

2022

IARIW-TNBS Conference on “Measuring Income, Wealth and Well-being in Africa”

Paper Prepared for the IARIW-TNBS Conference, Arusha, Tanzania, April 14-15, 2022

Social Exclusion and Poverty in Africa

Ahmad Hassan Ahmad (Loughborough University, UK), Simeon Coleman (Loughborough University, UK), Carlos Sakyi-Nyarko (Loughborough University, UK)

Social exclusion would lead to adverse social implications and worsening economic vulnerability, particularly for the poor, both of which can result in or sustain poverty. Notably, it can be the cause of the poverty of the socially excluded people, and consequently lead to higher rates of sustained poverty in the affected groups and the economy. This will, basically, lead to development of a poverty trap. Further, it hurts the socially excluded materially, with the resultant effects of making them increasingly poorer in terms of income, access to health, and education. Worryingly, research findings have linked social exclusion with conflicts, including violent ones. This research proposes looking into effects of social exclusion on both vulnerability and poverty with a special focus on Africa. Why Africa? Poverty and conflicts are of particular concern in Africa, where approximately one-third of its population live in extreme poverty. Africa presents a very relevant case, particularly because it has one of the youngest populations in the world with nearly half of its population aged under 25 years. Traditionally, and even in most developed economies, youth unemployment is higher than the national average, which implies that a large proportion of African population are excluded in the labour markets. Existing data supports this viewpoint, and it will be informative to assess this situation to ascertain and quantify the effects of social exclusion constraining economic opportunities for the whole economy and vulnerable groups such as women. Specifically, though some exceptions exist, the lack of access to education, health facilities and financial services for girls and women is acute in these economies. As is often stated, no nation should expect to operate optimally with half of its brainpower. Consequently, to further inclusivity, implementation of social inclusion policies is being advocated as a way of, not only addressing the current state of poverty in Africa, but also to tackle its social dimensions, including crime, conflicts, and self-esteem as highlighted in Amartya Sen’s Capabilities and Functioning approaches to understanding poverty.

Although, there is a general consensus in terms of the definitions and ramifications of social exclusion, however, there is less agreement on the measurement and mechanisms through which social exclusion affects social and economic well-being of, not only the excluded ones,

but the overall society. This lacking understanding of the wider implications for the wider society is a missed opportunity to grasp the extent of the problem. This situation may be because social exclusion involves issues such as complex and reinforcing processes and relates to culture and what may be regarded as societal norms. The lack of academic and policy focus on its social aspect, rather than simply on the affected individuals/groups is a crucial issue. Another potential problematic issue is that the concept is typically viewed from inconsistent perspectives and consequently, the measurement of the concept has been approached by researchers and policymakers, including anthropologists and economists differently. This, therefore, calls for an in-depth and critical analysis of the measurement of the concept, particularly from the African perspective, given how inherent some societal norms fuel social exclusion such that it has become almost unconscious and acceptable. Proper measurement will imply that we are able to obtain and employ more representative variables which can then be used for rigorous and robust analysis and thereby result in better outcomes.

A further dimension of social exclusion is a better understanding of its origin or causes in a given society, which is likely to vary across countries. In some countries social exclusion originates from the societal norms and sustained by public policies, while in others, they are mostly attributable to more recent public policies, or some combination. As the remedy may differ, it is necessary to uncover the causes of social exclusion and its relationship to other relevant variables, particularly, poverty. As there are no measurement standard, different measures of social exclusion are used. Measures used in the UK and the European Union can be treated as examples and be compared with measures that have evolved in other parts of the world, especially, those of International Labour Organisation (ILO) in developing countries. Admittedly, although universal standards are necessary, the suitability of measures for specific regions should be considered. We posit that these existing measures need to be reviewed within the context of the African situation and societal set up, particularly the extended family systems.

In this research, we will investigate, within the African context, not only the process and causes of social exclusion in Africa, but also the measurement, and hence size, and attempt to uncover its role in poverty and vulnerability. Further, we will be considering whether the effects are more pronounced for some sectors of society, for example in the young, who constitute the bulk of the unemployed in Africa and on women, who have undeniably long suffered from their higher exclusion in terms of access to finance, equal education and social services, and wealth generation and ownership.