost proponents was the Caribbean's own Sir Arthur Lewis. It was out of the formulations of theoreticians such as Lewis, Nurske and Rosenstein-Rodan that the theoretical justification for the creation of most of the State organizations now involved in social and economic planning was to come. This theory suggested that the weakness of the market due to factors such as limited natural resource base, small domestic demand for goods and services, underdeveloped infrastructure, low incomes and levels of saving made it unable to generate the economic activity and wealth that would result in the social well-being of the population. Therefore it was necessary to create State institutions such as central planning agencies, central statistical offices, marketing boards for agricultural produce, central banks, port authorities and so on.

Modernization theory was a close accompaniment to this school of economic thought and the second expression of development theory. It added the sociological component to the prescriptions of development economics. It identified western institutions and values as being fundamental for the attainment of the economic prosperity promised by development economics. This theory represented the broadening of the approaches to the problem of development as it presented itself in the early stages of nationhood. Besides economics, disciplines such as sociology, political science and psychology now offered prescriptions to the newly independent countries for moving from a state of backwardness to one akin to the situation of the former colonial masters. In all of these formulations it was assumed that the circumstances of these young nations necessitated some role for social planning led by the State.

For another 30 years or so the market-led variety of development thought, was forced to take a backseat in the efforts at development in the Third World. During this time the world went through economic boom followed by slump followed by boom followed by crisis. In this era some of the countries of the region moved unsuccessfully in the direction of development policies that were informed by theories based on a radical critique of capitalism - socialism.

### **Additional factors influencing social policy – failure of the State-led policies and the ascendance of market-led development theory**

At the beginning of the 1980s it became evident that the State-centered policies were not going to produce the desired results. Indeed most of the countries of the Third World were about to be plunged into economic crisis brought about by a combination of political excesses, economic mismanagement and declining prices for primary produce on the world market. Faced with a situation in which they were unable to meet their budgetary requirements and repay foreign debts these countries were forced to turn to the international financial institutions set up by the capitalist nations of the world to ensure global economic stability. This marks the genesis of the neo-liberalist orthodoxy that the entire world now has no choice but to work with. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were forthcoming with funds, but these were accompanied by conditionality that included a hobbled role for the State in the economic and social affairs of these countries.

The neo-liberalist interpretation of the circumstances faced by the Third World at the start of the 1980s is that the problems they faced in their economies and societies followed directly from the over involvement of government in the economy of these countries. This, they argued, led to corruption and inefficiency, hence economic crisis and social disorder. State-led development is the problem!<sup>3</sup> What is needed therefore is a policy milieu in which the private sector becomes the main factor in economic growth and government attends to things outside of the province of the private sector such as the building of roads and bridges and similar kinds of infrastructure. According to this argument, by concentrating on the development of social infrastructure and turning over the main economic activities and social functions to the private sector economic stability and ultimately prosperity would be assured for these countries.

An important part of this prescription is that the foreign debts that were incurred during the years of crisis must be serviced. This has reduced the funds available for the provision of social services at the same time that social needs have increased. These increases have occurred due to the reduction of government's role as employer, and

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the arguments of Deepak Lal, *The Poverty of Development Economics*: Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1983. For a discussion of these issues from the other side of the ideological divide see J. Toye, *Dilemmas of Development: Reflections on the counter-revolution in Development Economics*: Blackwell Publishers, 1993

other social fallouts arising from the reordering of government's role in the economy.

**Moving from polarities to practical convergence – is this the answer?**

Did this policy work? Over the course of the next decade and a half, Jamaica, the first country in the region to approach the international financial institutions, experienced some of the worst social, economic and political crises of its modern history. By 1995 the country had registered something of a macroeconomic respite from imbalance and financial instability. At the time, the technocrats in the World Bank took this as the first sign of its economic revival.

I did not agree. As measured by the quality of life enjoyed by all of its citizens, Jamaica had neither excelled at the pursuit of State-led development nor free market capitalism. What had become apparent is that the pure condition of either of these pursuits was illusory. When we extend ourselves in the pursuit of either of these poles then the importance of features associated with the other, begins to suggest itself to us. In the midst of the State-led endeavors of the 1970s the need for deregulation of economic activities and a more vibrant private sector became apparent. At the height of efforts to institutionalize the principles of free market economics its main proponents came to a fundamental realization. This was: that the social planning previously undertaken by the State can only be abandoned to the vagaries of the free market at the risk of the rest of the polity being subverted by human deprivation and its associated social pathologies.

**Planning in the era of the market**

It is my view that the divide between market and State is a false dichotomy. The region's situation affords us the opportunity to institutionalize effective social planning whilst coming to terms with the importance of the market for economic growth and development. One example of how this could be done is seen in the creation of the Social Policy Development Unit in 1994 in Jamaica. This unit arose out of a need for the more efficient utilization of resources in a social sector that had fewer funds available to it than in the past. With economic crisis, structural adjustment and economic deregulation the State found itself with fewer resources at hand to provide social services.

The available data on the health and educational status of the Jamaican people at the time indicated that reverses were suffered in areas such as health and education as a result of the dwindling of resources available for the provision of social services. The constraints of debt repayment and increased monetary and fiscal discipline represented real limitations on the amount of funds available to the social sector. These resources, therefore, now had to be spent more efficiently. This called for two things. Firstly, a more sophisticated understanding of the social sector than existed previously, and this is where the availability of data on the sectors enters the picture. Secondly, the sensitization of policy makers to the need to eliminate waste and the mismanagement of resources through the basing of policy decisions on this data. It is this imperative of reduced social sector resources and increased demands made on the State to provide social services that gives rise to the impetus for the formulation of social policies that are informed by sound data.

### **Identification of key social issues in the region as they relate to evidence-based social policy formulation**

Let me provide you with some examples of the importance of data to social policy from my research into poverty in the region.

In recent times the most systematic study of the phenomenon of poverty in the region has been associated with what are known as Living Standard Measurement Surveys (LSMS), or surveys of living conditions. These studies have been inspired by concerns about the social fall-out of the adjustments to society and economy associated with the adoption of market-led policy.

A number of countries in the region have had at least one of these household-based surveys conducted. These are Grenada, Belize, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Turks and Caicos Islands, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and possibly the Bahamas. Jamaica is the only country in the region in which they have been institutionalized. Here they have been conducted for some 10 years on an annual basis and provide policy makers with a great deal of information on the health, education, demographic, social welfare, housing and poverty situation of the population. In the study of poverty they have enabled policy makers to assess the effect of macroeconomic policy on the social sector and the effectiveness of social policies in addressing socioeconomic deprivation. These surveys enable the estimation of the number of

persons living below the poverty line, their geographic distribution and their social characteristics *at the time of the survey*.

This information in and of itself is of great value in the formulation of policy in the social sector. However, in order to bring out the importance of evidenced based social policy, I want to point to some of the questions that poverty research raises that are not adequately answered by these data. Or, to put it another way, I want to point out some of the ways in which the absence of data prevents the correction of social malady. Let us define poverty as, 'a condition of scarcity which frequently takes extreme forms'. The poor person is one who does not have enough resources to meet their basic needs. Although these annual surveys represent a move in the right direction, poverty is a function not only of its distribution within a population but also of its spread over time. We also need to understand what poverty means to those experiencing it.

The existing data tell us nothing of duration, or meaning. Neither do they tell us of those factors that might have precipitated the fall into poverty, or how to correct it. In regard to duration, when we examine poverty overtime we see that the distribution of economic resources tends to be much more egalitarian than suggested by point in time studies. If the household's experience of poverty over time is examined rather than its experience at a given point in time then various patterns of poverty emerge: cyclical short term, or where a household moves into and out of poverty on a regular basis; singular short term, or where a household falls into poverty on only one occasion and cyclical long term, or where a household moves into and out of poverty over a long term. This perspective affords us greater opportunity to understand the risks factors that precipitate the fall into poverty, and the factors that can lead to exit from poverty. Furthermore, the experiences associated with poverty will change over time in conjunction with the various social, political economic and biological cycles that confront the individual, or the household. On the basis of this type of information it is possible to disaggregate the notion of 'the poor' and devise policies geared specifically to the needs of the respective groups that constitute the aggregate.

Dynamic poverty analysis alerts us to the fact that in the Caribbean there are different types of poor people. There are those who are always poor; those who move into and out of poverty on a regular basis and those who are poor only once in their lifetime. These types of poverty have different causes and call for different types of social policy

to address them. One survey will not provide us with this information. Neither would one consisting of different households sampled over time. What is needed is a longitudinal study of a sample of households. In the absence of this type of data then the policies that are devised to address poverty are more likely to inform policy that is palliative rather than eradivative.

In order to obtain this type of information, there is also a need to conduct community studies. These allow for more in-depth discussions and understanding of the combination of issues that are specific to the individual, and those that are due to his, or her environment, which contribute to the socio-economic condition of poverty.

As with poverty, there is a need for greater understanding of issues surrounding health, crime, youth, the labour market, education, migration and issues of gender inequality, including domestic violence. Very often these social issues are interconnected.

### **Critique of policy responses in the region**

There are two factors that I wish to highlight in my critique of social policy responses to change adjustment and crisis in the region. These are the top-down approach to the implementation and management of social change and the rigid, hierarchical and in some instances archaic administrative structures that are used to implement social policy. Let us look at each of these in turn. It is an unfortunate fact that right across the Caribbean, from Belize to Jamaica down to Grenada, the formation of social policy is still informed, to too great an extent, by the notion that those to whom these policies apply have very little to contribute to either the formulation, or the implementation of these policies. This attitude on the part of our administrators has serious implications for the success of our social programmes.

In the first place it influences the very types of data that are collected since the world is conceived in terms of a subject (those who are collecting the data), object (those about whom the data are being collected) dualism that negates the wisdom and experiences of the people themselves. Secondly, this attitude tends to lead to the neglect of mobilization, facilitation and empowerment of the community to whom the policies are being applied. When this is not done and the activities associated with the policy are not sustained then it serves to reinforce the view that the community is simply made up of a bunch of people who have very little to contribute to the process of development and need to



be dictated to and led from above. Bureaucratic paternalism is part and parcel of the social policy process in the region and is one of the primary constraints on the success that these policies enjoy.

The second aspect of the critique of the social policy process has to do with the rigid hierarchical and archaic structures that are a part of the administrative mechanism that is responsible for the formulation and implementation of social policy in the countries of the region. It is true that changes are being effected in this regard, but the general point I would make is that the legacy of colonial type administrative structures still hamper the ability of the countries to formulate and implement effective social policies. Even where new administrative structures are created they do not have sufficient autonomy to fulfil their mandates. I take the view that the areas of health education and welfare constitute a composite whole that is an integral part of our economy and the way it functions. Thus, in the same way that there are aspects of our economic activity that have to be managed in a proactive way through flexible responsive administrative structures there should be a similar approach to the management of the social sector. When it comes to social policy what we need to be about is the effective management of social change through the creation of flexible administrative mechanisms. These must have the requisite technical capability that allows for the identification of the key issues impinging on the social sector. This will be linked to the making of recommendations to the policy makers so as to enable the management of these issues through proper planning and timely action. The social policy technical and administrative mechanism that I envisage must also have the status that ensures that the Cabinet takes its recommendations seriously. This does not represent a call for a return to central planning of the earlier days. What is envisaged is a partnership of the government, the private sector, the international donor community and representatives of the persons to whom the policies will apply. In a region where there have been estimates of as much as one fifth of the population living in circumstances of want and deprivation we can afford to do no less. And when you think about it both factors that I have highlighted have a lot to do with mind-set and will. I believe significant change is possible.

The present era, then, calls for a proactive State sector that has a well-developed sense of the need to modernize the economic structures and activities of the country that it governs. This is in keeping with the new globalized economy and the competitive nature of current economic activity. The old State-monopolized economy has no place in today's world. The reforms to the structures of government and the

critique of the role that government plays that have been put forward by the International Financial Institutions have a great deal of justification to them. What is important though is that we realize that in order for these new approaches to bear fruit issues of equity and social justice have to inform these reforms. The unfettered market will not ensure this. That role has to fall to government. But it is a government that now has to play the role of coordinator and facilitator rather than owner, employer and godfather. NGOs, CBOs and the international donor community will have to work in conjunction with the government to ensure that the principle of social equity infuses all of our institutional arrangements. It has to facilitate the empowerment of the people at the level of the community to ensure not only that they help themselves, but also that their very participation acts as safeguard against both market and State failure. It will have to provide in many instances for those like the old and the very young who cannot help themselves and who can't wait for help from any other source. It will often have to do these things with fewer resources than it had in the good old days of State-led development. Therefore it will have to ensure that its resources are properly expended and for that it needs policies that are well informed by a sense of what is happening on the ground.

Far too many of our governments have accepted the reduced role imposed by the new economic orthodoxy without realizing that there is a gap that has been created that it has to fill through the proper targeting of its social policies.

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