Social Protection in Africa: 
Can evidence, rights and politics converge?

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Paper prepared for the conference: 
‘Social Protection for the Poorest in Africa – Learning from Experience’ 
Imperial Botanical Beach Hotel, Entebbe, Uganda 
8-10 September 2008

Abstract

A growing number and diversity of social protection initiatives in Africa aim to institutionalise systems that guarantee assistance for the very poor and protect the vulnerable from livelihood risks and social discrimination. Much of the impetus has come from international development actors, with some notable exceptions. Three overlapping agendas appear to be shaping these developments: a technocratic concern with evidence of efficacy and cost-effectiveness, a political concern with the realities of constituencies, interests and institutions, and a rights-based concern with universal principles and standards. It is the articulation between these agendas and the different actors promoting them that determines what specific social protection instruments are adopted, how they are designed and implemented, and their outcomes – what gets taken forward, what goes to scale, what succeeds and what fails. We define ‘success’ here in terms not of immediate benefits for target groups, but of progress towards social protection systems that have nationwide coverage, can be sustained into the long term, have broad political support and institutional buy-in, and can ultimately make a significant impact on deprivation and vulnerability. Based on a selective review of social transfer programmes and policy processes in several African countries, we argue that initiatives that emerge out of domestic political agendas and respond to local conceptualisations and prioritisations of need are more likely to succeed than those based on imported ‘projectised’ models, but that ‘success’ depends on a convergence of all three agendas.

Keywords: Social protection, social transfers, southern Africa, cost-effectiveness, politics, international aid, non-governmental organisations

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1. Introduction: Social transfers in anglophone Africa

The social protection agenda in Africa has evolved rapidly since the early 2000s, driven by a particular set of vulnerability factors (notably the AIDS pandemic and recurrent drought-triggered food insecurity), political contexts (the trend towards democratisation, the growth of domestic civil societies) and institutional arrangements (not least the influential donors that are promoting social protection as their latest proposed solution to poverty and vulnerability in rural Africa). It is clear even from this selective list that social protection is intensely politicised, even if the overarching objective appears to be a technocratic effort to resolve problems associated with poverty, hunger and HIV/AIDS. For one thing, the drive towards institutionalising social protection programmes as a substitute for social welfare systems in Africa is occurring often against the instincts of powerful national actors such as Ministries of Finance, many of which are reluctant to commit to long-term programmes which they regard as fiscally unsustainable and as creating a ‘dependency mentality’ among the poor.

A related point is that the dominance of international donors in designing and financing social protection in Africa has been responsible for certain biases in the types of programmes that are implemented, their scale and location. Since policy-making is about making choices, these biases have necessarily resulted in the exclusion of other forms of social protection and other places. A cursory review of ongoing social protection activities in Africa reveals a predominance of unconditional cash transfer projects at sub-national level, mostly financed by bilateral or multilateral donors and implemented by international NGOs, and mostly located in anglophone countries.

Yes conceptualisations of social protection suggest a range of possible policy interventions by a variety of actors. Consider this definition from Zambia’s Fifth National Development Plan: “Social protection refers to policies and practices that protect and promote the livelihoods and welfare of people suffering from critical levels of poverty and deprivation and/or vulnerable to risks and shocks” (Republic of Zambia 2006: 210). In practice, social protection in Africa has been dominated by unconditional social transfers, delivered by public agencies in the form of cash. Cash transfers are either complementing or displacing food aid, which was previously ubiquitous either as emergency aid, food-for-work projects or school feeding schemes. Largely omitted from the menu are conditional cash transfers (which are dominant in Latin America), asset transfers (most popular in South Asia), social insurance mechanisms (with the exception of ‘weather-indexed crop insurance’ pilots for farmers), the extension of social security to informal sector workers, and efforts to address ‘social vulnerabilities’ (such as discrimination and marginalisation) through civil society mobilisation and legislative change rather than with social transfers. And anglophone Africa appears to be receiving considerably more external support for social protection than is francophone Africa.

Of course, national governments also have a stake in social protection, and in some cases they are driving the agenda independently of donors, or even against the advice of donors. As Hickey (2008) notes, the delivery of social transfers serves the interests of ruling elites, both through formal electoral processes and by sustaining informal patron-client relations. Summing up, three sets of factors appear to be shaping the evolving social transfers agenda in anglophone Africa:

- technocratic (‘what works’): a concern with building the evidence base about social transfer impacts, cost-effectiveness, implementation and delivery options;
- political (‘what’s popular’): a concern with the political impacts of social protection, in particular its vote-winning potential;
- ideological (‘what’s right’): a growing concern with realising universal rights (to food, health, etc.) for the poor and vulnerable (e.g. older people, or people with disabilities).
This paper argues that it is the articulation between these agendas that determines social protection policy choices and outcomes. What gets piloted, what goes to scale, what succeeds and what fails is largely determined by which agenda dominates the policy process in particular places at particular times. ‘Success’ here is defined not in terms of immediate benefits for target groups, but of progress towards social protection systems that have national coverage, can be sustained into the long term, enjoy broad political and institutional support, and can ultimately make a significant impact on poverty and vulnerability. The paper elaborates this central argument and draws on several social transfer projects as illustrative case studies.

2. The technocratic agenda: what works?

Numerous social transfer projects have been implemented by international actors in Africa in recent years, usually through a partnership between a bilateral or multilateral donor and an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), which together provide the driving force in terms of project initiation, funding, design, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation. The degree of involvement by national and local government varies, from merely providing official endorsement to assigning relevant line ministry staff, from central level down to project areas, with responsibilities for day-to-day implementation. Traditional authorities and community structures may also play a part, particularly in terms of beneficiary selection. In many cases, however, the perception remains that these are donor-driven NGO projects that fall outside normal government programming.

One objective shared by all these interventions is to convince sceptical governments that social protection can generate positive impacts at several levels (from beneficiaries and local economies to national Millennium Development Goals), and that concerns about negative impacts (e.g. dependency, unaffordability) are unfounded or exaggerated. On the other hand, even well-resourced donors are in no position to finance national social protection systems across Africa indefinitely, so substantial investments have been made in monitoring and evaluating these projects (‘building the evidence base’) and in advocacy (seminars, training, policy briefs, study tours) to persuade governments to mainstream social protection in their national poverty reduction strategies.

The two case studies discussed below illustrate both the positive features of externally resourced pilot projects implemented at local level by international NGOs – good design and implementation, positive impacts, useful lesson-learning around design and delivery options – and the technical and political challenges of moving from this ‘projectised’ model to scaled up, nationally owned social protection systems.

2.1 Case study #1: Cash transfers in Malawi

As a humanitarian response to recent food crises in Malawi, Concern Worldwide designed and delivered two innovative social transfer projects: ‘Food and Cash Transfers’ (FACT) in 2005/6 and ‘Dowa Emergency Cash Transfers’ (DECT) in 2006/7. Although the primary objective of these interventions was to reduce food insecurity, both projects also had as a secondary objective to draw lessons regarding the effectiveness and delivery of cash transfers, during food crises as well as for longer-term social protection programming. So FACT and DECT fulfilled dual roles, providing vital humanitarian relief while simultaneously piloting innovative approaches to the delivery of social transfers in rural Malawi.

FACT and DECT were designed and implemented by an international NGO (Concern) and funded by bilateral donors (Irish Aid and DFID respectively). Although both initiatives were linked to formal humanitarian interventions, they operated independently of the Government
of Malawi, except that government officials and traditional leaders collaborated at local level in targeting and identifying beneficiaries. In this sense, FACT and DECT fall squarely within the externally-driven social protection agenda. They aimed to demonstrate, firstly, that cash transfers are feasible and preferable to food aid, even in emergencies, and secondly (in the case of DECT), that technology and mobile banking services can deliver cash transfers regularly and cost-effectively, even in relatively remote rural communities.

The key innovative features of FACT were mostly in terms of project design, and included: (1) delivery of transfers half in cash and half in kind (a food package was provided in case supply shortages in local markets made food inaccessible to cash transfer recipients; (2) adjustment of cash transfers in line with food price fluctuations in local markets (to maintain constant food purchasing power at any price); (3) calibration of cash transfers by household size (small, medium, large). The key innovative features of DECT were mostly in terms of delivery, and included: (1) biometric registration and verification of beneficiaries (fingerprint recognition); (2) use of smart-cards, point-of-sale devices and ATMs to access cash; (3) subcontracting mobile banks to deliver cash to remote rural communities.

Considerable resources were devoted to monitoring and evaluating various aspects of FACT and DECT, and many useful lessons were generated concerning: the multiple uses of cash transfers; the positive impacts of calibrating payments by household size and indexing cash payments to food price fluctuations; the effectiveness of targeting using ‘triangulated community wealth ranking’; the ‘multiplier effects’ of cash transfers on local markets; the potential for partnerships with the private sector to achieve ‘financial inclusion’ of the rural poor; and the potential for technology to deliver various entitlements to Malawian citizens.

Despite the significant demonstration effects of both projects, which were evaluated as highly effective as well as innovative (Devereux, 2008), they remained outside the mainstream of social protection discourse in Malawi. Strong partnerships were built between the donors, the NGO and the private sector (Opportunity International Bank) – but not with the government, which is implementing (with UNICEF assistance) its own cash transfer programme in Mchinji District, soon to be rolled out to other districts, and is developing (with donor partners), a National Social Protection Framework and Policy. This leaves unanswered a number of critical questions about whether the lessons derived from small-scale pilot projects can be replicated on a wider scale, how these innovative approaches might fit within a nationally-owned social protection policy process, and how to build political support for initiatives that are essentially externally-driven pilot projects.

### 2.2 Case study #2: Scaling up cash transfer pilots in Zambia

Zambia is currently operating no less than five cash transfer pilot projects. The best known is the Kalomo District Social Cash Transfer Scheme, which was launched in May 2004 with German funding (technical assistance from GTZ), and provided a model for later schemes in four other districts: Monze (also GTZ-assisted), Chipata, Kazungula and Katete (technical assistance from CARE International). While all five schemes remain largely donor-driven – DFID took over funding of all five in late 2007 – and INGO-implemented, they fall under the nationwide Public Welfare Assistance Scheme (PWAS) which dates back to the 1950s and is implemented by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS). The PWAS is funded by the Government of Zambia, but at a much lower level; there is a striking imbalance between the generous financial resources and technical support allocated to the pilot projects (covering just 5 of 72 districts) and the severely under-funded national PWAS.

The institutional arrangement is, nominally at least, a donor-government partnership through joint commitment to social protection objectives and mechanisms under the Fifth National Development Plan, with coordination and reporting through the Social Protection Sector Advisory Group (SP-SAG), Chaired by the MCDSS Permanent Secretary, and its Technical
Working Groups. Implementation at district level uses PWAS structures: the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO) guided by a District Welfare Assistance Committee (DWAC), and at lower levels Community Welfare Assistance Committees (CWAC), which are central to the process of targeting and beneficiary selection.

With the exception of Katete, cash transfers are targeted at the 10% most needy (destitute or food deficit), incapacitated (labour-constrained) and asset-deprived households within project communities. The pilots provide each beneficiary household with sufficient cash to buy a 50kg bag of maize per month, or a third more if they have children. Variations on the basic model are experimenting with specific design features. Katete is trialling age-based targeting of older persons, to test the potential for a national social pension. Chipata is the only urban scheme, and is piloting ‘soft conditionalities’ by offering additional transfers for each child enrolled in school.

The main challenge facing the donors that are driving the social transfers agenda in Zambia is to persuade the government to take over full responsibility for the five pilot projects, and to scale them up to a sustainable national programme, given the enormous exclusion errors incurred by the limited coverage to date. The donors’ strategy has three components: first, commissioning studies to generate credible evidence on the positive impacts of the social transfers; second, training workshops and awareness raising (e.g. through study tours); third, working with the SP-SAG to establish a decision-making process on the best way forward.

Interestingly, the MCDSS is a strong ally of the donors – in fact, the donor group has resisted an ambitious SP-SAG ‘Implementation Plan’ for a rapid donor-funded scale-up to all 72 districts by 2011. Apart from the unsustainable demands that this would impose on external funding, the donor group is concerned about limited implementation capacity at the DWSO level. But the MCDSS has only a weak influence on the Ministry of Finance, which remains deeply sceptical about ‘welfare handouts’, arguing that these create dependency, are unaffordable in poor countries like Zambia, and divert scarce public resources from more pressing priorities, notably investment in productive sectors such as agriculture.

3. The political agenda: what’s popular?

‘Politicisation’ is usually characterised negatively, as interference in policy processes and allocation of resources for political purposes, subverting technocratic decisions made on an objective assessment and prioritisation of needs. In the context of social protection, adverse politicisation is associated with patronage-based allocations of social transfers and distortion of targeting procedures that should be objective, needs-based and politically neutral. In Africa and around the world, under all dispensations – from democracies to dictatorships – governments are routinely accused of favouring their supporters and depriving opposition groups or regions of equitable access to public resources. Even in mature, well-functioning democracies, social protection can become politicised by both ruling and opposition parties, especially in the lead-up to local or general elections when pledges to provide handouts to the electorate can buy crucial votes.

On the other hand, not all forms of politicisation are necessarily bad. When social transfer programmes become election issues – as input subsidies have done in Malawi and Zambia, and social pensions have in Lesotho – this implies that social protection has become an important item on national political agendas, and that governments are responsive to the priorities of their citizens. Malawi’s Input Subsidy Programme is discussed below. In Zambia, the ruling MMD successfully countered the appeal of opposition parties during the 2006 elections, buying support from rural voters by pledging to raise the fertiliser subsidy to 60%. Lesotho’s Old Age Pension and Swaziland’s Old Age Grant (discussed later in this paper) exemplify the idea of ‘positive politicisation’. The popularity of both programmes forced the
government to respond positively to opposition campaign pledges to raise the payment level (in Lesotho), and to a public outcry when pension payments were delayed (in Swaziland).

The other programme discussed in this section defines a programme’s political popularity rather differently – not in terms of electoral palatability, but in terms of national governments exercising their will against the ‘advice’ of donor partners. Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) is an unusual case where a government adapted an externally financed social transfer programme to serve domestic political objectives. The PSNP is not an isolated case of governments driving the social protection agenda rather than accepting programmes uncritically because they are funded by external actors. The social pensions in Lesotho and Swaziland were considered by agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as too expensive for such poor countries. Donors also remain sceptical about input subsidies, but as the case of Malawi reveals, when governments assert their preferences about locally appropriate social protection interventions, endorsement by the donors sometimes follows.

3.1 Case study #3: Input subsidies in Malawi

Until the late 1980s, the government of Malawi subsidised fertiliser to ensure household and national food security, until the international financial institutions concluded that they were unaffordable and inhibiting markets. The Fertiliser Subsidy Removal Programme (FRSP) was imposed on Malawi in the late 1980s, and was implemented by the government with great reluctance over a period of eight years. But the abolition of subsidies was associated with a rapid deterioration in food security in rural Malawi, largely attributed to constrained access to agricultural inputs, suggesting that the assumption that the private sector would fill the gap in input provision following the withdrawal of the state was unfounded (Peters 1996). In the late 1990s a group of donors, led by DFID, responded by delivering ‘Starter Packs’ – a package of seeds and fertilisers – to every farming household in Malawi. This intervention (effectively a 100% input subsidy) was very popular with farmers and the Government of Malawi, but unpopular with other donors, which saw it as an acknowledgement that the FRSP had failed.

The universal Starter Pack was scaled down to a Targeted Input Programme immediately before Malawi’s first post-independence famine in 2002, which was triggered by bad weather but exacerbated by the cutback in free inputs distribution (Devereux and Tiba, 2007). The Targeted Input Programme ran until 2004 before the donors decided to stop funding it, thus demonstrating the risk of ‘projectisation’ that accompanies all donor-led social protection initiatives.

The government responded by reintroducing subsidies on fertilisers and on maize seeds in 2005/06 and 2006/07, at a cost of $51m and $73m respectively. The objective was the same as when inputs were originally subsidised in the 1970s: to raise crop yields, thereby reducing vulnerability to food deficits and seasonal food insecurity in poor rural households. In a deviation from the earlier approach, these subsidies are not universal, but are delivered in the form of coupons targeted at 45-55% of the poorest smallholder households. Nonetheless, Malawi’s development partners were sceptical or even hostile, and refused to support the programme, which was initially funded entirely by the government.

The Input Subsidy Programme is credited with significantly increasing Malawi’s annual maize harvest in both 2006 and 2007 (Dorward et al., 2007), but at least two other reasons for the success of this programme can be identified. First, the government of Malawi was decisive in implementing the input subsidy in spite of donor antipathy, and was willing to finance it with or without donor resources – so the programme enjoyed domestic political support at the highest level. Second, and not unrelated, input subsidies are immensely popular in Malawi, where the majority of families farm for survival and struggle to achieve self-sufficiency even in good rainfall years because of small plots, low yields, and constrained access to inputs.
The antipathy of many bilateral and multilateral donors to subsidies was based on technical objections – subsidies allegedly ‘distort the market’ and are ‘fiscally unsustainable’ – though it is also possible that these donors are more inclined to promote their own social protection agendas (especially cash transfers) than to endorse government-led programmes. But this is myopic and fails to acknowledge the powerful political momentum behind input subsidies, which clearly exceeds the political constituency for cash transfers. In belated recognition of the positive impacts on agricultural production and the government of Malawi’s determination to continue the Input Subsidy Programme, several donors are now volunteering their support.

3.2 Case study #4: ‘Productive safety nets’ in Ethiopia

The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) is an unusual and intriguing case study, in that it is funded almost entirely by external actors, yet the government has exerted strong national ownership over the programme from its inception through design to implementation. By imposing its vision against several donor ‘red lines’ – non-negotiable positions which were subsequently relaxed or abandoned – the government of Ethiopia ensured that the PSNP was ‘nationalised’ rather than ‘donor-driven’ and addresses domestic political agendas.

Like all social protection policy processes, the PSNP was the product of technical arguments and political compromises. The government recognised the donors’ growing enthusiasm for cash transfers as a potential antidote to Ethiopia’s politically embarrassing dependence on international food aid. But this apparent convergence of interests stalled during the process of designing the PSNP during 2005, which became a protracted and fraught process. For instance, the donors were concerned about government capacity to implement such a large and complex programme, so argued for a phased rollout and for NGOs to be fully involved in PSNP delivery, to minimise the humanitarian risk. But the government insisted on immediate implementation at scale and on delivering the PSNP through government structures. The donors also favoured unconditional cash transfers, but the government’s concerns about creating an ‘entitlement culture’ led to their insistence on the provision of labour in exchange for cash – i.e. public works rather than ‘welfare handouts’ (IDL 2007: 8).

The government launched the PSNP in 2005 with several strategic objectives. Top priority was to break Ethiopia’s dependency on food aid by delivering cash transfers instead of food, the argument being that decades of food aid had created disincentives to food production and trade in rural areas, exacerbating rather than reducing household and national food insecurity. A second objective was to ‘graduate’ millions of chronically food insecure Ethiopians off dependence on the annual emergency appeal process, based on evidence from elsewhere that cash transfers are invested as well as consumed, stimulate local economies and can reduce poverty both directly and through income and employment ‘multiplier’ effects (Devereux et al. 2006: 2). Debates about the definition and measurement of ‘graduation’ are ongoing, with donors remaining sceptical about whether this concept is meaningful in the highly vulnerable context of rural Ethiopia.

The PSNP now reaches about eight million Ethiopians, 12% of the national population, and in terms of outreach is the largest social protection programme in Africa. The ‘safety net’ objective is achieved by providing participants with regular and predictable transfers of cash or food, either in the form of public works (for people able to work and their families) or as free transfers (for people unable to work with no household member able to work on their behalf). The ‘productive’ objective is achieved in two ways: firstly, through the construction of useful physical assets (roads, soil and water conservation, community buildings); on public works activities, and secondly, by providing ‘livelihood packages’ to participants to enable them to generate secondary streams of income to complement their farm-based livelihoods.

An evaluation of PSNP impacts after its first full year of implementation found that it was generally well targeted and had achieved significant positive impacts in terms of protecting
household assets, meeting a range of food and non-food needs, and improving self-reported well-being. Limitations included under-coverage and under-funding – high numbers of needy households not reached, small transfers not providing complete protection against hunger – and limited uptake of the ‘livelihood packages’, all of which threatened to compromise the programme’s ‘graduation’ objective (Devereux et al. 2006).

4. The ideological agenda: what’s right?

In contrast to ‘discretionary’ interventions that are implemented by unaccountable actors such as donors and INGOs, other programmes are based on an implicit ‘social contract’ between governments and citizens, and embody a notion of rights, claims or entitlements. Government-run social pension schemes are a prime example. In southern Africa, social pensions are operational in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland, they are being piloted in one district of Zambia and are under consideration in Malawi. (The social pensions in Lesotho and Swaziland are discussed below.) Social pensions represent a recognition by society as a whole that older people need and deserve support, and this finds expression in the delivery of regular and predictable ‘old age grants’. Once underpinned by legislation, this rapidly assumes the status of a legally enforceable ‘citizenship right’. For this reason, all five national social pension schemes in southern Africa are fully funded out of domestic fiscal resources – they constitute an inter-generational transfer from younger to older citizens – and they are politically impossible to reverse once introduced.

Other initiatives that embody elements of a rights-based approach to social protection are the product of domestic civil society activism, often supported by external actors (e.g. UNICEF efforts to promote the Convention on the Rights of the Child), with the aim of pressurising national governments to meet their obligations to promote the basic rights of citizens. Africa has limited experience to date with the mobilisation of civil society around social protection agendas, but the (as yet unsuccessful) campaign for a universal ‘Basic Income Grant’ (BIG) in South Africa and Namibia shows the trajectory such activism might take in the future. Civil society in Africa could also draw inspiration from the successful recent campaigns in India around the ‘right to food’, the ‘right to work’, and the ‘right to information’.

Rights are also rapidly entering the social protection discourse in terms of the ethical delivery of social transfers, specifically in ensuring that programme participants are treated with due care and respect. For example, if beneficiaries have to collect their social transfers from designated pay-points, these collection points should not be located too far from recipients’ homes, queuing times should be reasonably short, staff should be courteous and helpful, pay-points should be as secure as possible, and so on. This concern for ‘customer care’ is powerfully expressed in two ‘charters’ that have recently been drafted to accompany the implementation of Kenya’s ‘Hunger Safety Net Programme’ (HSNP), as discussed below.

4.1 Case study #5: Social pensions in Lesotho and Swaziland

Social pensions are an increasingly popular social protection mechanism in southern Africa. First introduced to South Africa in the 1920s and extended to Namibia (then under South African administration) in the 1970s, social pensions are regular cash transfers made to older people once they reach retirement age (usually 60 or 65 years). However, social pensions differ from private or public sector pensions in that they are not related to contributions by employers and employees, and they are not triggered by retirement from formal employment. They are perhaps best described as an age-targeted unconditional cash transfer programme. Most important of all from the perspective of this paper, social pensions in southern Africa are fully funded out of domestic resources and implemented by national governments, and are underpinned by legislation that elevates them to the status of a right. As the cases of Lesotho and Swaziland reveal, this allows social pensions to become ‘positively politicised’.
Lesotho’s Minister of Finance announced the introduction of a social pension for all citizens aged 70 and older in his 2004/5 budget speech. A remarkable feature of this programme is that it is overseen directly by the powerful Ministry of Finance, rather than the much weaker Department of Social Welfare. The Old Age Pensions Act was passed in January 2005, making it politically almost impossible to reverse and giving all eligible citizens a legal basis for claiming their entitlement. This feature of social pensions marks them out as very different from cash transfer pilot projects, which tend to be limited in scale (often confined to a single district), time-bound, and discretionary rather than rights-based, being externally financed and implemented by international NGOs with no local accountability.

Swaziland’s Old Age Grant was introduced in April 2005, following a speech by the King that identified the economic burden on “elderly poor citizens” caused by the AIDS pandemic as motivating increased public assistance to older people. This social pension is administered by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and it is not yet underpinned by legislation, although the Ministry is in the process of drafting a Social Assistance Bill. The legal basis for the Old Age Grant is Swaziland’s constitution, which includes a section on ‘Family Protection’ that commits the government (subject to availability of resources) to “provide facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance the welfare of the needy and elderly” (Dlamini 2007).

Several features of social pension schemes – that they are rights-based, legally enforceable, permanent, domestically financed, and implemented by accountable public agencies – mean that social pensions are amenable to ‘positive politicisation’. The programmes in Lesotho and Swaziland have both demonstrated this within a few years of their inception.

In Lesotho, the Old Age Pension became a campaign issue during the general election of 2007, when the main opposition party pledged to raise the monthly payment from M150 (US$25) to M500 (US$83), if they were elected. The governing party responded by promising to reconsider the pension payment level if they were re-elected. The ruling party was in fact re-elected, though with a reduced majority. A post-election survey revealed that many voters had chosen which party to support based on their commitment to the Old Age Pension. In his first Budget statement after the election, the Finance Minister announced a 33% increase in the monthly pension, from M150 to M200. Speaking at a national social protection workshop in June 2007, the Ministry of Finance conceded that “it would now be politically impossible to stop the Old Age Pension” (Croome and Nyanguru, 2007, p.22).

In Swaziland in November 2006, Old Age Grant payments were disrupted when Social Welfare officials had insufficient cash to pay all social pensioners. At one pay-point, only 50 of 300 registered pensioners received their grants. Recognising the political threat that this situation presented, local MPs responded to complaints by supporting affected constituents in a Parliamentary debate. The MPs voted to suspend all House of Assembly business until the issue was satisfactorily resolved. Accordingly, the Cabinet appointed a high-level task team that included the Ministers of Health and Social Welfare, Enterprise and Employment, Home Affairs and Finance, as well as the Governor of the Central Bank. One week later the task team proposed a comprehensive plan that addressed the problem and ensured punctual and full disbursement of the Old Age Grant in subsequent months (Dlamini 2007).

4.2 Case study #6: Beneficiary rights in Kenya

The Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) is a four-year pilot project, financed by DFID, that delivers cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households in northern Kenya. The HSNP is coordinated by the Government of Kenya and implemented by several agencies, including Equity Bank, HelpAge International, Oxfam GB and Oxford Policy Management. A broader objective of the HSNP pilot is to support the establishment of a government-owned national
social protection system, based on the efficient delivery of predictable cash transfers to poor and vulnerable Kenyans.

Unusually for a pilot project – or for any social protection programme – the HSNP includes a ‘rights’ component that introduces the notion of rights and responsibilities to the design and delivery of the programme. ‘Rights Committees’ are being established, and any resident of a targeted district (beneficiaries or excluded individuals) can take their queries and complaints to their District Social Protection Rights Coordinator.

The ‘Programme Charter of Rights and Responsibilities’ (PCRR) argues that implementation of the HSNP should be based on human rights principles of accountability, empowerment, non-discrimination, participation, and gender equality. Rights and responsibilities apply to programme beneficiaries and recipients, other residents in programme areas, local payment providers, Rights Committee members, and all staff involved in delivering the HSNP.

Several responsibilities that apply to programme staff relate to norms for delivering transfers, and are precisely specified in the form of commitments made in a ‘Citizen’s Service Charter’: payments will be made in full and on time in a secure location; all registration points will be located within 5 km of beneficiaries’ homes; payment points will be no further than 20 km from beneficiaries’ homes; all complaints will be addressed within 30 days of being lodged.

Local residents (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries) enjoy a range of rights in relation to the programme, including the right to accessible information, to an independent complaints and appeals process, to privacy and confidentiality, and to be treated with respect at all times. Serious grievances with material consequences will be referred to the HSNP National Coordinator, who has the authority to compensate complainants with valid grievances from a National HSNP Compensation Fund.

Taken together, these two charters establish a benchmark for the ethical delivery of social transfers that not only displays a commendably serious commitment to ‘customer care’, but backs up measurable indicators of delivery effectiveness with mechanisms that elevate these commitments to the status of ‘consumer rights’. It seems plausible that this exemplary case study, exceptional today, will become standard practice tomorrow.

5. Conclusion

Factors that explain the rapid rise of social protection up the development agenda include: a humanitarian concern for people suffering from chronic poverty and food insecurity, the global commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger by 2015, and ‘flag planting’ by donors and NGOs on pilot projects that deliver social assistance to a few thousand people, creating temporary islands of access to internationally financed social welfare. These initiatives generate useful ‘lesson learning’ about the design, delivery and impacts of social transfers, but they are unlikely ever to scale up into national programmes, because they are not ‘government owned’ from inception. Moreover, these projects bypass existing government systems of social provision, such as Department of Social Welfare programmes that deliver cash transfers to designated ‘vulnerable groups’ (e.g. people with disabilities, war veterans, and older persons).

Two justifications are usually given for this neglect, each of which is open to question. The first is that African social welfare ministries are so weak and under-resourced in terms of funding and personnel that they lack the capacity to deliver predictable social transfers at national scale to large numbers of eligible citizens. But if capacity constraints are the binding constraint, why don’t donors invest in building government capacity instead of implementing small-scale projects outside of government structures? Also, if government institutions and
structures are so inadequate, why do donors insist that the primary purpose of piloting social transfers is to scale them up and hand them over to become permanent, institutionalised programmes – implemented by national governments?

The second argument is that African governments lack the political will to invest in social protection, which Finance Ministries tend to dismiss as an expensive extravagance that merely creates ‘dependency’, so they need to be persuaded with evidence demonstrating that social transfers are an investment that can generate pro-poor economic growth and poverty reduction. But if lack of political will is the underlying issue, how to explain successful government initiated programmes such as the social pensions in Lesotho and Swaziland, which were conceptualised, implemented and financed entirely out of domestic resources?

Social transfer projects and programmes in anglophone Africa are being driven by different configurations of the three agendas identified above – technocratic, political and ideological – but all social protection initiatives have political overtones at local, national and international levels. Perhaps the most important lesson to emerge from this selective review of social protection policy processes in Africa is that initiatives that evolve out of (or are adapted to) domestic political agendas and respond to local conceptualisations and prioritisations of need are more likely to succeed – in terms of their coverage, fiscal sustainability, political institutionalisation and impacts – than those that are based on imported ‘projectised’ models.

Even if government systems are under-resourced, and even if national priorities differ from those of external actors – for instance, governments might favour input subsidies whereas donors prefer cash transfers – donors and INGOs should support home-grown responses to poverty and vulnerability by national governments and local civil society movements. For one thing, mobilisation to claim rights or entitlements from the state is an essential complement to technocratic approaches to social protection, given that donors (like many governments) are understandably wary of the irreversibility, heavy financial commitment and accountability that is inevitably associated with implementation at scale.

For another thing, while a wealth of evaluation reports and commissioned research studies has been generated in the effort to ‘build the evidence base’ for cash transfers, much less research has been invested in cash transfer programmes that are operated and financed by national governments without donor support. Consider, for instance, Botswana’s social protection system – one of the most comprehensive but least documented in Africa. The Government of Botswana operates several successful, scaled up, domestically-funded social transfer schemes serving tens of thousands of people, yet much less is known about their impacts than is known about tiny cash transfer projects in Lesotho, Malawi and Swaziland that ran for just a few months and provided social assistance to only a few thousand families.

In conclusion, therefore, donors and INGOs would be well advised to identify and engage strategically with domestic political processes and civil society activism, in order to maximise potential synergies between the technocratic, ideological and political agendas that are driving social protection in contemporary Africa.
References


Endnotes

i This paper builds on an earlier paper by the same authors (Devereux and White 2007).

ii Selected recent or ongoing cash transfer projects in anglophone Africa include: Ethiopia (Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)); Ghana (Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP)); Kenya (Cash Transfer Programme for Vulnerable Children, Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP)); Lesotho (Cash and Food Transfers Pilot Project); Malawi (Food and Cash Transfers (FACT), Dowa Emergency Cash Transfers (DECT), Mchinji Social Cash Transfer Pilot Scheme)); Swaziland (Emergency Drought Response); Zambia (Social Cash Transfer Pilot Scheme). Donors involved in funding these projects include: DFID, GTZ, Irish Aid, UNICEF and the World Bank. International NGOs implementing these projects include: CARE, Concern Worldwide, Save the Children and World Vision.

iii Several case studies cited in this paper draw on research commissioned from local researchers by the Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) of 20 social transfer schemes in six countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These case studies were complemented by thematic studies on conceptualisation, design, implementation, impacts, and institutional and policy contexts (see Ellis, Devereux and White, 2008; also www.wahenga.net). The 20 case studies covered unconditional cash and food transfers, conditional food transfers, subsidised farm inputs, asset transfers, and schemes that build on ‘traditional’ social protection practices. Most schemes were implemented on a pilot scale, but six were national programmes.

iv Botswana’s social protection programmes include: Old Age Pension, war veteran pension, drought relief assistance (vulnerable groups feeding, public works), destitute persons package, needy student package, orphan ration, remote area dwellers package, clinic ration, community home-based care package, school meals (BIDPA, 2007).