

## Defining Social Problem in the Context of Imperialism: A Theoretical Reflection from Africa

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### Abstract

*What constitute a social problem has always been a matter of discussion. There are those who stick to the “appearance” of social problems, and those who strive to uncover the “essence”. This article discusses these facets of the debate and locates the arguments within the wider context of European imperialism. By using Materialism theoretical framework, this article has discussed the roots of the term social problem and its evolution in terms of meaning and scope. Besides, it has established that, in Africa, the term social problem must be analyzed inseparably from imperialism by looking into the dialectical relationship between center and periphery. The article then concludes that, the definition of a social problem should not rest on idealistic notions and quantitative aspects; rather should focus on the prevailing social relations of production exist in Africa.*

**Keywords:** social problem, imperialism, poverty

### Introduction

Defining a social problem is normally perceived as a very simple task. In introducing what social problem is, scholars normally start with the question *what is a social problem?* A common response is always very simple; a social problem, they say, is any condition which is *harmful* to a certain society; or a social problem is any condition which has negative consequences to *many* people in a certain society (Hart, 2017). These responses are not far from scholarly definitions. For instance, Rubington and Weinberg (2010) define a social problem as any condition or behavior that has *negative* consequences on a large *number* of people and that is generally recognized as a condition or behavior that needs to be addressed. For Kendall (2013), a social problem consists of *harmful* conditions or behavior that affects some or all members of a society, and that a big *number* of people believe that the conditions warrant public concern and collective action to change the situation. This position is supported by many

scholars, including Lauer (1976), Jamrozik and Nocella (1998), Leon-Guerrero (2005), Lauren and Lauer (2014), Hart (2017) and Barkan (2020).

However, the above definitions provide a very simple description of the term “social problem”. While it is true that a social problem is a harmful condition, affects a particular society/people, and that the people must be aware of the situation; these terms “*harmful condition*”, “*society*”, “*people*”, “*aware*” must be theorized and contextualized so as to provide what I call “a complete meaning” of the term social problem. Relying on the definitions provided by functionalists, or meaning and action theories provides *half knowledge*, and when reflected in relation to Africa, one cannot really understand the context. A complete meaning of social problem must explain what a harmful condition is; to whom it is harmful; since when it has been harmful, and the like. It must also answer questions like: What is society? Does society mean a group of people? If yes, who are these people? Are all people affected negatively with a certain condition? How can we measure negative consequences of the condition? For a certain condition to qualify to be called a social problem, does it need social/public awareness? What if the public is not aware of the condition which affects their life, will it still be a problem or not? How can we measure public’s awareness of a negative condition? What if people are ideologized? Who defines a negative condition? Do all people come together to define the situation?

It is my argument that all these questions must be answered to arrive at a fuller meaning of the term “social problem”. I move that, the definition of social problem be lodged with issues of power relations and ideology. Thus, to arrive to a complete definition, i.e. a definition which stems from the social structure, and is free from ideology, one must scientifically explain the relationship between *society* and *problems* and to explicate what is *social* in social problems? And what is *problem* in social problems? The next sections try to answer these questions.

### **The “Social”**

The term *social* has been one of the controversial terms in the social sciences. In the context of Tanzania, for instance, a layman’s understanding of the term involves *humanity; a person who cares for others, cultured and humble*. This resembles an 18<sup>th</sup> century meaning, whereas the term social meant sociability, fashionable life or morality; being social is a human quality (Schwartz, 1997). The term had become intrinsic to human identity and a vital descriptor of human agency. In early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term social was theorized dominantly along positivist perspective. At this time the term social is defined as power or state with authority and territorial boundaries,

distinct language, values, customs and traditions (ibid). Functionalist scholars build their theorization of society on this background.

To start with Durkheim, for instance, the *social* is that element of society which acts as a *bond/ social cement* that keeps a society together. This social bond/social solidarity constitutes a collective representation (embedded in values/customs and traditions of society) which links individuals and society and thus defines the nature of society (Morrison, 2006). The latter functionalists such as Parsons and Melton refer this (the social) as a social system with interrelated and interdependent elements/institutions such as economy, polity, culture, education, family, media, peer groups to mention a few. A change in any part is leading to a certain degree of system imbalance and results in changes in others parts and a system as a whole (Wallace and Wolf 1991; Barkan, 2020). So, these are the components of society, and thus, the term social, express a totality of these components. A social problem then is simply seen as a condition which is influenced by *function* or *dysfunction* of the social elements thus creating social pathology, anomie, social disorganization or social dysfunction. For instance, dysfunction of a cultural institution may affect family ethics and educational values which at the end affects the whole system/society. This view suggests, society functions like a human body as Leon-Guerrero (2005) emphasizes:

*Borrowing from biology, Durkheim likened society to a human body. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function in the body, he theorized that society has its own organs: the institutions of the family, economy, politics, education, and religion. These organs: or social structures have essential and unique functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does... The functionalist perspective, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order (Leon-Guerrero, 2005: 10)*

Then, for functionalists, social problems become social as they result from failure/underperformance of one or more social institutions which disturb the equilibrium (order) of the whole society. The situation, then, inhibits the *functions* of social institutions that constrain institutional interdependence and interrelationship which eventually leads to social

disorganization/dysfunction. Improvement in science and technology, for instance, may be perceived as a positive function as it makes an economic system more productive but may eliminate jobs and increase unemployment and poverty; these dysfunctions can disrupt or degrade the functioning of the whole social system. Thus, unemployment and poverty become *social problems* as they are influenced by system disorganization.

Meaning and action theories such as Phenomenology, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Construction of Reality and the like have their own definition of the *social*. Though they partly agree with the functionalists on social institutions, they assume that the institutions are not *natural*; rather are constructed by human agency. Individuals are rational, and act on the basis of meanings which arise in their everyday interactions. Thus, they don't respond to social institutions as mere objects, rather as active and experienced agents, who construct and modify their alterations with regard to context. For something to qualify as *social* according to this perspective, it must come from individuals' everyday experience and meanings; the subjective conditions of life aspects (Schneider, 1985). Blumer (1971) in *Social Problem as Collective Behavior* tries to explicate this logic. For him, a social problem must arise from the *public* rather than experts/institutions. A social problem is a public concern about a certain putative condition and a result of what Kitsuse&Spector (1973) call a participants' definitional activities. When *the public* (through their experience and meanings) does not define a certain putative condition as a problem then the condition/problem is not *social*. Thus, social problems are "the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (ibid).

For materialists, these definitions provide *incomplete* meanings as they cannot explain the nature and character of society. Thus, using Durkheimian definition of the "*social*" one cannot differentiate the *social* of two different societies, say neoliberal America and neoliberal Africa. Positivistic meanings are too general and basing on the empirical description of social components. For materialist then, the complete definition of the term should include the analysis of *social relations of production* taking into consideration their contradictions against productive forces and superstructure of society. The superstructure which comprises polity, culture, ideas/knowledge, laws etc. must not be understood as sources of social problems because they themselves shaped and were reshaped by the relations of production.

Proceeding from this assumption, Godelier (1978), Jessop (2018) and Oversveen (2021) assert that, the term social means the *social structure* of society which involves the analysis of dominant relations of production. The analysis takes into consideration the nature of class struggle and accumulation tendency of a particular society. At the end of this analysis then, one gets to understand the evolution of class structure of a society, power relation between the classes, distribution of benefits resulting from the producing class, ideologies and all components of superstructure. When the term *social* is defined in this manner, it provides a complete understanding of the term and society at large. This definition allows us to differentiate the “social” of different societies and different epochs; such as the *social* of a capitalist society, the *social* of a slavery society and many other societies.

### **Problem or problems?**

What is the nature of society? Is it characterized by a *problem* or numerous *problems*? To answer this question, one needs to call upon the historical context of the terms. Whether the society faces a singular social problem or numerous social problems depends on the context which fostered the emergence of these terms. Historically, the phrase “social problem” emerged at the mid-19th century in Europe expressing the totality of poor living conditions to the people who could not solve by themselves. This was referred as a “social question” equating it with other academic questions of the time including mathematical question, geometrical question and philosophical question. Thus, as a philosophical question or a geometrical question comprise a lot of related cases, the term *social question* (social problem) as well express a synthesis of numerous situations which later on referred as social problems (Schwartz, 1997).

In this manner therefore, the term social problem is singular, and it expresses a single situation which affects the society. As far as European capitalism is concerned, a *social problem* referred to the problem of social relations of production. As well documented by Engels (1846), Hobsbawm (1999), and List (1841), the first generation of industrial revolution in Europe, for the first time in history, faced critical conditions on issues related to health, sanitation, poverty, famine, housing, unemployment and many others. These conditions affected a large population in Europe and couldn't be addressed easily. Writing from this angle, John Stuart Mill considered this as a problem of ownership and distribution of resources (Hall, 1965). For Shackford (1869), Marx and Engels (1977), all putative conditions mentioned above, emanated from the unequal distribution of

wealth which expressed the oppressive and exploitative relationship between labor and capital (Schwartz, 1997). This approach enables social scientists to approach these conditions by questioning social structure and dominant social relations, as in any given society because the *socialis* singular and so the *problem*.

Theorizing within this paradigm, Andrew (1854) in *The Science of Society*, analyzed the *social problem* of society and provided possible solutions. The solutions include, proper redistribution of the fruits of labor, revolutionizing property ownership particularly land and natural resources, fostering individual freedom and cooperation and establishing new peace, order and social sympathy. All these solutions implied that important changes had to be made in the *social relations of production*; the problem of society.

If this was the dominant theorization until 1850s, where did the phrase *social problems* come from? How did it become dominant in social sciences theorization? This movement is well understood when the social and political situation of the then European society is analyzed. Hobsbawm (1999) and Engels (1845) for instance, elucidate evolution of social crises in Europe. From these readings it is well established that European society was facing a critical problem. Using Britain as a case for instance, workers' strikes and demonstrations from 1810s to 1840s (ibid) horrified the British society. This followed by the "pressure of communism in Europe" which put much pressure to the capitalist class. As the law of class struggle determines, the capitalist class continued to disseminate *ideology* so as to win the battle. They used academic disciplines particularly Sociology and Social work to justify their position (Schwartz, 1997). They tried as much as possible to produce *problem solvers* who can deal with the conditions empirically (empiricist approach) i.e. without analyzing the social relations of production.

Problem solvers cannot solve *the problem* in its totality, rather they approach this problem quantitatively and thus, each putative condition is treated separately and isolated from the social structure. In this manner, problem solvers do specialize on solving for example, poverty, malnutrition, famine, diseases, unemployment, prostitution etc. out of social relations of production. This approach favors the ruling class as it keeps them far from the cause. Using Durkheimian methodology, sociologists are trained to approaches these "social problems" objectively, treating these conditions as *things*, which are above individual capabilities. This does not only diminish human agency but also keeps away *these problems* from the real problem. What does this imply? As far as the social structure remains untouched, this



approach becomes ideological, as it does not aim to eliminate the problem, rather perpetuates its existence. The mass is blinded that the government, NGOs and Charitable organizations are going to eradicate putative conditions labeled as social problems in a society, but in reality, this approach cannot do the job; that's why 'social problems' under capitalism have remained over years (Ha-joon, 2007, 2010).

This empiricist approach has been discredited in some ways. Some scholars have called this an *aspirin* approach (Agarwal, 1992), or *descriptive* approach (Shivji, 2009), or an *eerie approach* (Hancock, 2009) or *rift and shift* approach (Foster & Clark, 2009). It is an *aspirin* approach because it does not aim to cure or prevent but to release pain. It is *descriptive* because it aims to describe the empirical features (appearance) of the problem without analyzing the essence. It is an *eerie approach* because it tries to solve problems using the same philosophy which has created them. It is a "*rift and shift*" approach because solutions proposed to solve problems create more problems. All these labels suggest that, the approach is myopic, thus, cannot be used to define concepts in the social sciences.

### **Defining a social problem in Africa**

How should Africans define a social problem? What represents a social problem in Africa? Should we proceed from a *social problem* or *social problems*? We have already seen how proceeding from the latter is vague. Given the context of Africa, this definition cannot give out a complete and precise picture of putative conditions. So long as it ignores the relations of production, the definition cannot explain for instance, the influence of Arab slave trade, colonialism and European imperialism (and all its features) in Africa. Thus, defining social problems in Africa without analyzing the prevailing social relations and the historical development of these relations is to produce an incomplete and vague meaning of the situation. Thus, it will be difficult to distinguish *problems* of say, pre-colonial and colonial society or problems of the colonial masters against the colonized. Out of social relations of production all members of society seem to face same problems in a similar fashion. For these reasons, we must drop this kind of definition. We have one option then, to define social problems on the basis of the relations of productions, the essence of all putative conditions.

Using this relational definition requires one to analyze dominant social relations in Africa. Though there is a slight variation, most Afrocentric scholars agree that Africa has gone through communalism, feudalism (or African mode of production), colonialism, neo-colonialism and neoliberalism. The first two stages are grouped as pre-colonial Africa while

the last three stages are stages under European imperialism. Thus, to arrive to a complete understanding of any putative condition in Africa requires one to carefully analyze these stages of social development which express dominant relations of production of the time. What is the pre-colonial Africa? What is the situation of Africa under imperialism?

### *Pre-colonial Africa*

Historians and archeologists describe Africa as one of the continents which has a long and complex history. It is agreed that the modern man originated from Africa, and that up to 500 A.D, Africans had already achieved a civilization of their own. From 5000 years BC to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, Africa had already achieved development in all aspects (Chami et al., 2002; Chami, 2021). Up to 15<sup>th</sup> century, many parts of Africa had already reached a stage similar to feudalism of Europe. Tremendous progress was seen in manufacturing, political organizations, trade, religion and culture. Rodney (2001) for instance, asserts that;-

*When it comes to the question of manufacturing in Africa before the time of the white man, it is also essential to recognize where achievements have been underestimated. African manufacturers have been contemptuously treated or overlooked by European writers, because the modern conception of the word brings to mind factories and machines. However, "manufactures" means literally "things made by hand," and African manufacture in this sense had advanced appreciably. Most African societies fulfilled their own needs for a wide range of articles of domestic use, as well as for farming tools and weapons.... (Rodney, 2001:41)*

The same analysis was also done by Peter (2015) on the development of science and technology in Africa, Mapunda (2002) on the development of iron technology in East Africa and Amin (1976; 2009) on culture and social organization. For example, Peter (2015) explicates how Africa had developed in learning systems, mathematics, medicine and architecture and engineering;

In Medicine, Peter asserts;

*"Many treatments we use today were employed by several ancient peoples throughout Africa. Before the European invasion of Africa, medicine in what is now Egypt, Nigeria South Africa and Ghana, were more advanced than medicine in Europe. Medical procedures performed in ancient Africa before they were performed in Europe*



*include vaccination, autopsy, limb traction and broken bone setting, bullet removal, brain surgery, skin grafting, filling of dental cavities installation of false teeth... Around 800, the first psychiatric hospital and insane asylum in Egypt was built by Muslim physicians in Cairo. In 1285, the largest hospital of the Middle Age and pre-modern era was built in Cairo, Egypt, by Sultan Qalaunal-Mansur. Treatment was given for free to patients of all backgrounds, regardless of gender, ethnicity or income” (Peter, 2015:17).*

In learning systems, he adds:

*“Learning systems too began in Africa long before the coming of the European explores. In about 295 BC, the Library of Alexandria was founded in Egypt. The oldest degree awarding university in Egypt after the Cairo University was established in about 961 when non-religious subjects were added to its curriculum. Three philosophical schools in Mali existed during her golden age around 12th–16th centuries. The Sankoré University became a full-fledged and a fully staffed University with the largest collections of books on African science. [It...] was capable of housing 25,000 students and had one of the largest libraries in the world with roughly 1000,000 manuscripts” (Peter, 2015:16).*

In Mathematics, Architecture and Engineering Peter proclaims;

*“It is worthy of note that only a few of people know, that many modern high-school level concepts in mathematics were first developed in Africa, as it was the first method of counting. More than 35,000 years ago, Egyptians scripted textbooks about mathematics that included division and multiplication of fractions and geometric formulas to calculate the area and volume of shapes. Eight thousand years ago, the people in present-day Zaire developed their own numerical system, as did Yoruba people in the country now called Nigeria...In Architecture and engineering, Various past African societies created sophisticated built environments. There are the engineering feats of the Egyptians: the bafflingly raised obelisks and the more than 80 pyramids. The largest of the pyramids covers 13 acres and is made of 2.25 million blocks of stone. Later, in the 12th century and much farther south, there were hundreds of great cities in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. These, massive stone complexes were the hubs of cities. One included a 250-meter-long, 15,000-ton curved granite wall... The Walls of Benin City, are collectively the world's*

*largest man-made structure and were semi-destroyed by the British in 1897” (Peter, 2015:15-16).*

These evidences denote two important things: that, *first*, until then African was developing, then it was not a *dark* continent, not uncivilized and all other negative notions. And *second*, the prevailed relations of production did not *block* social progress, did not produce rampant chronic putative conditions to the extent of destroying the producers and the society at large. Though there were inequalities, these did not extensively ruin the lives of the people (Rodney 2001); for instance, as explain by Peter above access of medical treatment in this era was free of charge; access to food, medicine, and natural resources was assured to all.

### **Africa under Imperialism**

There are many definitions of imperialism; however, this paper proceeds from Lenin’s conception of imperialism, which for him is the highest stage of capitalism (Shituz, 1961). So, it means that the complete understanding of imperialism requires an understanding of capitalism and its evolution. In a nutshell, capitalism is a system through which capital becomes a major means of production which has evolved through mercantilism, industrial capitalism, monopoly capitalism and then imperialism. While the first three stages describe the contradiction of capital within Europe, the last one, explicates the export of capital outside Europe. As conceptualized by Lenin, imperialism as a process involved the change from capitalist free economy to monopoly capitalism, concentration of capital and production in few hands, the emergency of bank capital as the basis of financial capital, the export of capital outside Europe and division of the world among core capitalist nations (ibid.).

The last two issues connect Africa to the imperialist chain. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European capital was exported to Africa and yet, the continent was divided among the capitalist nations of Europe. Thus, scramble for and partition of Africa which followed by direct colonialism was done under this logic. This phase affected Africa negatively, the continent was turned a source of raw materials for European nations, a source of cheap labor and a market for European commodities. In the process first, it destroyed all Africans social, economic, political and cultural institutions which contradicted the logic of capitalist accumulation and second it created colonial institutions which demolished the social organizations of African communities by supporting exploitation and oppression of European capital. Thus, assessing the process through which European capital has done to Africa since mercantilism, Shivji had this to say:

*“In the history of capitalism, destruction and devastation (including wars) have been an innate part of its five-century history, the iron law of capitalism has invariably held: accumulation at one end and pauperization at the other. The continent which has witnessed the greatest devastation in this undoubtedly Africa.... In its encounters with Europe over five centuries, Africa went through all these and much more. Its people were turned into chattels and commodities to be sold and bought in their millions. The continent was depopulated of its youngest and most energetic. They were dehumanized, their social fabric and cultures destroyed and their humanity trampled on (Patnaik & Moyo, 2011:4)*

Using Shivji’s conception then, this “iron law of capitalism” has been the source of social problems in Africa. Africa’s’ history, civilization and development reached before come into contact with European imperialism, were devastated. The logic of development says Shivji (2009), was destroyed and forced to contribute to European development. Thus, the so-called social problems in Africa such as poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, prostitution, street children, unemployment and other similar situations were nurtured within European capitalism in general, and imperialism in particular. A similar situation is observed in the two subsequent phases of imperialism namely neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism. In the neo-colonial era, though most of African countries got ‘flag independence’ social and economic subjugation prevailed. The logic of accumulation remained the same as the world division of labor did not change. In this period, Africa remained the source of raw materials and market of imperialist industries. In the later phase of imperialism, neoliberalism has come to concretize the effects of European capitalism on Africa, as the logic of accumulation and the world division of labor has not changed. As opposed to the colonial period, where political domination was direct, in the neoliberal era African countries are dominated through ideology. This means, since putative conditions are caused by the nature of accumulation tendency, and the capitalist accumulation tendency has not changed, so it means the so-called social problems of today are a result of imperialism.

### **Imperialism and poverty in Africa**

Poverty has remained a major predicament in many African countries. Despite macro and micro approach to poverty, the majority of African population has not yet eliminated the situation. Since independence, countries have tried to deal with poverty by preparing poverty reduction

policies and programs without notable achievements. Here, poverty is used as an example of putative conditions in Africa. Despite international and national multi-sectoral efforts to eliminate the situation, it has remained pervasive and perilous. By comparing with other social predicaments, poverty has remained a major and all-time impediment in Africa. The extent and effects of poverty have been increasing sporadically particularly in this era of neoliberalism (Bond, 2005; Lines, 2008; Quadri, 2018).

In the mid-1980s, World Bank and IMF produced a blanket policy namely Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) purposely to help the third world countries to wipe out poverty. Thus, from 1990s many African countries changed their internal policies and institutional arrangements to accommodate SAPs requirements. This followed by the millennium development goals and poverty reduction strategies of 2000s. Generally, these tools aimed at eradicating poverty and all its manifestations such as lack of education, health care, gender inequality, unemployment and environmental degradation. However, despite these efforts poverty in Africa has remained a major problem, and the number of poor people increases every day (Bond & Dor, 2003; Bond, 2005). The immediate question is: Why is it so? What is the nature of poverty in Africa?

Poverty as a *social* problem did not exist before European imperialism. In the feudal societies like those of the Western Sudanic states and Interlacustrine region the property-less people were secured. Land as the major means of production was accessed by all, thus production and trade were articulated to the point that the evils of the system were at the low level (Rodney, 2001). Poverty in Africa was incubated by the European slave trade. This, as documented by Rodney (2001), Acemoglu et al. (2005), and Shivji (2011), caused much suffering to Africans and above all the destruction of the then political economy of African states. Many people lost their lives and many others were sold as slaves to America. This did not only destroy the social organization of Africans but also the development logic. It laid down the foundation of Africa's exploitation for the benefits of other continents.

The situation was accentuated during the colonial period. As it is widely published, the colonial context had negatively affected African countries. Colonialism was a European project to exploit African resources (Amin, 1976, 2009, 2010; Popov, 1984; Patnaik & Moyo, 2011). As a phase of imperialism, colonialism insured a maximum supply of raw materials, and reliable market of European commodities (Nkrumah, 1965). In this manner, all developmental aspects of life initiated by Africans were demolished, and

everything was made to reflect the interests of European capitalism. Agriculture, mining and transport sectors for example, were operated under this logic. Africans produced crops which were needed by European industries/population such as cotton, coffee, tea, tobacco, etc. The market as well, contained products which were relevant to the colonial economy. In this manner, Africans were prohibited to produce iron tools, instead were supposed to buy from Europe (Diop, 1968; Mapunda, 2002). This is what Amin (1976) and Shivji (2009) call disarticulated economy whereas, Africans produced what they didn't consume and consumed what they didn't produce.

Judging from this context Lines (2008), Ziai (2016), and Wangraf (2018) concludes that poverty is not a *natural* phenomenon rather it is created by some members of the human population. African nations have been integrated within the world capitalist system of which all putative conditions including poverty are fostered. Citing Structural Adjustment Programs as one of the destructive programs in Africa, Lines (2008), Ziai (2016) and Quadri (2018) are of the view that, the programs have increased the level of poverty and accentuated sufferings to Africans. It is from this position where Zeleza (1997) proclaimed that, these programs [from World Bank] are *lethal medicines*. They don't intend to cure, rather to kill and destroy lives. So then, World Bank and her allies are agents of imperialism and function to under-develop African countries (Bond, 2005; Ziai, 2016; Wangraf, 2018). In the words of Hancock (2009) these are *Lords of Poverty*. The relationship between these institutions and Africa is exploitative and oppressive rather than developmental. Though empirically they seem to help Africa, the essence of their practice tells a different story. Here Lines (2008) criticizes some deadly practices of these imperialist agents; -

*'The IMF and World Bank are instruments of domination and control in the hands of powerful states whose long-standing objective is to perpetuate the plunder of the resources of the Global South, especially Africa... The fundamental role of the Bank and Fund in Africa and in the rest of the developing world is to promote and protect the interests of global capitalism.'* Arguing that, *'They have never been interest[ed] in "reducing" poverty, much less in fostering "development"'* (Lines, 2008:57)

Green (2012) has this to add; -

*"For much of the past 30 years the IMF and the World Bank have been pursuing nothing less than a radical overhaul of the way that developing countries run their economies. That role has been hugely*

*controversial and, in many eyes, profoundly destructive, and both institutions have been obliged to rethink their approach... Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, 'IMF riots' periodically ravaged cities throughout the developing world, leaving hundreds of people dead and wounded and losses of millions of dollars in damaged and looted property. If structural adjustment were a medicine, it would long ago have been banned due to its adverse side effects" (Green 2012:244-246).*

This implies that poverty in Africa is not a real problem; is just a putative condition created by the imperialists. In Africa therefore, the analysis of poverty is incomplete if it does not consider the European slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism. These forces since then have exacerbated and promoted the development of underdevelopment in Africa. They have been destructive, retrogressive and voracious in all dimensions. Therefore, the definition of any situation/problem in Africa must consider these forces. These are the source of all putative conditions as analyzed by Bond (2005), Byres (2005), Lines (2008), Hancock (2009), Shivji (2009), Green (2012), Ziai (2016), and Wangraf (2018) above. This means then, the main problem lies on *social relations of production* of the world capitalist social formation. It is improper then to regard putative conditions as problems in themselves. Poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity, unemployment, etc. are the products of social relations of production (in this case imperialism) and they cannot stand independently.

## **Conclusion**

This paper gives out a theoretical reflection of the definition of social problems in Africa. This was done to correct the incomplete meanings provided by other sociological approaches. Dominantly, the definition of a social problem has been restricted to idealist thinking which is obsessed with subjective experiences, collective behavior or empirical facts such as number and rates. This study has tried to explain how this kind of definition is incomplete. It is incomplete as it does not explain the essence of society, i.e. social relations of production. In this manner, the dominant definition provides half knowledge of the conditions as the other part of the story remains untold. When this incompleteness is treated as normal, scientific and complete reality it becomes ideological since the so-called social problems appear as natural conditions, isolated from human agency; and when human agency is involved class analysis is left out.

Reflecting on Africa, this definition examines the so-called social problems out of European imperialism. This suggests that the problems of Africa are



not connected to the world capitalist economy, rather, they are internally created. This kind of argument is incomplete as it cannot explain the complete picture of African societies. Thus, according to this paper, the complete definition of social problems lies on the social relations of production. As the history of the terms *social* and *problem* reveals, social relations of production provides a complete picture of putative conditions. The nature of all 'social problems' therefore rest in social relations of production. Thus, using this framework, the current African social problems which includes poverty, cannot be understood out of imperialism. As a social force, imperialism has destroyed Africa in all aspects; social retrogression and poor living standard are products of the system. Core capitalist countries through imperialist institutions such as World Bank and IMF, imposes exploitative and oppressive conditions to African countries. At the end, lensing from the world division of labor, Africa remains the producer of raw materials needed by the core capitalist countries and the market of their produce. While this process produces wealth and development to the core capitalist nations, it produces poverty, underdevelopment and all other putative conditions in Africa. Therefore, judging from other definitions of social problems in Africa, this framework offers a detailed and complete definition as it locates the so-called social problems in a big picture.

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