

# **A Social Safety Net for the Chronically Poor? Zimbabwe's Public Assistance in the 1990s**

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**Draft – Not for Quotation**

**International Conference on  
“Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy”  
Chronic Poverty Research Centre,  
Institute for Development Policy and Management,  
University of Manchester  
Manchester, UK  
7-9 April 2003**

Version 3  
27 February 2003

### **Abstract:**

The Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) operated several social safety nets in the 1990s, most of them targeted at households temporarily impoverished through deprivation of their normal livelihoods. One social safety net was, however, designed specifically to help those who, by reason of age, infirmity, or disability and lack of family connections, were destined to be chronically poor. This social safety net was called Public Assistance. This paper reviews the performance of Public Assistance and finds it had a disappointing performance record, with low levels of coverage of its target group and inadequate benefits for its clients. The paper examines the reasons for the disappointing performance of Public Assistance, and draws out their policy implications.

(T)he objective of Public Assistance (namely) to relieve distress and thereby prevent destitution... is not being fully realised because of two major factors. First, the number of beneficiaries assisted on a yearly basis is too low... The second factor that erodes the effectiveness of Public Assistance is hopelessly inadequate levels of assistance.

Edwin Kaseke et al. (1997: 15-16)

## **Introduction**

The Government of Zimbabwe's social safety nets have been credited, most notably by Jean Drèze and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, with preventing famine and protecting livelihoods in three consecutive years of drought-induced food emergencies in the 1980s (Drèze and Sen, 1989: 146-152; Drèze, 1995: 571-580). While recent assessments of the performance of Zimbabwe's social safety nets in the 1990s have produced a more nuanced picture of different programmes with varying degrees of effectiveness (Kaseke et al., 1997; Munro, 2001, 2002 and forthcoming), most of the academic and media attention in the 1990s focussed on those Zimbabwean social safety nets targeted at people who were temporarily poor due to drought or economic restructuring. This paper shifts the focus towards Zimbabwe's oldest social safety net, one which targets the chronically poor, or those people who, by reason of age, infirmity, disability and lack of family support, are more or less permanently destitute. This social safety net is called Public Assistance, and it has operated, in various forms, since before independence in 1980<sup>1</sup>. This paper assesses the coverage and effectiveness of Public Assistance in providing timely and appropriate assistance to chronically destitute individuals and households, and to determine the reasons for its lack of effectiveness. Policy implications for similarly targeted social safety nets are then drawn out.

This paper begins with a brief overview of poverty and social security in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, then outlines the administrative and political features of Public Assistance. Estimates of its effectiveness are then made, and the reasons for the programme's ineffectiveness discussed. Policy implications are

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Social Welfare Assistance Act*, Public Assistance is known as "Social Welfare Assistance"; in the Government of Zimbabwe's annual budgets, it is the "Relief of distress" line in the "Public Assistance" vote of the Department of Social Welfare; in the job titles used by the Department, it is called Public Assistance.

discussed.

### **Poverty and Social Security in Zimbabwe in the 1990s**

Zimbabwe is a developing country in southern Africa<sup>2</sup>. It had a population of 10.4 million people at the 1992 census and 11.8 million at the 1997 Inter-Censal Demographic Survey. In the 1990s almost 60% of the population lived in rural smallholder farming areas and around a third lived in urban areas, mostly in the two biggest cities (CSO, 1994 and 1998).

Even though Zimbabwe was a middle income country for most of the 1990s, income and consumption poverty were relatively high, as the country had one of the highest levels of income and asset inequality in the world (CSO, 1998a: 28; Moyo, 1995; World Bank, 1997: 222). Poverty increased throughout the 1990s. Household survey evidence shows that income and consumption poverty rose throughout the first half of the 1990s (CSO, 1998; Alwang et al., 2002); see Table 1. As economic conditions deteriorated in the second half of the decade, income and consumption poverty presumably grew even more. Capability poverty, as summarised in the human development index (HDI), was relatively good in the early 1990s, but fell throughout the decade. In 1990, HDI was 0.598; by 1999, it was 0.554 (UNDP, 2001: 147).

**Table 1**  
**Consumption Poverty of Households in Zimbabwe**

<b>Poverty Index</b>	<b>1990/91 All Zimbabwe</b>	<b>1995/96 All Zimbabwe</b>	<b>1995/96 Communal Areas</b>	<b>1995/96 LSCF Areas</b>	<b>1995/96 Urban Areas</b>
<b>Prevalence of Poverty (% of Households below the Total Poverty Line)</b>	40.4	63.3	81.7	56.0	53.4
<b>Prevalence of Extreme Poverty (% of Households below the</b>	16.7	35.7	57.4	26.8	10.2

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<sup>2</sup> This statement, like the other descriptions that follow, apply to Zimbabwe in the 1990s. It is important to bear this in mind, since there have been enormous political and economic changes in Zimbabwe since 2000.

<b>Food Poverty Line)</b>					
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**Source:** CSO, 1998a: 30, 36, 52

In the rural areas, smallholder farming households generally depend on rainfed agriculture for most of their livelihood. Zimbabwe is a drought-prone country, however, and during the twentieth century Zimbabwe faced a major drought on average every six years (NEPC, n.d.: 3). Major nationwide droughts occurred in 1992, 1995 and 1998. Major droughts in Zimbabwe are associated with below normal harvests, shortages of food and water, widespread cattle deaths, declining real wages (and, hence, declining remittances from relatives in urban areas), contractions in national income, balance of payments difficulties, increasing unemployment, and resort by poor people to emergency coping strategies (Munro, 2001: Ch. 5). What Hulme and Sheperd (2003) call "transient" poverty - temporary disruption of normal livelihood patterns which can be compensated for by provision of social or family assistance and likely cured by a better harvest or a general upswing in the economy - was therefore a major feature of rural life in Zimbabwe in the 1990s.

Both the level of rural poverty and the impact of frequent drought on the rainfed agriculture practised by Zimbabwe's smallholder farmers have been magnified by a serious maldistribution of agricultural land inherited from the colonial era (Iiffe, 1990; Moyo, 1995). In the 1990s, just over 4,000 large-scale commercial farms covered almost half of the arable land, and most of the land with the best soils and rainfall. Around a million smallholder farming households were left with the other half of the arable land, most of it with poorer soils and lower and more erratic rainfall (Moyo, 1995: 85).

Around 12% of Zimbabwe's population lived and worked on the large-scale commercial farms (LSCF) in the 1990s (CSO, 1994 and 1998). Many of these workers were either migrants from neighbouring countries - mostly Malawi and Mozambique - or the descendents of such migrants. Having been in Zimbabwe for many years - even generations - many of them have lost touch with their countries of origin and are of indeterminate nationality. Native-born Zimbabweans sometimes refer to LSCF workers - regardless of their origins - as "foreigners", "Malawians" or "Manyasarand", since the colonial name for Malawi was Nyasaland. All these terms have a pejorative connotation. When long-term

LSCF workers are of Zimbabwean origin, it is not uncommon for them to have lost touch with their families back in the smallholder farming areas and so have lost any traditional rights to land that they or their ancestors once had. In other words, Zimbabwe in the 1990s had a substantial rural landless class. While LSCF workers were less likely to suffer from income or consumption poverty than households in the smallholder farming areas (Table 1, above), their educational, health and nutritional status appears to have been worse (Amanor-Wilks, 1995; Lowenson, 1992; Mugwetsi and Balleis, 1994; Inter-Ministerial Committee, 1993, 1993a; 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1999). As we shall see, retired LSCF workers made up a disproportionate share of the Public Assistance programme's client base (e.g. *Financial Gazette*, 22/7/99).

Extreme poverty in Zimbabwe in the 1990s was largely - though not entirely - a rural affair. (See Table 1.) Rural households had on average lower monetary incomes and higher levels of capability poverty than urban households. Urban poverty rose, though, throughout the 1990s, fuelled by rising unemployment, falling real wages, rising levels of morbidity and mortality (often linked to HIV/AIDS), and declines in the quality and availability of social services. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that chronic poverty in urban areas grew in the 1990s, as evidenced most dramatically by a surge in the number of homeless people, street children, beggars and illegal peri-urban shanty towns. Many of the homeless and street people appear, through migration, ill luck or family breakdown, to have lost contact with family members in the rural areas, and therefore cannot draw on the traditional or informal social safety nets based on kinship and neighbourliness. A raging epidemic of HIV/AIDS created 600,000 orphans by the end of the decade and both traditional and state-run social safety nets have struggled to provide adequate care for them (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2000: 8). There is reason to fear that many of these orphans will fall into chronic poverty. Even though several studies on poverty were undertaken in Zimbabwe in the 1990s (CSO, 1998a; MPSLSW, 1997), no nationally representative longitudinal poverty studies (e.g. panel surveys, long-term ethnographic studies) were done. This lack of longitudinal studies limits our knowledge of poverty dynamics in Zimbabwe.

In coping with both transient and chronic poverty, the extended family is an important factor in social security in Zimbabwe. Hospitality and mutual aid towards one's relatives, even quite distant ones, are

important cultural values for all of Zimbabwe's ethno-cultural groups. Adult children are expected to care for elderly parents and other relatives, a norm which is reinforced by beliefs that there are strong links between the living and the dead and that the dead relatives can assist or harm the living (Mararike, 1999: 154-165). Labour migration and the associated remittances back to the rural areas are important facets of coping with risk and vulnerability in smallholder agriculture. Better off members of a family are expected to house and support relatives who are passing through or who migrate in search of work or schooling. The more wealthy members of a family are often called upon to make loans or gifts to or provide care for family members who find themselves in difficulty. The extended family is increasingly under strain, though, from urbanisation, labour migration, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the impingement of western cultural, religious and economic values, especially in urban areas (Ncube *et al.* 1997).

Partly because these informal or traditional social safety nets are likely to be inadequate or incomplete (Platteau, 1991), and partly because of the demands created by competitive politics in the immediate post-independence era (Munro, 2001: Chs. 5-9), GOZ established and updated a number of government-run social safety nets in the 1980s and 1990s. The most famous were those designed to respond to drought and the costs it imposed on smallholder farming households. This was the origin of the Drought Relief, Child Supplementary Feeding and Agricultural Recovery Programmes (Borsotti, 1993; Hicks, 1993; ILO, 1993; Kaseke, 1993; Kaseke et al., 1997; Raftopoulos, Hawkins and Matshalaga, 1999; Munro, 2001, 2002 and forthcoming; Rukuni and Jayne, 1995; Walker and Ncube, 1997). In response to the "transitional costs" of structural adjustment (GOZ, 1991), GOZ established a Social Development Fund (SDF) to compensate for increased cost recovery in health and education services, and to retrain retrenched workers (ARA-Techtop, 1994; Chisvo and Munro, 1994: 18-23; *Chronicle*, 19/1/95 and 20/1/95; ILO, 1993: Ch. 6; Kaseke, 1993a; Mhone, 1995; Moorsom, 1996; Munro, 2001: Ch. 9). The social safety net aspect of the SDF3 was wound up and handed over to the Public Assistance Programme in 1999, after leakages of SDF benefits to non-target groups reached unacceptably high levels. All these social safety nets were designed, however, to assist those in transitional poverty. Only one social safety net, Public Assistance, was specifically designed to help the chronically poor.

## **Public Assistance: Administrative and Political Features**

Public Assistance (PA) is a permanent programme in the sense that it is mandated by the *Social Welfare Assistance Act* (Zimbabwe, 1988), a law with no sunset date. Public Assistance was administered by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), which had a long-established network of nine provincial and 59 district offices throughout the country. The programme was run entirely through the DSW hierarchy, going from the Director at head office to the Social Welfare Assistants and Clerks in the district offices.

The fact that the programme was administratively so neat makes it stand apart from most other Zimbabwean social safety nets, which have been characterised by crossed lines of authority and complex inter-departmental and inter-ministerial politics (Munro, 2001: Ch. 5-9). This “neatness” of the implementing structure of PA helps explain why PA worked so smoothly in the 1990s. Although PA failed to reach a large proportion of those eligible for assistance (see below), it was a model of relatively good accounting, professional administration and objective screening of applicants, and virtually zero leakage to ineligible individuals and households. In contrast, throughout the 1990s, GOZ's other social safety nets, especially Drought Relief and the SDF, became bloated and increasingly politicised both inside and outside the implementing ministries (Munro, 2001: Chs. 6-9). The only government body involved in PA other than DSW is the Ministry of Finance, with whom DSW must negotiate the rates paid to PA clients and, hence, the total annual budgetary allocation for PA.

The rationale for Public Assistance is that, no matter how well the economy is doing and no matter how effective “traditional” (i.e. local or kinship-based) social safety nets are, some people still fall into destitution and are unable to help themselves. In particular, people of advanced years and those with permanent disabilities or chronic illnesses may not be able to work for a living. If they do not have any family or if they have lost touch with their family, there may be no one to look after them. Public Assistance is meant for such chronically poor people. The *Social Welfare Assistance Act* spells out

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3 The Social Development Fund took on other responsibilities, notably the Poverty Alleviation Action Plan.



the criteria for receiving Public Assistance. The Act limits PA eligibility to people who are destitute, unable to work for a living, and either over 65 years of age, disabled or chronically ill; they must have no known family who can look after them. In other words, PA is explicitly targeted at a sub-set of the chronically poor. DSW staff whom I interviewed in 1999 generally liked the fact that the criteria are spelt out so clearly in the Act. They felt that the clear legal definition was of great help to DSW staff in making assessments, and helped limit political interference in the implementation of the programme.

PA was selectivist in targeting and passive in its approach to identifying potential clients. The selection criteria and the screening process were designed principally to exclude undeserving cases from getting benefits from PA. Ensuring that all eligible individuals got benefits was a secondary consideration of the programme's design. In contrast to Zimbabwe's drought-induced social safety nets, the benefits available to PA clients were meager and the screening process or means testing was relatively tough. There was little incentive to apply for PA benefits unless one was desperate. PA was deliberately designed so that it would not distort the labour market, using the principle of least eligibility derived from the English Poor Law of 1834. In other words, benefits should be set so low, and the difficulties involved in getting benefits set so high, that the most poorly paid labourer would have no incentive to apply for benefits (Englander, 1998).

PA is also passive in its approach to recruiting potential clients. It generally expects prospective clients to come forward of their own initiative and present themselves to their local DSW office to apply and be processed<sup>4</sup>. Field trips by DSW staff to identify potential clients have always been rare and became even rarer over the course of the 1990s as inflation and the GOZ's growing fiscal problems have bitten into DSW's transport budget. The only exception has been in drought years, when emergency funds were made available for extra travel related to Drought Relief, which is also run by DSW. While GOZ promoted its drought-triggered social safety nets and the Social Development Fund with considerable publicity and social mobilisation, even in remote rural areas, the same is not the case for Public Assistance. Qualitative fieldwork conducted by the author in urban and rural districts in 1999 suggested

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<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, traditional leaders or ward councillors have referred potential clients to DSW district offices and sometimes have applied for PA on their behalf. But this is the exception, not the rule.

that PA was not nearly as well known as Drought Relief, Child Supplementary Feeding, the Agricultural Recovery Programme or Social Development Fund. Drèze and Sen (1989: 19) have suggested that widespread publicity and social mobilisation may play an important role in recruiting would-be clients to the social safety net programmes, as well as preventing or discouraging corruption and abuse by officials.

Once a potential PA client comes to a DSW office to apply, he or she must queue to obtain an application form. The application form is complicated and is in English, not the native language of most Zimbabweans. Most PA applicants have trouble completing the form and require assistance. A Social Welfare Officer or Social Welfare Assistant then interviews the potential PA client, and is supposed to conduct home visits to verify the details on the application form. If everything is in order, and assuming funds are available on the district's Public Assistance vote, the District Social Welfare Officer may approve the granting of Public Assistance to the destitute person.

The overall effect of this selectivist design and a passive approach to identifying clients is that few applied, and most of those who did apply were indeed eligible and were approved for assistance, budgetary constraints permitting. Current and former DSW staff whom I interviewed and informed observers (e.g. Kaseke et al., 1997) agree, however, that many people who met the selection criteria, however, never got to the point of applying for PA. This was either because they had not heard about the programme, lived too far away from the nearest DSW office, suffered from infirmities or disabilities which prevented them from travelling to a DSW office, or were intimidated by the bureaucratic requirements. The fact that there was only one DSW office per district meant that many eligible people simply never applied for assistance because of the costs and difficulties of travelling to the district headquarters; journeys to the district headquarters can be over 100 km in many districts, and sometimes several trips might be required for a single application.

As Cornia and Stewart (1993) have suggested, social safety nets face a trade-off in their targeting strategies. Either they can reach the majority of the target group, but at the cost of providing benefits to some people who are technically ineligible, or they can try to restrict benefits to only those who are

eligible, but at the cost of failing to provide benefits to some of those who are indeed eligible for benefits.

The former is called an "E-mistake", or error of excessive coverage, while the latter is called an "F-mistake", or error of failing to cover the whole of the target group. By seeking to minimise E-mistakes, Public Assistance has created large F-mistakes.

Given its selection criteria and the socio-economic make-up of Zimbabwe, PA is particularly important as a social safety net for those urban poor and former LSCF farm workers who, through migration, ill luck, family breakdown or other reasons, have lost touch with their extended families (*Financial Gazette*, 22/7/99). Though there are no firm figures, DSW staff have told me that a large proportion - possibly up to half - of PA clients in the late 1990s were elderly people of foreign origin. Some married into Zimbabwean families, but lost touch or fell out with their Zimbabwean in-laws after divorce, separation or the death of the spouse. They have no family to support them in Zimbabwe. DSW staff reported that the LSCF managers sometimes brought aged "foreign" farm workers who were no longer able to work and "dumped" them at the DSW offices for the Department to look after through PA. Other such elderly workers came into DSW after they had been fired from a LSCF or mine. If DSW could trace their relatives in their country of origin, and if the relatives agreed to take them back, then PA paid to transport the person "home", usually by bus. PA paid for about 100-150 such travel warrants every year in the 1990s. If no relatives could be traced, or if the relatives refused to accept their aged relation, then DSW would pay maintenance allowance to the client for the rest of his/her days. If possible, a place will be found in a retirement home, but these are very few, and the maintenance allowance is insufficient to cover the costs of institutional care, so private retirement homes are not eager to take in PA clients. Most of the residents of retirement homes in Zimbabwe are of foreign origin (*Financial Gazette*, 22/7/99). PA's largely "foreign" client base may explain Zimbabwean politicians' indifference to the fate of PA and its clients. This issue will be taken up below.

As for the benefits PA provided to its clients, in rural areas, PA clients were entitled to a cash maintenance allowance (see below), a free medical treatment card, and school and exam fees if they had dependent children of school going age. In urban areas, PA clients had the same entitlements as rural PA clients, but could also have their rent and electrical and water bills paid by PA. An urban PA client

could thus cost three or four times as much as a rural client.

As for PA's resource base, staff of DSW told me in interviews that DSW has argued regularly - and unsuccessfully - for higher maintenance allowances and more support budgets (e.g. for transport for outreach), while the Ministry of Finance has traditionally - and successfully - argued to keep PA benefits low and its coverage small. Table 2 below suggests that the DSW staff are correct.

**Table 2**  
**Expenditure on Public Assistance, in Real 1990 Z\$**

Year	Expenditure on PA Maintenance Allowance	Expenditure on PA School & Exam Fees	Total PA Expenditure	Total PA Expenditure as % of GDP
1994	Z\$2,282,374	Z\$636,128	Z\$2,918,502	0.0001%
1995	Z\$1,698,793	Z\$700,772	Z\$2,399,565	0.0001%
1996	Z\$1,701,820	Z\$345,858	Z\$2,047,678	0.0001%
1997	Z\$1,993,195	Z\$284,003	Z\$2,277,198	0.0001%
1998	Z\$2,822,864	Z\$638,146	Z\$3,461,010	0.0001%

**Source:** 1994: Secretary for Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare n.d.; 1995-98: Public Assistance Section, Department of Social Welfare. GDP data are from CSO.

**Notes:** DSW provided expenditure data in nominal Z\$; I have deflated these to real 1990 Z\$ using the mid-year value of Consumer Price Index compiled by the Central Statistical Office. In 1990 Z\$2.08=US\$1. "Total PA Expenditure" excludes Drought Relief, which is technically part of the PA vote. Years are calendar years, not fiscal years.

GOZ's expenditure on Public Assistance has always been small, around one-tenth of 1% of national income. This reflects the low priority accorded to the programme by GOZ as a whole, DSW's support notwithstanding. In contrast, GOZ spent over Z\$11 million (in real 1990 terms), or three to five times as much as the total PA budget, on school fees and exam fees alone under the SDF programme in each of 1993, 1994 and 1995 (SDF, 1996: 6). In the drought year 1995-96, GOZ spent almost Z\$35.4 million (in real 1990 terms), or 0.3% of GDP, on the Child Supplementary Feeding Programme (CSFP). Even in the non-drought year 1994-95, GOZ spent over Z\$11 million (in real 1990 terms) on CSFP, or around four to five times the total spent on Public Assistance.

Ironically, the one time that DSW did manage to convince Ministry of Finance to greatly increase the annual budgetary allocation to PA, in 1998, perverse consequences ensued. In fiscal year 1996-97,

DSW received an allocation of Z\$9.1 million for PA from Ministry of Finance, and spent roughly 7% more than that (Minister of Finance, 1997: 63). The following year, 1997-98, DSW successfully argued that PA was suffering from large F-mistakes and that, therefore, PA's budgetary allocation should be greatly increased. The Ministry of Finance accepted this argument and upped the PA allocation to almost Z\$40.6 million (ibid.), a nominal increase of over two-and-a-half fold, or a doubling in real terms, taking into account the once-off lengthening of the GOZ fiscal year in 1997-98<sup>5</sup>. The 1999 PA allocation was increased to almost Z\$49 million, an increase that was expected to be almost enough to keep up with inflation (Minister of Finance, 1998: 58). As Table 2 makes clear, however, DSW was not able to increase PA spending at nearly the rate of the increases in budgetary allocations in 1998. An embarrassed DSW had to return unused PA funds to Ministry of Finance. DSW officials told me in 1999 that, although PA still had high levels of F-mistakes, the passive approach to recruiting PA clients, DSW's lack of sub-district offices, and the strict means testing stipulated by the Act all hindered DSW's ability to identify potential PA clients, screen them, and provide them with assistance. The lack of transport in particular was a hindrance to recruiting more clients in rural areas. Many would-be clients continued to drop out during the screening process. DSW officials told me that one important conclusion they drew was that both conjunctural factors (e.g. the lack of funds for transport) and structural factors (e.g. the strict criteria and screening process stipulated by the Act) impeded DSW's ability to spend money on PA, despite the unmet needs of the programme.

### **Effectiveness of Public Assistance**

Effectiveness is defined here as the extent to which a programme reaches its target group with resources that are relevant to and sufficient for their basic survival and maintenance needs. This definition implies that one must look at the programme's coverage (i.e. proportion of the target group who actually receive benefits from the programme) as well as at the type and level of benefits the programme provides to those who are successful in obtaining them.

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<sup>5</sup> Previously, the GOZ fiscal year had been from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> June. In the late 1990s, GOZ decided to align the fiscal year with the calendar year, since most other economic statistics were collected on a calendar year basis. The 1997-98 fiscal year was therefore lengthened to 18 months, from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1998. From 1<sup>st</sup> January 1999, the GOZ fiscal year and the calendar year coincided.

As might be expected from its selectivist design, its high barriers to entry, its passive approach to identifying and recruiting potential beneficiaries, its lack of accompanying publicity, and its small budgetary allocations, the coverage of Public Assistance has been low indeed.

**Table 3**  
**Number of Public Assistance Beneficiaries**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of PA Beneficiaries: Maintenance Allowance</b>	<b>No. of PA Beneficiaries: School and Exam Fees</b>
<b>1994</b>	69,308	--
<b>1995</b>	32,086	11,587
<b>1996</b>	21,628	4,686
<b>1997</b>	15,028	1,348
<b>1998</b>	20,562	2,613

**Source:** 1994: Secretary for Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare n.d.; 1995-98: Public Assistance Section, Department of Social Welfare. GDP data are from CSO.

**Notes:** The school and exam fee beneficiaries should also be maintenance allowance beneficiaries.

The administrative statistics show that, even at its peak in 1994, PA covered only 0.65% of Zimbabwe's population. The two attempts made by official household surveys to assess PA coverage in the 1990s show similar levels of coverage. One survey in October 1992 identified only 0.5% of all households (N=23/5007) who reported getting PA in the previous month. In a November 1997 survey, only 1.1% of households (N=47/4407) reported receiving PA or any other form of charitable assistance in the previous month (see Munro, 2001: Ch. 9). By way of contrast, GOZ surveys show that 35.7 % of households, and 47.2% of the population, lived in extreme poverty, i.e. below the food poverty line, in 1995-96 (CSO, 1998a: 30).

Though most of those who fell below the official food poverty line did not meet the criteria of the *Social Welfare Assistance Act*, there is broad consensus among current and former DSW staff and informed observers (e.g. Kaseke et al., 1997) that PA still missed many, and probably most, of its target group. These F-mistakes occurred at each stage of the PA process. First of all, and as noted above, many of PA's target group never got to a DSW office to apply because they were too old, too weak or too

disabled to travel to the district headquarters to apply. Other potential PA clients, old, illiterate and living in remote areas without access to the mass media, may simply never have heard of PA; certainly my own qualitative fieldwork in six districts in 1999 uncovered a great many people who did not know about the programme. Among those who did apply for PA, DSW staff have told me that some apparently needy and eligible applicants for PA "disappeared" in the midst of the application procedure, apparently discouraged by the complex application forms and the need to make several visits to the same DSW office in order to get all one's paperwork right. DSW staff have also confirmed to me that sometimes, especially in the second half of GOZ's fiscal year, eligible applicants have had to be turned down because the district's PA budget had already been exhausted, or was fully committed to existing PA clients. This problem was reported in district offices covering both urban and rural areas; since the urban PA clients found it easier to get to the DSW office, and since urban PA clients cost so much more than rural clients, the district's PA budget could be exhausted before many rural applicants had a chance to apply<sup>6</sup>.

The coverage figures in Table 3 above do, however, require some interpretation, especially for 1995. When I asked DSW staff why the number of PA recipients had fallen so dramatically in 1995, a year of drought and economic recession, I was told that DSW had shifted many maintenance allowance clients to the Drought Relief Programme. At the same time, DSW shifted many PA school and exam fees clients to the SDF, which also paid school and exam fees, albeit for a broader clientele of households earning less than Z\$400/month. Shifting clients from one programme to another like this was a logical thing to do that year, since large amounts of food were available to DSW through the Drought Relief Programme in 1995, and the budgetary allocation for SDF school fees was far more elastic than the school and exam fees budget line for PA. In fact, DSW officials told me that many of the PA beneficiaries preferred getting Drought Relief to getting PA maintenance allowance, since the value of the Drought Relief food rations was greater than the value of the PA maintenance allowance. As the 1995-96 Drought Relief Programme was wound up, some of these clients may have found their way back into the regular PA rolls, though the decline in the number of PA clients seen in Table 3 suggests

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<sup>6</sup> The overall effect is that the distribution of PA benefits was probably biased to the urban poor. In other words, F-mistakes were likely higher in rural areas.

this is unlikely. Unfortunately, DSW officials were not able to quantify these shifts back and forth between PA on the one hand and Drought Relief and SDF on the other, as the decisions on such transfers were taken by district level officials on a case-by-case basis, and no formal or centralised system of records was kept. However, the fact remains that, in non-drought years (1994, 1996, 1997), the number of PA clients remained very small, and there is every reason to believe that F-mistakes were large.

Not only was the overall coverage of PA too low, but the cash maintenance allowances paid out to the few who got benefits were well below the Government's own food poverty lines, as Table 4 shows. In other words, the PA maintenance allowance, which is meant to cover an individual's basic necessities such as food, clothing, soap, matches, etc., is not even enough to cover what other branches of GOZ consider to be the basic food requirements.

**Table 4**  
**Monthly PA Maintenance Allowances and Food Poverty Lines, in Nominal Prices**

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>PA Monthly Maintenance Allowance – Adult</b>	<b>PA Monthly Maintenance Allowance - Child</b>	<b>National Food Poverty Line- CSO</b>	<b>Rural Food Poverty Line - MPSLSW</b>	<b>Urban Food Poverty Line - MPSLSW</b>
<b>1996-97</b>	Z\$50	Z\$20	Z\$149	Z\$119	Z\$153
<b>1999</b>	Z\$100	Z\$60	Z\$327	Z\$285	Z\$365

**Source:** Maintenance allowance data from DSW; poverty lines are from CSO, 1998a: 113 and MPSLSW, 1997: xix; price data from CSO's consumer price index.

**Notes:** All three poverty lines indicate the minimum income required to buy a basic package of food for an adult individual for a month. All three poverty lines have been updated from the survey date to the middle of each fiscal year using CSO's consumer price index. GOZ fiscal year data are used, since the maintenance allowance remains fixed for the duration of the GOZ fiscal year. In 1996-97, the GOZ fiscal year ran from 1 July 1996 to 30 June 1997; the fiscal year was subsequently changed and, by 1999, the fiscal year and the calendar year coincided.

The inadequacy of the maintenance allowance was borne out by my own field investigations. The monthly maintenance allowance of Z\$100/adult for fiscal year 1999 would have been barely sufficient to purchase a 10 kg bag of the staple roller meal, which in the first half of 1999 cost Z\$83, and which rose to Z\$98 in August. As 10kg/person/month is the FAO-recommended minimum level of consumption of staple foods for an adult, there would be little left over to purchase other foods, cooking fuel, matches,



soap or other necessities after purchasing one's staple food.

Not only are maintenance allowances very low in relation to the GOZ poverty lines and actual living costs, but PA clients often incurred high expenses in collecting their monthly maintenance allowance. PA clients usually had to travel to the district DSW office to collect their maintenance allowance. The cost of the trip for rural PA clients could consume much of the allowance; for example, a return bus trip from Zhombe communal area to the Kwekwe district headquarters, a distance of 70 km, cost Z\$70 in August 1999, i.e. 70% of the monthly maintenance allowance for an adult. DSW staff in Kwekwe confirmed that a number of DSW clients did come by bus every month from Zhombe to collect their allowance. DSW staff reported that their offices would often try to deliver the PA cheques to pre-arranged collection points in rural areas on pre-arranged dates if and when they had vehicles and fuel, but that GOZ's growing fiscal problems in the 1990s had made this system unreliable in recent years.

DSW staff in one district reported that, since maintenance allowances were paid in the form of a cheque, PA clients who had no bank account - probably the great majority of them - often had to turn to shopkeepers to cash those cheques. In exchange for this service, the shopkeepers allegedly insisted that a certain proportion of the value of the cheque be spent in their shop.

Not surprisingly, the PA clients with whom my research team spoke all said that the maintenance allowance was insufficient to support oneself on. While this sort of comment is to be expected, it is nonetheless entirely credible in view of the evidence. The question therefore arises, how did these people survive? Most PA clients whom my research team interviewed admitted that they had other livelihood sources, notably begging or very small-scale income earning activities like knitting.

In sum, the effectiveness of PA appears to be low, both in the sense that it had high F-mistakes and that the benefits it offered were indeed less than the poverty line. But what about characteristics of the people who received PA benefits? Were they actually the chronically poor that the *Social Welfare Assistance Act* intends as its beneficiaries? In other words, what is the situation with respect to E-mistakes, or errors of excessive coverage?

There is no survey evidence available to answer this question. Since the PA client base is so small, even very large household surveys capture only a few dozen PA clients, not a big enough sample for any kind of statistical analysis. Nor have specialised surveys of PA clients been conducted by GOZ or by independent researchers. The anecdotal evidence is consistent, however, in suggesting that PA clients are indeed a near perfect match with the requirements of the Social Welfare Assistance Act. DSW officials have told researchers including the author (e.g. Kaseke et al., 1997; Munro, 2001) that they are confident that PA has very low E-mistakes. The fact that these same DSW staff were very forthright in describing abuses, wastage and E-mistakes in other GOZ social safety nets - especially Drought Relief and SDF - lends credibility to their claim that PA had very low E-mistakes. The two dozen PA clients in three districts whom my research assistants and I interviewed and observed in 1999, as well as the dozens of other PA clients whom I encountered from 1992 to 1997 gave every impression of being truly and chronically destitute<sup>7</sup>. There seems little doubt that those who receive PA benefits are indeed extremely and chronically poor.

### **Policy Implications**

One of the unusual features of PA compared to other social safety nets in Zimbabwe in the 1990s was the lack of interest shown by politicians - both from government and the opposition - in the programme. Throughout the 1990s, GOZ has often used social safety nets to curry favour with its core constituency, rural smallholder farming households. GOZ's tendency to spread Drought Relief so liberally around Zimbabwe every drought year - even to areas where rainfall was normal - suggests to many observers that that social safety net has a political as well as a humanitarian purpose. Other social assistance programmes are even more overtly political. While visiting one DSW district office in 1999, for example, I witnessed a liberation war veteran collecting his disability cheque from DSW. The veteran

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<sup>7</sup> As noted above, the difficulties involved in applying and being screened for PA and the meager benefits one received once successful meant that con men and tricksters would have little incentive to try to defraud the programme. It would be far easier and more profitable to fraudulently obtain other forms of social assistance, for example Drought Relief or SDF assistance (Munro, 2001: Chs. 6 and 9). The most likely form of PA fraud would appear to be double-dipping, i.e. applying for and receiving PA from two different DSW offices. DSW officials told me, for example, that there was little to prevent anyone from applying for PA from both DSW offices in Bulawayo, as

walked with a cane but arrived in his own car, was well dressed, and chatted openly about his new business venture in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He collected a cheque the value of which exceeded the entire PA budget of the district for that month. There was nothing to suggest anything illegal or improper had happened. But war veterans were a key constituency of the Zimbabwean government in the 1990s, while PA clients were not.

This lack of political interest shown by Zimbabwe's political class in PA has been a double-edged sword. It has kept out the political interference that plagued Drought Relief and SDF in the late 1990s and so helped maintain the objective and professional nature of PA programme management. But it also meant that PA suffered from chronic underfunding for most of the decade and inadequate political will to reform the relevant legislation. Achieving consistently higher coverage levels implies the need to reform the Act, and to ensure higher levels of benefits and more funds for transport and outreach. These are the lessons of the 1998 budget debacle, when hard-won but unspent PA funds had to be returned to the Ministry of Finance. But the political arrangements of the 1990s failed to generate any coalition interested in reform of PA, while the 1988 reform of the Act had been motivated more by the need of the post-independence majority rule government to remove the racially discriminatory aspects of the colonial era legislation than by other factors. Furthermore, the 1988 reform left other essential attributes of the Act unchanged, namely the use of the least eligibility principle and all that it implied in terms of low levels of benefits and strict means testing of applicants.

Several reasons have been put forward to explain why Zimbabwe's political class has failed to get involved with PA in the 1990s, for good or evil. As noted above, DSW staff have credited the stringent and clear requirements of the *Social Welfare Assistance Act* for limiting political interference and permitting the programme to be managed professionally and objectively. But Zimbabwe's politicians have surely also calculated that they were unlikely to win many new votes by improving PA's benefits or coverage. The fact that PA benefits are so small and that its clients are amongst those least likely to vote because of their infirmity, disability or advanced age has discouraged politicians from developing any interest in PA. Also, LSCF workers - the pool from which many future PA clients would be drawn

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there was no cross-check mechanism between the two offices.

- were disenfranchised for most of the 1990s, since they failed the residency requirement for voting, which insisted that one had to either own, rent or have traditional rights to land to vote in a given location. Finally, it must be admitted that the ethnic and national origins of much of PA's client base has been an important factor in the programme's inability to raise political support. Few Zimbabwean politicians would like to make their name campaigning to give more money to "foreigners" when the needs of Zimbabweans are so great<sup>8</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Zimbabwe's Public Assistance in the 1990s was something of an anomaly. The anomaly was that, while PA is administratively very neat and tidy, with clear lines of authority, clear accounting and remarkably few loose ends, it is, according to both its critics and the people who implement it, failing to reach most of its target group. PA's passive approach to identifying and reaching clients combined with its intimidating screening procedures to produce these high F-mistakes. The benefits it provides to those who do succeed in getting into the net are moreover quite meager, lower even than GOZ's own extreme poverty lines. PA has failed as a social safety net for the chronically poor in Zimbabwe, and for both of the reasons that Kaseke et al. (1997) suggested at the head of this paper. Clearly, tidy administration is no guarantee of programmatic impact. Many of PA's problems are inherent in its design (e.g. Kaseke, 1993 and 1995; Kaseke *et al.* 1997; Munro, 2001: Ch. 9).

The failure of Public Assistance as a social safety net for the chronically poor in a country and at a time when social safety nets for the transiently poor were by and large quite successful (Munro, 2001) is another anomaly. The explanation for this second anomaly most likely lies in the nature of the various social safety nets' target groups. Those for the transiently poor had as their target groups key constituents of the government and ruling party, namely the smallholding peasantry of Zimbabwe. PA's target group was the old, the displaced, the disabled, those without family connections, in short, the politically marginal. The nature of these two sets of target groups raises the question of whether such a

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<sup>8</sup> Since land invasions began in 2000, the ruling party's longstanding indifference to the fate of the LSCF workers (e.g. Amanor-Wilks, 1995; Mugwetsi and Balleis, 1994; *Daily News*, 29/7/99) has turned to outright hostility in a

narrowly targeted social safety net could ever possibly be successful, given the political marginalisation of its client group. Experts on social safety nets and other government welfare programmes have often argued that broadly targeted social assistance programmes not only have the advantage of low F-mistakes, but also generate broad-based political support for the programme (Stiglitz, 2000: 267-8.). The case of PA in Zimbabwe in the 1990s seems to confirm this view. If the chronically poor of Zimbabwe are to get adequate social protection, therefore, their best hope may lie in a more broadly targeted scheme of social assistance. Whether the Zimbabwean state will be able to design and provide such a scheme is very much open to doubt, however, unless the country makes a near miraculous recovery from the political and economic crisis that has been enveloping the country since 2000.

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### **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank David Hulme, Angela Dale, Frances Stewart and Joan O'Donoghue for comments on earlier versions of this paper. Any remaining faults must surely be my own. This research was part funded by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of UK Universities and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The full cooperation of the Department of Social Welfare of the Government of Zimbabwe in this research is gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed here are mine alone, and are not the official policy of any institution to which I am or have been affiliated.