NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMIC REFORMS AND THE REALISATION OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS IN AFRICA

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1. Introduction

This article examines the origin and consequences of neo-liberal economic strategies for the realisation of economic and social rights in Africa. It argues that the theory and practice of neo-liberalisation in Africa endanger the realisation of social and economic rights. It also argues that the realisation of these important rights requires a change of strategy on two fronts: on the part of leaders, a nuanced and more imaginative understanding of development challenges and situational possibilities; on the part of citizens, a change in the strategy and tactics of the struggle for human rights in a less state-centric world. The first part of the article introduces its central objective. The second part describes neo-liberal economic theory and its “triumph” over “embedded liberalism”, as a background to the third part, which describes and analyses the practice of neo-liberalisation in Africa. The fourth part suggests a change of approaches to development and the struggle for social and economic rights consistent with the changing global order. The final part contains a summary of the arguments and concluding remarks.

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2. The Triumph of Neo-liberalism

Neo-liberalism is

“a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”.¹

Neo-liberals believe that all human action can be effectively and efficiently guided by the market. By such efficient guidance, the allocation of resources by the market maximises social good; therefore, the longer and more elaborate the reach of the market, the more frequently market transactions occur, the better the chances of maximising the social good. Prior institutional frameworks and traditional power configurations have undergone radical transformation at the global surge of neo-liberal ideology. Among these are not only traditional forms of state sovereignty, but “divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart”.² Thus, market exchange has assumed the role of an ethic in itself, put forward by its neo-liberal proponents as a substitute for all previously held ethical beliefs.

The triumph of neo-liberalism followed closely on the heels of the economic difficulties from which the capitalist world order suffered in the 1960s. After the Second World War, it became apparent that, in order to prevent the re-emergence of inter-state geopolitical rivalries which led to the economic slumps of the 1930s and other forms of political instability which had culminated in the War, domestic peace and tranquillity was crucial. Such peace and tranquillity was best forged through some form of compromise between capital and labour. This compromise was to be constructed through a blend of the state, market, and democratic institutions so as to ensure domestic peace,