

NEGOTIATING SOCIAL POLICIES IN KENYA: AID, ETHNICITY AND RESOURCE STRUGGLES

Since independence, the Kenyan state claims to have pursued the principle of equal rights as an important part of its nation-building project. At the same time, Kenya's population is differentiated economically and politically along ethnic lines with state resources benefiting mainly those communities close to the ruling elite. At the beginning of the 21st century, important political events took place that seemed to address these inequalities. Focusing on a ten-year period from 2000–2010, this thesis examines the nature of Kenyan state–society relations through the prisms of two social policies: free primary education and HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

The thesis asks: what roles have the enactment of social policies and aid within decision-making arenas played in the configuration of the contemporary Kenyan state?; and how have ethnicities and local redistribution of resources shaped negotiations within the implementation arenas? These questions are examined by means of a qualitative enquiry. Fieldwork was undertaken over a period of 11 months from August 2008 to July 2009 in which secondary data was collected and in-depth interviews and participant observations undertaken. Based on these data, the thesis analyses relationships among actors and how these relations led to particular political configurations and social institutional arrangements. It is argued that Kenya's political competition for resources, together with donor-led reforms, eroded government social provision thereby strengthening other means of redistribution that are ethnicity-based.

The empirical enquiry found that donor involvement illuminates contradictory facets of statehood. On the one hand, national and transnational actors in the social sector weave donor assumptions into these two policy processes, raising questions regarding the legitimacy of the policy environment. On the other hand, implementation of the policies is closely linked with local patrimonial relations as well as nation-wide corruption. As a result, the implementation processes simultaneously reinforce nationalism and ethno-centrism. These tentative findings suggest that, contrary to donor assumptions regarding national unity and universal social protection, Kenya's social policies are part of a political machinery that fosters both the ruling elite's self-preservation and ethnic fragmentation. In this context, social policies have a limited impact in addressing inequality since the population understands that, in addition to social provision, redistribution happens through different mechanisms, namely through ethnic-biased allocations, patronage and corruption. This places the study within a body of literature that sees the African state as an undetermined process, in which domination is never exerted exclusively by one actor but is exercised by different actor groups that compete over the institutionalization of power relations.