Poverty and human security in Kenya

Abstract:

Kenya attained its independence in 1963 after six decades of British colonial rule. The colonial legacy has been instrumental in shaping the policy regime in the country, in addition to influencing sectoral operations and reforms. The latter affect the various ways in which citizens have been able to access vital services, opportunities, and choices. Soon after independence, the country's new administration under the late President Jomo Kenyatta articulated its commitment to fighting the three enemies of development, viz., ignorance, illiteracy, and disease. Poverty and human security were, therefore, at the top of the agenda of the new post-colonial government. Successive development policies and initiatives indicate that this commitment, at least at the level of blueprints, has more or less remained the same, with perhaps some adjustments with regard to specific planning targets and the strategies used. Poverty in Kenya has been analyzed and variously understood by its many proponents. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),!' for example, presents poverty in its various dimensions, encompassing deprivations that relate to human capabilities including consumption and food security, health, education, human rights, speech, security, dignity, and decent work, noting that poverty should be reduced in the context of environmental sustainability and reduced gender inequality. The latter is seen as integral to all dimensions of poverty. Accordingly, the OECD places emphasis on sound government policies coherently applied to development, focusing on key policy areas with strong poverty reduction impacts. The areas in question are seen to include debt relief, trade, investment, agriculture, environment, migration, health research, security, and arms sales.Y Although there is no agreement on what poverty means, it is widely accepted that the poverty incidence for Kenya increased from 44.8 per cent in 1992 to 45.0 per cent in 1994 and to 52.3 in 1997:3/ The poor have been unable to access such services as basic education and health - both critical aspects of human security. The relationship between poverty and human security has been articulated in the Global Human Development Report of 1994. As a way of protecting human beings from abuse of their freedoms, human security has become a crucial component in explaining and analyzing different aspects of vulnerabilities and other dimensions of poverty across time and space. It is argued that people without socioeconomic and politico-civil freedoms cannot access the requisite opportunities and choices enabling them to escape the poverty trap.4/ On the other hand, poverty itself limits access to important freedoms. We agree with Galtung21 who coined the term "structural violence" to refer to any constraint on human potential caused by the structures in society. As part of human insecurity, structural violence exists in circumstances where human beings are unable to realize their full potential, i.e, when their somatic and mental realization are below their "potential realization." Thus, unequal access to resources, political power, education, health care, or to legal representation are forms of structural violence embedded in social structures which cause direct violence/conflict. Peace is impossible in this context because relations in these societies are organized in such a way that the potential for development for significant numbers of the people is impeded by socioeconomic, political, and psychological factors.~ This article analyses poverty and human security with specific reference to Kenya. Using a combination of historical and thematic approaches, the article identifies the key linkages between the two phenomena, and raises issues concerning the potential to positively strengthen the linkages in question.