

# SOCIAL PROTECTION IN AFRICA: A WAY FORWARD <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper explores options for those engaged with social protection as donors, consultants, researchers and NGO workers, with the objective of enabling such development partners to do a better job in helping to advance the social protection agenda in Africa. The paper sets out five approaches to effective programme development and policy interventions, building on ten guiding principles which are proposed to guide future engagement of development partners with national social protection policy processes in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

## Principles

1. **Recognise the importance of social protection:** Social protection remains a vital tool for achieving inclusive growth in sub-Saharan Africa.
2. **Support national policy priorities:** First identify the national vision for social protection, then design interventions around those objectives, starting from what is already in place.
3. **Minimise policy intrusion:** Ensure that externally-supported programmes do not promote the preferences of development partners over those of domestic actors, including in terms of selected instruments or favoured target groups.
4. **Rationalise donor support:** Harmonise donor activities to prevent competition, reduce inefficiencies, and encourage the pooling of resources.
5. **Encompass a diversity of approaches:** Instead of importing standardised models, build national social protection systems based on local analysis, political preferences, capacities and prioritisation of needs.
6. **Focus on vulnerability:** Social protection should focus on addressing poverty and reducing vulnerability, based on local perceptions of the nature of vulnerability.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, published on 8 September 2010, was co-produced by: the Centre for Social Protection (CSP) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Social Protection Programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia (UEA-DEV), and the Regional Hunger & Vulnerability Programme (RHVP). Authors include: Stephen Devereux, Mark Davies and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler (IDS/CSP), Anna McCord and Rachel Slater (ODI), Nicholas Freeland (RHVP), Frank Ellis and Philip White (UEA-DEV/RHVP).

<sup>2</sup> These five approaches and ten principles were first suggested in an earlier paper by the same authors, "Social Protection in Africa: Where Next?". This version incorporates comments and suggestions from a range of colleagues.

7. **Limit pilot projects**: There is little justification for more social protection experiments in Africa – the imperative now is to take lessons learnt and apply them for effective delivery at scale.
8. **Find new levers of support**: Work more closely with Ministries of Finance, parliamentarians, the private sector, domestic civil societies, and local mainstream and electronic media.
9. **Involve participants**: Engage social protection participants in vulnerability assessments, programme selection, design choices, delivery, and M&E.
10. **Focus on outcomes**: recognise that social protection is not an end in itself (numbers of people covered by social protection), but rather a means to an end (reduced poverty and vulnerability).

These principles inform five approaches proposed for development partners to pursue: (1) learn from government-driven programmes and work with governments to monitor, evaluate, improve and extend them; (2) work through appropriate institutional mechanisms, at regional and national levels; (3) learn lessons for national implementation from existing national programmes, rather than from pilot projects; (4) be driven less by instruments and locate social transfers within a broader national social policy agenda, by paying more attention to social protection objectives; (5) find new levers for supporting African governments, based on a more sophisticated understanding of national political contexts. Each of these is discussed below.

## **1. Start from government programmes**

There is a need to ***understand better the politics of social protection***, namely why governments have particular preferences among policy options, and why there is more enthusiasm for certain social protection programmes than others. There is a need to understand both the political drivers of policy processes and the opportunities for future engagement – by identifying where the energy for social protection is strongest and how external actors might best engage with this, particularly where domestically driven programmes have succeeded. There is a need to consider: (1) why governments have selected particular instruments; (2) why their interventions have been successful, and (3) how development partners might support them. It is important also to learn from technical aspects of these programmes, in terms of how governments have successfully implemented such large-scale programmes – especially in the face of serious doubts on the part of development partners about implementation capacity. This learning could be coordinated across countries as a collaborative exercise.<sup>3</sup>

***Promoting improved analysis of the politics of social protection*** at country level should form an important part of the design phase of all new social protection programmes. This should include the identification of key stakeholders, government priorities and constraints, informal as well as formal institutions and policy processes, public discourses and complex patterns of allegiance

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<sup>3</sup> This research might profitably include the social pensions in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, the agricultural input subsidies in Malawi and Zambia, and government-donor hybrids such as the PSNP in Ethiopia, LEAP in Ghana, the OVC programme in Kenya, and the VUP in Rwanda. While some of these programmes (eg Malawi's input subsidy and Ethiopia's PSNP) already have a substantial literature, other programmes (eg the social pensions in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) have largely escaped critical scrutiny in terms of their political context.

and competition involving both domestic and external actors. This analysis should also consider innovative mechanisms for supporting policy-making – e.g. recognising ways in which the support of elites and middle classes, as well as greater accountability to the poor and vulnerable, can emerge from an active and mobilised civil society and from broadly targeted social protection itself.

## **2. Work through appropriate institutions**

Social protection is predominantly a national, not a regional, issue, reflecting as it does national political, economic and social imperatives. **Regional institutions** like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa and the African Union (AU) have important roles to play in defining a vision and in monitoring progress towards agreed social protection targets, but they do not provide strong leadership and have limited influence over, and capacity to support, national policy-making processes. Once regional institutions have produced their overarching guidelines and policy frameworks, donors should focus their efforts on design and implementation within the context of national policy objectives.

There is however, considerable scope to build on the momentum generated by regional initiatives, to accelerate and inform national policy-making processes. For instance:

- The AU is to be commended on the progress made with its **social policy framework** to date, but it is important to recognise that its current capacity to drive social protection across Africa is constrained, and there is a need to support AU ability to advocate, and to monitor progress towards, the implementation of the framework.
- There is an opportunity to promote a more coherent incorporation of social protection into the food security discourse in NEPAD's **CAADP Pillar 3** ("public investment towards increasing food supply, reducing hunger and improving responses to food crises"), by better integrating agricultural and social protection interventions.

To achieve this, donors should commit to establishing Africa-wide research and policy development, with the aim of constructing a **pan-African social protection network**. There is a need to promote the collection and dissemination of lessons across countries, and South-South learning through regional events, study tours, and technical exchanges.

At **national level**, there is a need for development partners to focus their attention and efforts on design and implementation within the framework of national policy objectives, in order to address the challenge of donor harmonisation and to prevent competition around alternative approaches and instruments, as well as rationalising programming and support to governments. Examples of **successful intra-donor and donor-government coordination** (such as that around the PSNP in Ethiopia) should be shared in order to learn lessons and identify best practice.

The UN's Social Protection Floor initiative, which aims to support countries in their efforts in building, expanding, extending or reorienting their social protection systems by establishing a joint global, regional and national commitment to ensuring minimum security rights for all, has the potential to contribute to improved **donor harmonisation around a nationally-owned framework**.

### 3. Learn lessons from national implementation, not from pilot projects

What is required now at national level is not further evidence of the positive impact of small-scale stand-alone donor-led social protection experiments: it is practical experience to inform implementation at national scale and better understanding of how such projects should fit together as components of an **integrated, consolidated, national social protection programme**. There is a simultaneous need to stimulate open debate around the key constraints to adoption of large-scale social protection: specifically, to address government concerns about (i) funding and affordability of social protection, (ii) perceived capacity constraints in implementation, (iii) social protection's contribution to economic growth, and (iv) the issue of dependency.

- In terms of **fiscal sustainability**, there is a need to review how donors currently finance social protection programmes and how this can be revised to promote government confidence regarding affordability and hence programme sustainability, while minimising donor micro-management and policy intrusion. There are two aspects to this. The first is the identification of appropriate donor roles in the provision of technical and financial assistance in key areas of high initial expenditure and fixed start-up costs, such as the establishment of systems for identification, targeting, delivery and M&E. The second is concerned with the question of ongoing recurrent expenditure (both the transfers themselves and the associated delivery costs), where there is a need to review various financing and coordination options.<sup>4</sup>
- **Implementation capacity** is another key issue for consideration. While many governments face capacity constraints, it is clear that when delivery is prioritised by national governments, they are able to deliver significant social protection provision at scale. There is a need to learn from and disseminate success stories relating to the implementation of social transfers at scale in Africa. Positive examples are offered by the impressive progress in terms of national implementation of the PSNP in Ethiopia, input subsidies in Malawi, and social pensions in Lesotho and Swaziland. One key insight from these recent experiences is the need to keep social protection programmes simple, avoiding complex targeting, delivery and compliance procedures.
- There is also a need for evidence to illustrate the extent to which social protection can contribute to **economic growth**. To date, such evidence has been derived mainly from small-scale pilots whose impact on the economy could be expected to differ, perhaps by orders of magnitude, from that of a comprehensive national social protection programme. It is important to complement this with a review of the impact of such national social protection programmes in Africa, to generate rigorous evidence of their impact on economic growth. Similarly, it is important also to reflect on the potential positive impacts of social protection on equity, redistribution and social justice, which might also contribute to sustainable growth in the long-term and which provide

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<sup>4</sup> Examples would be pooling mechanisms (as in Zambia), multi-donor trust funds (as in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe) and budget support modalities, both general and sectoral (as in Cape Verde). New funding models also need to be considered, such as "cash-on-delivery", an approach which, as a recent paper has argued, may be particularly well-suited to social transfer programmes (Holmqvist (June 2010), "External Financing of Social Protection – Opportunities and Risks", Nordic Africa Institute, paper for the European Report on Development 2010).

incentives for social protection provision even in the absence of observable growth impacts.

- Finally, there is a need to engage with government concerns about **dependency** by critically evaluating the evidence of “dependency syndrome” in Africa’s social protection programmes.

#### **4. Encourage a broader social protection agenda**

If social protection is to shift from top-down to demand-driven, it needs to become more responsive to the range of needs and threats that poor and vulnerable people face. It also needs to be acceptable to the middle classes, as without their support there is little prospect of a social protection programme becoming nationally owned and politically and fiscally sustainable.

In the context of labour market interventions, for example, responsiveness could potentially be achieved by reforming supply-led public works programmes into **demand-led “employment guarantee schemes”** – where citizens decide when and for how long they choose to take up the state’s offer of (low-) paid work.

The broader problem here is that social protection policy in Africa is being driven by (at least) two complementary but not integrated agendas: a “social security” agenda concerned with delivering social assistance and basic services to vulnerable groups, and a “food security” agenda concerned with ensuring sustainable livelihoods for the working poor. In reality protection is needed against both “life-cycle risks” (such as in early childhood and old age), and “livelihood risks” (such as unemployment, or crop production shocks). Meaningful social protection can be achieved only by integrating interventions on both fronts – but advocating too vociferously for one agenda risks crowding out political traction and budget allocations for the other. A more **open debate around these two approaches is required** so that national governments and their development partners better understand their contradictions and complementarities.

#### **5. Look to new levers of change and accountability**

There is a need to **engage with key national stakeholder groups** if social protection programming is to be aligned to the political realities in each country and be driven forward by domestic rather than external levers of influence. Critical national agents are civil society, civil servants in key ministries, parliamentarians, and beneficiaries.

- **Civil society**<sup>5</sup> has the potential to employ a range of strategies to promote the adoption of social protection and monitor performance. While engagement with civil society may be difficult and risky, particularly in contexts where governments are hostile to activism and a free press, it may also yield high returns, especially if civil society represents the vulnerable groups that social protection aims to support.

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<sup>5</sup> “Civil society” is a broad and diverse grouping which may in any particular context include a range of the following: trade unions, NGOs, representatives of special interest groups (eg women, children, pensioners, people with disabilities, people affected by HIV and AIDS, homeless people, youth) community-based organisations (CBOs) faith-based organisations (FBOs), activist academics and the independent media.

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- As well as **Ministries** with direct responsibility for social protection provision, there is a need to engage with Ministries of Finance and Planning, as such agencies are typically powerful but unconvinced by the case for the prioritisation of investment in social protection. There is a need to engage with such ministries and share evidence on the contribution of social protection to stability, economic growth and fiscal sustainability, as well as challenging assumptions regarding “dependency” and the “unproductive” nature of expenditure on social protection provision.
- It is also important to work with **parliamentarians**, given the electoral popularity of social protection provision. MPs can become important advocates for the introduction and effective delivery of programmes which offer support to their constituents.
- Finally, there is a need for more systematic direct engagement with the **beneficiaries** of social protection programmes. Where beneficiary participation is not included in programme design, implementation and monitoring, there is a risk that decisions about social protection will be made at the discretion of governments and development partners, and may not reflect the priorities and preferences of the intended beneficiaries. A deeper involvement of citizens in the social protection discourse will raise the quality of national political debate – as well as the quality and impact of social protection programming.

Social protection is more than a set of programmes or instruments; it represents a form of “social contract” between a government and its citizens, and is in some instances grounded in legislation that guarantees enforceable claims and holds the government accountable for delivery. The “social contract” vision of social protection has implications for both the scope of social protection provision and its implementation. For instance, beneficiaries should be directly involved in defining the objectives of social protection and the most effective instruments for achieving these objectives, as well as eligibility criteria, targeting mechanisms and independent grievance procedures. A development partner approach which supports such processes is required if social protection is to be developed within adequate national “accountability frameworks”.

