



Towards Equitable, Gendered and Transformative Social Policies in D. R. Congo

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the evolution and challenges of social policy in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1940 to 2021, drawing on research conducted under the Gender and Transformative Social Policy in Post-COVID-19 Africa Project (GETSPA). Despite decades of policy interventions, social policies in the DRC have been hindered by outdated approaches, inefficiency, and limited transformative impact. Key sectors such as education, employment, health, and social protection have experienced inconsistent attention, with persistent unemployment, rural-urban disparities, and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups. Women's participation in social policy has improved, but true gender equity remains unrealised. The lack of structural transformation and the prevalence of discriminatory practices have further limited the effectiveness of social policies. To break this cycle and achieve the country's development aspirations, including the goal of becoming an emerging economy by 2035, a paradigm shift is urgently required.

This brief recommends a new generation of social policies that are equitable, gender-responsive, and transformative. Key recommendations include:

- Promoting inclusive economic growth through investment, improved business climate, and human capital development.
- Advancing gender equality and good governance.
- Extending social policy benefits to rural areas.
- Integrating sustainability and ecological considerations into social policies.
- Ensuring adequate financing for social policies.
- Strengthening institutional and legal frameworks to support transformative change.
- Without these reforms, the DRC risks continued underdevelopment and growing social crises. Immediate action is essential to meet the needs and expectations of the population and to secure a better future for all Congolese.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has brought to the forefront the critical question of how effective social policies in Africa truly are, including in the DRC. From the colonial period (1908-1960) through the post-COVID-19 era (1960-2021), the DRC has experienced five political regimes, each introducing

social policies aligned with its own ideology. While these policies aimed to improve living conditions, they have largely failed to deliver structural transformation or address the specific needs of women. Several factors have contributed to this outcome.

Since independence, the DRC has faced near-constant institutional instability and, for over 25 years, ongoing conflict in its eastern regions. These challenges have been compounded by global economic crises and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, social policies have often been inconsistently implemented or sidelined, depending on the prevailing political, economic, and security context. Although some efforts have considered women's needs, they have rarely been equitable or transformative. A key barrier remains the persistence of traditional, outdated approaches to social policy. To achieve real progress, the DRC must embrace a new paradigm – one that is gender-responsive, transformative, and inclusive. This requires strong commitment and mobilisation from policymakers, civil society, and the broader public.

This policy brief calls for a new, gender-responsive, and transformative approach to social policy in the DRC. It advocates for policies that move beyond traditional paradigms to those that actively involve political leaders, non-state actors, and the public in driving sustainable change.

Methodological Approaches

This policy brief draws on research conducted under the Gender and Transformative Social Policy in Post-COVID-19 Africa (GETSPA) Project, led by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, and funded by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA).

The project spanned 17 months, from April 2021 to September 2022, and unfolded in several phases. It began with a comprehensive study of social policies in the DRC, tracing their trajectory from 1940 to 2021. The findings of this study were then disseminated through multiple platforms, including a conference at the University of Kinshasa, radio and television programmes, newspapers and online media.

Subsequently, a seminar-workshop was organised to introduce state and non-state actors to the proposed paradigm shift in social policy. This was complemented by consultations with government institutions and civil society actors, whose insights and perspectives shaped the preliminary draft of the policy brief. The participatory nature of this process ensured broad engagement and generated valuable contributions, which have significantly enriched the final version of this brief.

Unequal emphasis on different social policies

Since 1940, education policies have consistently occupied a central place in government programmes. Considerable investments have been made in youth training, seen as the strength and future of the country. However, this policy has often prioritised quantity over quality. Each year since the 2000s, around 200,000 university graduates enter the labour market, but most of them are unemployed, further deepening the employment crisis.

Employment policies remain the weakest aspect of state action. Economic downturns, political crises, the looting of 1991 and 1993, and decades of war have destroyed much of the country's economic fabric. Many enterprises have collapsed, and government measures to reduce unemployment have failed, leaving the unemployment rate at nearly 80%. Sectors such as transport, housing, health, and social protection have evolved unevenly. During periods of stability, governments made limited efforts to improve these areas, though often with unsatisfactory results. In times of crisis, these sectors were largely abandoned, as evidenced by recurring transport failures, poor urban planning, and the near-privatisation of healthcare.

Limited recognition of women's roles

Despite cultural constraints, Congolese women have been recognised as key pillars of society since 1965. Public policies have included some measures for women, such as prioritising girls' education and involving women in health and administrative structures. However, gender parity remains aspirational rather than achieved. While the Constitution and international commitments guarantee equality, women's empowerment still depends heavily on evolving social attitudes and effective enforcement of legal frameworks.

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Persistent discrimination and lack of transformation

Social policies have generally lacked both equity and transformative impact. Rural areas have been disadvantaged compared to urban ones, while marginalised groups, including people with disabilities and indigenous pygmy communities, remain excluded. Political favouritism has also shaped policy implementation, with regions linked to ruling elites receiving more attention than opposition strongholds. As a result, structural transformation has been absent across all policy areas.

Institutional instability undermining social policies

Chronic political instability, wars, economic crises, corruption, and poor governance have stifled the development and implementation of effective social policies. Furthermore, governments have often responded reactively to popular demands, but without adequate vision, financing, or monitoring mechanisms. This has produced archaic, inefficient, and poorly executed policies that fail to meet citizens' expectations.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Social policies in the DRC have long been characterised by outdated approaches and inefficiency. To break the cycle of underdevelopment and meet the country's aspiration of achieving emerging economy status by 2035, a new generation of social policies is urgently needed. These must be equitable, gender-responsive, and transformative, with robust systems for design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Without such a shift, social expectations will remain unmet, and living conditions will continue to deteriorate.

In light of this analysis, we make the following recommendations for transformative social policy:

1 Promote inclusive economic growth

Foster economic growth driven by investment and consumption. This requires peace, security, an improved business climate, investment in human capital, higher wages, better infrastructure, and support for entrepreneurship.

2 Advance gender equality and good governance

Ensure women's active participation in political and public life, and guarantee their rightful place in society through targeted policies and governance reforms.

3 Expand focus beyond urban centers

Extend social policy benefits to rural areas, ensuring equitable development across all provinces.

4 Integrate sustainability

Embed ecological considerations into social policies through a "Social Green Deal," promoting a just transition that balances social, economic, and environmental needs for future generations.

5 Secure adequate financing

Allocate realistic budgets and ensure consistent funding for social policies.

6 Strengthen institutional and legal frameworks

Enact and enforce legislation that supports equitable, gender-responsive, and transformative social policies.

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