

TAKING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SERIOUSLY

Sharon Bell

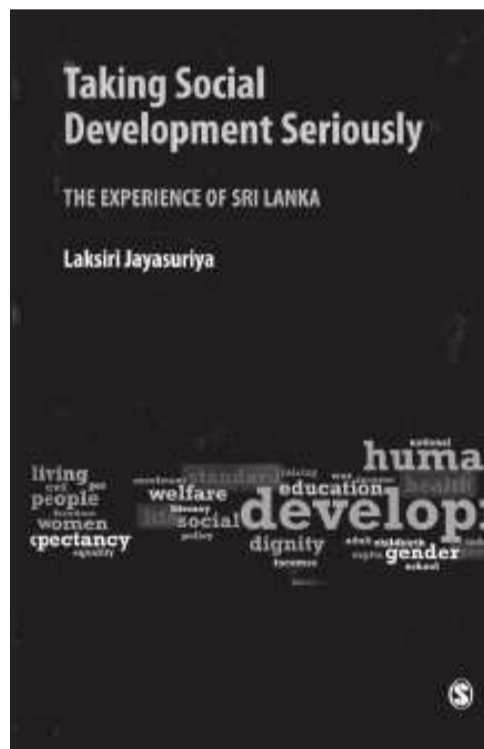
Laksiri Jayasuriya, 2010 Taking Social Development Seriously: The Experience of Sri Lanka, New Delhi: Sage

Whilst not an expert in comparative social policy my research interests have revolved for many years around the focus of this volume, Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was the site of my two years Ph.D. fieldwork in the late 1970s – the time Professor Jayasuriya quite appropriately identifies as the turning point in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial social development and welfare state evolution. I experienced firsthand the shortages of essential goods and rural hardship characteristic of the last days of the Bandranaike government; the 1977 election that brought to power the neo-liberal UNP government that turned a blind eye to post-election violence directed at the Tamil population – the harbinger of the civil war that was to embrace the island for over two decades from the early 80s; and the frustration of the educated rural youth in Sri Lanka’s south whose aspiration, to eschew primary production and find white collar employment commensurate with their educational attainment, was palpable.

Taking Social Development Seriously covers three broad fields. Part One: Social Development and Social Policy provides an overview of the key conceptual and theoretical issues relevant to social policy as social development. Importantly this section links the theory and practice of social policy with development theorizing. Particular attention is given to the work of Amartya Sen and his long-standing engagement with the conceptualization of equality (42). In Part Two: The Evolution of Social Development in Sri Lanka the focus is on the development of the Sri Lankan welfare state. This social development is seen largely as a consequence of British colonial policy and in the early colonial phase (1833-1931) the importation of modernity via colonialism (70), which created a vibrant export economy (tea, rubber and coconut) and a favourable political and social climate for sustained social development. Yet it also created ‘a dual society denoting

a marked social and cultural difference between an urban-centred English educated middle class tied to the metropolitan culture and the more rural vernacular educated adhering to the provincial local culture’ (85) – a recurring theme in the volume. Jayasuriya’s analysis of the late colonial state (the period of self-rule from 1931) focuses on democratization and the emergence of welfarism, particularly in health and education, which increased both the numbers and the

ambitions of the educated. This section provides a fascinating analysis of the British cultural ethos of the time and the importation of the ‘big ideas’ of utilitarianism and evangelicalism. It may be argued that with this firm focus on the Western intellectual tradition and its importation to Sri Lanka the analysis downplays the dynamic interface with Indigenous culture and politics, particularly the prevalence and sustained importance of patron-client relationships in all facets of life. The persistence of these feudalistic patterns of interaction and dependency arguably persisted because of the failings of the welfare state to address the needs of the rural poor, but it is perhaps simultaneously the reason why there was not greater pressure to extend the welfare state more comprehensively to the rural poor.



Part Three: The End of an Era and Reframing Welfarism focuses on the influence of the neo-liberal political and economic ideology which represented a paradigm shift – a retreat from the welfare state based on a modified ‘social safety net’ approach to welfare in the political context of a ‘monolithic authoritarian structure of government, a Bonapartist State, whose prime objective was to facilitate market-driven economic growth’ (140) aided and abetted by the orthodoxy of the World Bank and IMF at the time.

Whilst the foregoing is undoubtedly an important resource for students of social policy and academics with an interest in Sri Lanka, the most fascinating and important parts of this

volume are arguably chapters 9 & 10 and the afterword by Nimal Sanderatne. In chapter 9 it is argued that the consequence of the 'ideological rejection of State welfare in Sri Lanka' (159) and the impact of the new economic policies of liberalization combined to generate a social philosophy in government of 'private affluence and public squalor' (159). Tragically this has been accompanied by a retreat from the principles of social democracy. Jayasuriya however has not abandoned hope and promotes the concept of the 'third way' – the doctrine of market socialism as a basis for reclaiming social democratic ideals capable of addressing the diversity of interests in a plural society. This view is however tempered in chapter 10, the Postscript: Taking Stock after the Fall of Sri Lanka's 'Berlin Wall'. This chapter links analysis of the 25 year civil war, the JVP-led insurrection in 1989, the rise of Sinhala nationalism, the high social and economic costs of militarization, which is proceeding apace, and the development of a 'regime of exception' (179). We are reminded that Sri Lanka now ranks as the most militarized country in South Asia with defence expenditure as a proportion of total government expenditure far exceeding social expenditure: 'Put simply, the defence burden represents a massive shift of resources away from welfare enhancing functions' (183). The analysis in these two chapters, together with Jayasuriya's astute linking of the importance of welfare provisions to the predominantly rural Tamil people of the Jaffna peninsula, and the subsequent withdrawal of these provisions under the neo-liberal regime post 1977 as an important factor in 'rupturing the ethnic accommodation' (130) cries out for more attention.

This volume is the work of a mature academic and analyst. It draws on a formidable array of conceptual, policy and

historical resources and in so doing makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of an extremely important policy and social development site – once an exemplar of equitable social development, but now, as others have noted, a paradise clearly lost. The work generates understanding of the complex interplay of policy, economics and politics and its contribution is readily transferable to other contexts. It broaches the highly contested issue of the achievements of the welfare state to extend equity and fair treatment to all persons and the gravity of the crisis of the welfare state in Sri Lanka in the 1970s – the cost of the welfare state, in an economy which failed to keep pace with the aspirations of its educated and healthy population.

I was asked to write this review as I embarked on a new role in an Australian University that arguably sits at the centre of Australia's own public policy and economic development cauldron – Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory. This is a state with a large geographical landmass and a tiny population (just over 200,000), but where 30% of that population is indigenous. This is a state that is an exemplar of failed public policy and now shows all the signs of the author's 'two-societies': an indigenous society characterized by third world living conditions and poor health and education outcomes and a multicultural settler Australian society that is enjoying the new wealth of the booming extractive export economy. The context gives weight to the value of Professor Jayasuriya's reflective volume, not just for scholars of Sri Lankan society, but to those with an interest in the interface between public policy, economics and the real politik. The volume stands as a testimony to the value of comparative social policy. ■

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