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The politics of promoting social cash transfers in Uganda

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Abstract

In 2015 the Government of Uganda agreed to start rolling out a social pension programme across the country and to increase its own financial contribution to this. This outcome was largely driven by the decade-long and highly politicised efforts of a transnational policy coalition, led by mainly by international donors and national bureaucrats. This was a struggle over ideas as well as incentives and resources, with this coalition having to overcome strong resistance from the Finance Ministry tendency and wider notions of deservingness, dependency and affordability. This resistance largely held until the policy coalition started 'thinking and working politically' in ways that helped align the social protection agenda with Uganda's shifting political settlement dynamics, particularly the President's increased susceptibility to pressures from below in the context of populist patronage and multi-party elections. Nonetheless, government's apparent commitment to social protection remains meagre and even after the roll-out only a tiny proportion of Uganda's poor will benefit from this small transfer. Whether cash transfers will amount to more than another form of vote-buying clientelism remains to be seen. The evidence presented here raises serious concerns regarding both the developmental character of Uganda's contemporary political settlement and also the costs of the 'going with the grain' motif of the new thinking and working politically agenda. Aligning policy agendas with dominant interests and ideas may render interventions politically acceptable whilst further embedding clientelist logics and doing little to address distributional problems.

Keywords: social protection, politics, cash transfers, political settlements, ideas, donors, Uganda, SAGE

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1. Introduction

In August 2013, the president of Uganda issued a letter to the minister of gender, labour and social development (MGLSD) that called for an extension of the Senior Citizens' Grant (SCG) project to a 15th district, in addition to the 14 in which it had been piloted since 2010. This would be Yumbe, a district in the northern part of the country where the president was keen to consolidate his recent gains at the 2011 election. Yumbe was chosen not according to any technical criteria, but in response to a delegation of district leaders who directly lobbied the president in 2013 for their district to be included in the pilot. The same letter also requested that the minister of gender prepare plans for a national roll-out of the cash transfer project, which involves delivering 25,000 Ugandan shillings (c.US$10) per month to all citizens aged over 65[1] within the pilot districts. Taken by surprise, the international donor officials and bureaucrats within MGLSD who had been at the forefront of promoting social protection in Uganda for a decade took this to represent a major breakthrough. Meanwhile, the same announcement was greeted with a mixture of dismay and anger within the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED), which had long opposed the adoption of cash transfers, particularly on the grounds of affordability and sustainability.

Following a heated two-hour debate in cabinet, during which the president argued in favour of extending the programme and MFPED officials emphasised the budgetary constraints, the Ministry allocated 2 billion Ugandan shillings to the scheme within the 2014-15 budget: although this was no more than the government owed under the cost-sharing agreements that it had been ignoring since the pilot project began, this still marked a significant moment given how seldom government matches its funds to those of donors for specific projects. The plot was thickened further still by the fact that the Ministry of Gender had also requested financial support for a new Youth Empowerment Programme, the latest in a long line of pre-election 'handout' projects used in Uganda to ensure support for the regime. This programme was allocated 19 billion Ugandan shillings, close to 10 times the amount committed to the cash transfer scheme.

The battle over cash transfers continued during the 2015-16 budget process. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) had been a leading proponent of social protection in Uganda and beyond since the early 2000s and was the main funder of the SCG. With its first phase of funding coming to an end, DFID was keen to extend its commitment but only if the Government of Uganda (GoU) would do likewise. In May 2015, DFID wrote to MFPED stating that they would withdraw their support unless government increased its financial contribution to 10 billion Uganda shillings and accelerate the process of rolling out the SCG. This threat

[1] Aged 60 and above for the Karamoja districts.

carried particular potency in light of the forthcoming 2016 elections. Working through the coalition of bureaucrats, politicians and civil society actors that it had established to help promote social protection, DFID and its coalition embarked on a major lobbying effort within and beyond government to emphasise the political dangers of withdrawing a popular programme during election year. With the president now increasingly supportive of the initiative, and even the International Monetary Fund now advocating cash transfers, MFPED was no longer able to resist. The 2015-16 Budget Framework Paper included not only an increased contribution of 9 billion Ugandan shillings for 2015-16, but also year-on-year increases to help roll-out the SCG to 40 new districts by 2020.

This process, described in more detail within, underlines the extent to which the advance of social protection in Africa is a highly political affair that is primarily shaped by the dynamic interplay of transnational factors and the incentives and ideas generated within a country's specific 'political settlement' (Lavers and Hickey, 2015). Defined as "the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based." (Di John and Putzel, 2009: 4), the adapted political settlements analysis adopted here draws attention to how the changing balance of power within and around ruling coalitions shapes elite incentives and ideas in ways that shape commitment to particular policy agendas (Lavers and Hickey, 2015).[2] Although it is too soon to predict whether social protection will eventually come to form part of a deeper social contract in Uganda, as opposed to becoming mired in the politics of patronage, our analysis suggests that the conditions for institutionalising citizenship-based forms of social protection will emerge in Uganda anytime soon. Efforts by international donors to create a political constituency for social protection in Uganda have implications for the new governance and development agenda, including calls to employ political economy analysis to inform donor activities and for donors to 'go with the grain' of power and politics within African (Booth and Cammack, 2013; Levy, 2014).

The paper builds on primary research conducted over March-May 2014 and January 2016 in Kampala that involved over 35 key informant interviews with representatives from all major stakeholders (government and donor officials, parliamentarians and civil society players). Section 2 briefly introduces the main dynamics and ideas within Uganda's political settlement, before Section 3 examines the politics of efforts to promote social protection over the past decade. Section 4 analyses the causal mechanisms at work here in relation to transnational factors and Uganda's shifting

[2] As discussed at greater length in the conceptual framing paper for this project on social protection (Lavers and Hickey, 2015), a full analysis of political elite behaviour needs to account for ideas as well as interests. Indeed, from a constructivist point of view, 'interests' themselves are always perceived, rather than objective and 'real', and therefore have an ideational basis. Whilst agreeing with this perspective, here we use the shorthand 'interests' rather than 'perceived interests' to refer primarily to the interests that political elites have in maintaining themselves in power.

political settlement, whilst Section 5 concludes by returning to the broader questions around 'thinking and working politically'.

2. Shifting dynamics of Uganda's transnationalised political settlement

For more than a decade after Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power in Uganda in 1986, the NRM was widely credited as being a largely progressive regime that was working towards rebuilding state-society relations and promoting development in a country badly damaged by two decades of civil strife and authoritarian rule. This capacity and commitment to ensure stability and promote development rested largely on the NRM's developmentalist vision and ability to build a ruling coalition that was inclusive of most elite factions and the country's rural base (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, 2013; Lindemann, 2011). Senior bureaucrats also played an important role, particularly those within the Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Uganda charged with maintaining the macro-economic stability that helped underpin pro-poor growth (Mosley, 2012). In political settlement terms (Khan, 2010), Uganda during this period could be characterised as a dominant developmental coalition, with few powerful players either horizontally, in terms of other elites, or vertically, in terms of lower-level factions.

However, the return of elections in 1996 and the exit of senior actors from the NRM into opposition leading up to the 2001 elections saw this balance of power shift in both directions. The commitment to universal primary education following the 1996 elections set in place the populist strategy of distributing public goods in return for the political loyalty to rural voters in particular. Over the 2000s, this strategy became increasingly personalised at the expense of efforts to build more effective and accountable systems of governance. Key examples include: the abolishment of graduate tax in 2001 and the process of districtisation (Green, 2010), both of which undermined local government capacity to deliver development; and the president's 'poverty tours', which involve a mixture of listening to local concerns and securing loyalty through handouts and promises of further goods. This dynamic reached a new level of intensity at the 2011 elections, when Uganda's mode of 'inflationary patronage' (Barkan 2011) went into overdrive: money was poured into rural areas to secure the vote (Izama 2011), particularly in the previously oppositional north. This strategy has been broadly successful in political terms: although the opposition Forum for Democratic Change ran the NRM increasingly close in the 2001 and 2006 elections, its support fell away in 2011 as the north swung behind the NRM (Conroy-Krutz and Logan, 2012). Despite more powerful players exiting the ruling coalition in the run-up to the 2016 elections, the president secured over 60 percent in a heavily disputed poll.

This transition, from a potentially 'developmental' dominant coalition to an increasingly 'weak' dominant party settlement, with relatively weaker levels of capacity and commitment to deliver development (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, 2013), has overlapped with profound shifts in Uganda's transnational political economy of development over the past decade. International development agencies have long been an influential part of the policy-making process in Uganda, dating back at least to 1987, when the International Monetary Fund helped persuade the government to adopt structural adjustment reforms. Donors were also credited with helping to promote the poverty agenda from the late 1990s onwards, with Uganda the first country to devise and adopt a poverty reduction strategy paper, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). Uganda achieved impressive levels of growth and poverty reduction over the 1990s, although high levels of poverty and vulnerability remain, particularly in the north and east (Republic of Uganda, 2014). However, since 2005-06, Uganda has moved markedly away from the poverty reduction agenda in pursuit of a more ambitious programme of 'prosperity for all' and 'structural transformation' under its new National Development Plan (Republic of Uganda 2010). This shift was catalysed by a decreased reliance on international development aid and the growing availability of alternative economic resources, particularly the discovery of commercial quantities of oil and the signing of the Sino-Africa Agreement (Hickey, 2013). Budgetary allocations have been shifted to what are considered more 'productive' sectors (e.g. energy, roads) in line with the focus on structural transformation. This period has also seen more difficult relations between government and western development agencies around issues of democratisation and high-level corruption cases.

It was in the midst of these political and political economy transitions in Uganda, in the early 2000s, that international donors started to promote the idea of social protection. Although GoU's apparent commitment to poverty reduction at this point gave donors cause for optimism that the agenda would take hold, a more historical perspective may have suggested a more pessimistic view. According to one historical reading of the political economy factors that have been associated with the uptake of social protection in Africa (Hickey, 2008), the critical underlying factors have involved some combination of rising inequality and urbanisation, bureaucratic capacity and domestic revenue mobilisation, along with programmatic political parties committed to promoting development. In contrast, Uganda's political economy of development remains largely in the same shape as it was 40 years ago: structural transformation has been limited, with relatively little movement of labour and resources into more productive areas of the economy (Haussman et al., 2013) and a low (though growing) proportion of Ugandans living in cities. Income inequality as measured by the Gini co-efficient rose sharply over the same period that poverty levels were falling, from 0.37 in 1992-03 to 0.43 in 2009-10, but has largely flat-lined over the past 10 years. Finally, and if domestic revenue mobilisation offers a window onto state capacity and the state of the social contract in a country, Uganda also performs poorly on this score. The tax take has remained low at around 12 percent for several years now, and no direct taxation to link the majority of citizens to services since the electorally driven abolition of graduated tax in 2001.

3. Gradual politicisation of social protection in Uganda: 2002-2015

The process through which social protection has become ‘established’ in Uganda falls into three main phases. The first phase, which ran from 2002 to 2005, involved a largely technocratic and largely unsuccessful effort by donors to promote social protection as a policy agenda. From 2006 donors shifted towards a more politically-attuned strategy that was more successful in establishing social protection as a policy agenda and getting a pilot cash transfer programme on the ground. The third phase, from around 2011 onwards, involved the progressive shift of social protection from the policy to the political agenda.

Phase I: promoting social protection via the poverty agenda (2002-05)

> “…that (in 2002) was when they sold us the idea of social protection. The World Bank was organising training, they and DFID recommended SRM training in Paris. I went along with officials from Ministry of Finance and Office of Prime Minister. So that’s how we started … got plan approved in 2004, and got it into the last Poverty Eradication Action Plan” (interview with MGLSD official, 17 February 2014).

The first efforts to promote a new social protection agenda in Uganda began in 2002,[3] led by the World Bank and DFID. The World Bank initially focused on training civil servants, largely from MGLSD, in its preferred conceptual model of ‘social risk management’ (SRM). A DFID advisor who attended the Bank’s 2002 workshop in Uganda started to develop an alternative approach, hiring an advisory team known for its criticism of the SRM approach to also work with the same MGLSD bureaucrats, with the aim of promoting a broader and more transformative agenda (see Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). DFID’s aim was to ensure a national policy focus on social protection in Uganda via the PEAP review process which was ongoing at the time. A social protection task force was formed to lobby sector working groups to include a focus on social protection in their strategic plans, with the advisory team conducting studies and holding brown-bag seminars to achieve influence.

This strategy achieved marginal gains, with the World Bank Social Protection specialist admitting in 2005 that “Mainstreaming has been a struggle” (interview, October 2005). Social protection interventions did get several mentions in the revised PEAP (2005-08), but few of these became policy or budgetary priorities thereafter. Little effort was made to engage powerful players from MFPED or the political elite more broadly, and MGLSD lacked the political clout or technical capacity to influence the wider policy agenda. Donor efforts were also undermined by a lack of co-

[3] Although numerous constitutional commitments and legislative instruments that would later be characterised as ‘social protection’ did exist in Uganda at the time, these were largely limited to formal sector pensions, donor-driven programmes and various traditional mechanisms of support.

ordination between the main players involved. As such, this phase ended with social protection weakly established on Uganda's policy but not its political agenda.

Phase II: towards a more politically attuned strategy of promoting social protection (2006-10)

Strategic approach

From around 2006-07, DFID-Uganda started to adopt a much more politicised approach to promoting social protection, strongly informed by a political economy analysis that they commissioned to inform their influencing strategy. Efforts to establish a coalition in support of social protection in Uganda were broadened beyond the usual suspects, to include more influential players within government circles. A range of formal and informal efforts were employed to persuade leading figures within MFPED in particular of the agenda's importance. This included sending senior bureaucrats and politicians on study tours, seeking informal lobbying opportunities with ministers over breakfast meetings, and working through political allies to ensure that briefings were delivered at cabinet retreats and NRM conventions. Efforts to secure the support of civil and political society were extended, as with the formation of the Uganda Social Protection Platform in 2008, and media channels were used to try to popularise the idea of social protection.

The aid context was also shifting: social protection was now becoming a global policy agenda and, under Paris Declaration principles around donor co-ordination and harmonisation, DFID was now the lead actor on social protection. Donors became increasingly co-ordinated behind a more coherent strategy which now emerged, with a strong focus on the Bank securing a national social protection strategy (led by the Bank) whilst DFID focused on establishing a pilot cash transfer project with the support of Irish Aid and UNICEF. These three agencies offered strong institutional support to their respective policy advisors, encouraging them to invest heavily in policy engagement efforts and using the visits of senior figures from headquarters to further press the case for social protection. The professional qualities of the staff involved in these policy influencing activities was frequently cited by those involved as a positive factor, including the high level of energy, policy expertise and advocacy skills of successive social development advisors at DFID-Uganda. The fact that DFID-Uganda was able to provide resources and technical assistance in a responsive, timely and flexible manner also helped to keep the process moving.

The growth of social protection as a global policy agenda over this period was an enabling factor, with senior GoU officials attending the Livingstone conferences of 2006 and 2008. DFID-Uganda drew more extensively on the burgeoning epistemic community on social protection, contracting researchers from the DFID-funded Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) in 2007 to help co-ordinate efforts both to promote social protection and assist with pilot project design. This process was largely managed by Development Research and Training (DRT), which was also involved in advocacy work on social protection. In September 2008, CPRC and DRT organised a major international conference in Entebbe to showcase the feasibility and effectiveness of social protection. However, and although this secured the attendance of powerful players from within both MFPED and MGLSD, linking social protection to a discourse on chronic poverty was not persuasive to political elites in Uganda and actually slowed down the process of securing government buy-in for cash transfers.

Outcomes

The agreement between government and donors to establish a cash transfer pilot programme in September 2006 followed a prolonged period of resistance from powerful actors within government. The focus on cash transfers was agreed after ministers and officials from MGLSD and MFPED attended the Livingstone conference in March 2006, where a visit was made to the Kalomo project. A memorandum of understanding between DFID and government was signed in around September 2006 and design workshops were held in February and March 2007. The plans to scale up the policy were approved by the minister of MGLSD in May and the specific pilot design was approved in June 2007.[4] However, when DFID tried to transfer funds to MGLSD in August 2007, the minister of finance blocked this, apparently because of concerns over the affordability of the project over the long term and its donor-led character.

This occurred in a new political economy context within which both western donors and the poverty agenda were declining in force. The return of multi-partyism in 2005 led to the NRM establishing a party manifesto for the 2006 elections, much of it written by the then minister of finance, which it intended to use to displace the PEAP. Entitled ‘Prosperity for All’, the manifesto set out a more ambitious and productivist agenda, and helped create an environment in which ‘cash transfers’ were seen as wasteful handouts. For example, in July 2007, the month before the minister blocked the transfer of funds, reports appeared in the press claiming that a cash transfer programme was to commence, and characterising the scheme as ‘handouts’ and an expensive waste of money. As one proponent of social protection working in Uganda at the time noted:

> “…back in 2008 when the ministry of gender first requested permission from cabinet to implement the programme, they were rejected. The feeling in cabinet was that social protection would lead to dependence, and was not sustainable, it was seen as welfare hand-outs and

[4] The plan that emerged was to develop six pilots in a regionally representative selection of Uganda’s poorest districts, which would target the poorest 10 percent of households. The design was influenced to some extent by the OVC programme in Kenya, and transfers would include supplements for children and older people. Selection would be via a mix of community participation and proxy means testing, one cross-checking the other. The cash would be delivered through the financial system and post offices, rather than government channels.

> government didn't want to give such…" (interview with authors, March 2014).

However, by 2009 the stand-off had been resolved and cabinet had given its approval for the roll-out of the pilot cash transfer programme, namely the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE). This was partly fortuitous and reflected the highly personalised nature of politics and policy-making in such political settlements: the new minister of finance, appointed in 2008, had earlier been minister at MGSLD and was both knowledgeable about and sympathetic to the social protection agenda. However, it was also important that social protection advocates had shifted their discursive approach:

> "So what we did was that we redefined the programme around vulnerability of certain groups of people, old people, orphans and disabled, whom everyone would be comfortable giving money to, basing on their vulnerability rather than their income poverty … we stopped talking about poverty and started talking about vulnerability and social exclusion … so when we re-articulated the programme that way, cabinet approved it (in 2009). So I think that is the first political lesson we learnt" (interview with aid advisor, March 2014). [5]

Influenced by the political economy analysis mentioned earlier, this new approach to 'going with the grain' was apparent in the process of programme design. For example, the level of transfer was calibrated to ensure that recipients would not be able to leapfrog those in higher income deciles (interview with SAGE programme designer, April 2014). This new approach played well, alleviating elite concerns around giving handouts to and causing dependency amongst the undeserving poor: In June 2010, cabinet approved the establishment of the Expanding Social Protection (ESP) programme, officially as the project delivery unit for SAGE. Donors still performed a technical role. For example, when the concerns around financial sustainability were raised by the sub-committee of cabinet appointed to vet the programme, ESP swiftly generated the evidence needed to allay the concerns (interview with senior MGLSD Official, 17 February 2014).[6] However, key officials

[5] The political rather than technical nature of this targeting decision is further underlined by the fact that it ran contrary to the findings of a study of targeting options produced by DFID following a request from MFPED. Completed in December 2007, the report concluded, along with the wider literature, that targeting by vulnerability would have more pro-poor results than targeting by age. Although this analysis provided the basis for MGLSD to prepare a cabinet memorandum in March 2008 that requested permission to implement a vulnerability-targeted social transfer programme, this decision was later altered in favour of a focus on the elderly when cabinet objected.

[6] Several such reports are available at http://www.socialprotection.go.ug/.

within ESP continued to see their role as being more political in nature, in terms of securing wider political support for social protection.[7]

Expanding Social Protection in Uganda

> "…the programme (ESP) has been critical: field trips, advocacy meetings, international field trips, a relentless building of the politics. If it doesn't work after this then…!" (interview with development agency official, 18 February 2014).
>
> "The ESP programme has been extremely strong in both areas: implementation has been really strong, it's happening, it's out there, really pretty successful. And then they've twinned that with the focus on the politics and really building political support, and it's the politicians not the technocrats who are critical here" (interview with multilateral aid official, 18 February 2014).

In administrative terms, ESP lies within MGLSD, although its offices are physically located beyond the main ministry in bespoke premises. Staffed by bureaucrats from within MGSLD and international staff hired by donor agencies through a private sector company, and heavily dependent on donor financing, ESP effectively operates as a 2.0 version project management unit. Informed and shaped by the 'thinking and working politically' agenda, ESP offers technical support for specific projects and policy framework formulation, whilst also working actively to build a stronger political constituency in support of social protection.

ESP is responsible for rolling out the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) programme, a four-year pilot in 14 districts that is supposed to be jointly funded by government and development partners (DFID, Irish Aid, and UNICEF), but which received no budgetary allocation from GoU until 2014-15. SAGE has two elements, both of which involve pilot cash transfer programmes in 14 districts selected according to their poverty rankings within the context of broadly representative agro-ecological regions.[8] The first element is the Senior Citizens Grant (SCG), which involves a transfer of around $US10 per month to all individuals over 65 in the pilot districts, and the second is the Vulnerable Family Grants (VFG), a means-tested cash transfer to households with limited labour capacity, as identified through a mixture of data-driven and community-based targeting. By 2014 the programme reached over 100,000 beneficiaries, being implemented at the local level

[7] ESP's focus on 'working politically' to promote social protection would be further underlined in March 2013, when it shifted an economist staff member from an analytical role to a role focused centrally on advocacy (interview with ESP staff member, January 2016).
[8] As of 2015, the SAGE scheme covered 123,153 beneficiaries in 15 districts: Kyenjojo, Kyegegwa, Kiboga, Kyankwanzi, Apac, Kole, Katakwi, Kaberamaido, Moroto, Napak, Nakapiripirit, Amudat, Nebbi, Zombo and Yumbe.

through a mixture of parallel structures and staff established by ESP with some oversight from local government officials. The SCG, which we focus on here, is delivered via the MTN mobile network.

The implementation of the SAGE programme began from April 2011. Perhaps because ESP officials were keen to capitalise on the political opening for the project, the programme commenced before a baseline study had been conducted. This was undertaken in September-October 2012, followed by impact evaluations after one and two years of the programme being implemented.[9] Having a pilot project on the ground in Uganda was used extensively to persuade political and bureaucratic elites of the need to maintain and extend the programme. These study tours, and meeting recipients of the SCG in particular, seem to have turned some erstwhile opponents into supporters, including some leading political figures within MFPED. Asked what had been the main influence on their thinking, one minister answered:

> "…the field! It is less about reports or study tours than these, seeing direct changes on the ground. See people having meat for Christmas for the first time, school clothes … there is now respect for these people who used to be cursed for asking you for money. And they are speaking very highly of government now. Study tours elsewhere help too." (minister within MFPED, 17 February 2014).

Having witnessed the impact and political logics of social pensions during a DFID-funded study tour to Lesotho in 2012, one minister encouraged ESP to sell SCG as "a political programme", in order to secure widespread political support (interview with ESP official, January 2016).

Bureaucrats were more likely to emphasise the more technical drivers, stressing that they have been influences more "…from ESP reports they pass, also they have been able to get a number of ourselves on study tours, training and that has been effective for many of us. These have been best strategies." (senior MFPED official, 17 February 2014).

ESP also worked hard to persuade parliamentarians who had been erstwhile opponents of the scheme. According to one MP:

> "From the time SAGE was formed, most of us in parliament didn't understand: thought they were giving money to people to get money to get drunk and just sit and wait. The first time they (ESP) came to parliament, MPs were hot for them, but they picked the vocal people, took them to trips, … some of us were then taken to Lesotho, South Africa, Malaysia, got lessons and really appreciated that this support was

[9] The relevant reports can be found at: http://www.opml.co.uk/projects/uganda-social-assistance-grants-empowerment-sage-programme

> necessary, did not create laziness, but really helped. So after those visits we caused a platform in cabinet to be formed of all ministers with a social protection agenda; then formed the parliamentary forum as a lobby group …. ESP was very handy" (MP, 18 February 2014). "

Formed in 2011, the Parliamentary Forum for Social Protection is an informal lobby group of over 60 members and led by a member of parliament from a district covered by the pilot cash transfer programme. The Forum has actively sought to build wider support amongst MPs and also the president:

> "We have lobbied him directly, although we started with First Lady, as the president seemed to tell us it was consumptive and we should focus on roads. She became a very passionate member of the forum, so from there we even took advantage of the (NRM) retreats that happen every year. So at Kyankwanzi two times we found time to launch this, and by third time he proposed that ministry should prepare a roll-out plan" (interview with MP, 18 February 2014).[10]

Beyond ESP, and from a more technical perspective, the capacity of MGLSD to co-ordinate and promote the social protection agenda was helped by the formation of a Directorate of Social Protection in 2013 and the appointment of a highly experienced and politically connected senior bureaucrat as the ministry's new permanent secretary in 2014.

Phase Three: from the policy to the political agenda (2013-ongoing)

The third and ongoing phase has seen social protection move from becoming part of the policy agenda to being 'politicised'. The two key episodes here involved the surprise commitment by the president to add an additional district in 2013 and the move to roll out the programme more broadly in 2015.

'The 15th district': the president commits

By 2013, momentum around the social protection agenda seemed to be growing. MGLSD had drafted a National Social Protection Framework and established a cabinet-level inter-ministerial social protection sub-committee (MGSLD 2013a). However, there had been no financial commitment from government's own revenues and the policy agenda did not seem to fit well with the country's new development orientation.[11] The letter that President Museveni sent to the minister of gender in

[10] According to one minister, "Every MP wants it yesterday in their constituency. The First Lady wants it fast-tracked to her region" (interview, 17 February 2014). Kyankwanzi district is an NRM stronghold where the Movement holds its annual retreats and undertakes political education of military and bureaucratic officials.
[11] Commitments within Uganda's National Development Plan to social protection remain negligible. According to one study conducted in the middle of 2013 that looked at the extent to which social protection commitments have been implemented within the first half of the NDP: "The findings are quite amazing: while the commitment has been there, the implementation of

August 2013, requesting that she adds a further district to the SCG pilot programme and prepares plans to roll out the programme nationally, therefore took everyone by surprise. It corresponded neither to any particular lobbying efforts by ESP nor any new evidence concerning the programme's performance. Rather, the catalyst seems to have been a visit to the president's rural retreat in western Uganda by dignitaries from Yumbe requesting that they also benefit from the programme, which was operational in an adjacent district (interviews with various stakeholders, March-April 2014). Similar delegations had emerged elsewhere, including one from another northern district (Acholi), which had lobbied the minister of gender (interview with MGSLD official, 28 February 2014), and sometimes through forming a formal group such as the Akole Older Persons Association (interviews with MPs, April 2014). The pressure seemed to be telling: during a celebration of Older Persons Day in October 2013, the president repeated what he termed "a personal commitment" to roll out the programme to the rest of the country.

The announcement was received with predictably different responses across the finance and civil society tendencies in Uganda. The priorities for 2013-14 had already been established, but by early 2014 MFPED officials were clearly upset at having to work this new commitment into the 2014-15 budget priorities. Senior bureaucrats and the minister opposed the extension, primarily on the grounds of cost and financial sustainability over the long term, and because they considered it to be a consumptive rather than productive forms of expenditure and thus to run counter to GoU's established commitment to achieve structural transformation of the economy through a productivist development strategy (Republic of Uganda 2010). There was palpable sense of anger amongst leading technocrats within MFPED that social protection was an externally driven agenda that is being imposed in ways that undermined their existing strategy:

> "…it is not that SP is wrong, but at the first stage in economic development do you start bringing those issues as a matter of prioritisation? So, should I spread resources off UPE, USE into social protection? Those are the choices and trade-offs we have to think about. Should I stop roads and infrastructure for social protection?" (Interview with senior bureaucrat, MFPED, 18 February 2014.)

Such officials feel that their hands have been tied by the fact that the programme had become 'a political fact on the ground', realising that by now it had become "politically entrenched … once you've started you can't go back on it". Technocrats were also concerned that cash transfers were likely to be used to fuel political clientelism, particularly in the run-up to the 2016 elections. This fear was further fuelled by the

the commitment has been quite slow. Of the 13 commitments in the NDP on SP, the amount of resources that was earmarked to them was not achieved. And within the MLGSD, yes SP is the main funded department within the ministry. However, in the last financial year the ministry received only 60 percent of its allocated budget" (interview with study author, March 2014).

fact that the request for increased expenditure on cash transfers came directly alongside a new initiative from the same ministry, namely the Youth Employment Programme (MGSLD 2013b), widely seen to be a pre-election 'handout' to help secure electoral support for the regime in 2016. By now a gap had opened up in the ministry between the politicians and technocrats, which included the then minister, who did not sit as an MP. As one technocrat noted, "… the politicians are keen, it is helpful for them, they ride on it in their constituencies, because it gives them some political capital in those 14 districts" (interview with MFPED official, 17 February 2014).

This struggle between the technocratic and political tendencies reached the highest levels. Leading up to the 2014-15 budget there was a heated two-hour debate in cabinet, during which the president argued in favour of extending the programme and MFPED officials repeatedly emphasised the budgetary constraints (interview with senior MFPED official, January 2016). During the exchange, the president admitted to having been lobbied directly by senior officials from the main agencies and diplomatic missions supporting the programme, namely the UK and Ireland. At this point, the technocrats seemed to have won out: as one MFPED official noted, "We are only giving 2 billion shillings, not even 10 percent. We do not have a plan to take on the recurrent expenditures." (senior MFPED official, 17 February 2014). The president himself seemed to accept that there were fiscal limits to rolling out cash transfers, drawing attention to this constraint even whilst making political capital from the programme:

> "As you know, we committed to provide a Senior Citizens Grants programme to support all older persons in the NRM manifesto. This programme is now being implemented in 15 pilot districts with Yumbe district being the most recent addition. Our plan is to gradually extend the programme to more districts in the whole country as resources become available. As our economy grows; and with it our national revenues, I am convinced that the expansion of the Senior Citizens Grant from the current pilot 15 districts to the whole country will be within our means soon" (speech by president in Yumbe, 1 October 2014, International Day of Older Persons).

Nonetheless, proponents of social protection saw GoU's decision to finance SAGE from domestic revenues as a highly significant shift, not least because of its origins in a presidential command:

> "When was the last time that government contributed to a donor-funded project to the tune of 2 billion shillings? Government doesn't do that. So it is incredibly significant that government is putting its hand in its pockets. Ministry of finance held back for a long time because they never wanted

> commitment. But the directive came from the top" (interview with ESP official, 12 March 2014).

The 2015-16 budget struggle: past the point of no return?

> "… It has a lot of political implications, the moment you start (cash transfers) you have to continue. If you withdrew it from people, it could be protests, voting, people will definitely reset the government. So we will scale up but only to the limit" (senior MFPED official, 17 February 2014).

By 2014, DFID had made plans to extend their support for the SCG programme into a second phase, but wanted a stronger financial greater commitment from GoU for this next five-year period. In November 2014, MFPED wrote to MGLSD suggesting that they would increase GoU's commitment to 10 billion Uganda shillings for 2015-16. Although much less than the 33 billion shillings that MGLSD had initially requested, both MGLSD and DFID seemed content with this. However, as the budget process progressed, MFPED came under pressure to increase expenditures in other directions, including the costs of the forthcoming 2016 elections, and the amount allocated to SCG was reduced by half to 5 billion Uganda shillings. This was unacceptable to both DFID and Irish Aid. In March 2015 they called a breakfast meeting with leading members of the pro-social protection coalition, including ministers and senior bureaucrats from MGLSD and key parliamentarians, and also the influential chair of the budgetary committee (interview with bilateral aid official, 25 January 2016). The strategy they agreed would be straightforward: unless GoU increased its commitment back to 10 billion Uganda shillings, the bilateral agencies would withdraw their support for Phase II. With elections due in February 2016, 2015 was effectively election year and advocates of social protection within parliament and MGLSD would highlight the significance of closing a politically popular programme at this point.

The social protection coalition moved fully into advocacy mode in a bid to influence actors at all levels of governance. Senior DFID officials called a meeting with senior MFPED officials to deliver the message directly, at which point the whole mood of the meeting was reported to alter significantly (interview with bilateral aid official, 25 January 2016). DFID-Uganda also found opportunities to target the president and First Lady: the head of office prepared a briefing paper for the British high commissioner to use when meeting the president for their regular briefing and DFID's visiting director of programmes was requested to raise the issue with the First Lady during a visit in February 2015. MGLSD's senior leadership were fully on board, with the minister writing to the president saying directly that they need this 10bn for what is "a political programme" (interview with MGLSD official, January 2016). In the build-up to the budget speech in June 2015, ESP used donor funding to mount a media campaign across television, radio and newspapers in support of extending cash transfers. ESPD also provided direct support to the Parliamentary Forum for Social Protection and in May 2015 Parliamentary debates saw those MPs whose districts had the pilot programme extol its virtues and MPs without it demand its extension to their constituencies. Forum members held meetings in every region of the country and encouraged district leaders to implore government to roll out the SCG to all parts of the country (interview with member of parliament, January 2016).

According to one MGLSD official,

> "…when it was the day to pass the budget, the Parliamentary Committee on Social Development had met with the Budget Committee and made it very clear that we could not lose this programme at a political time such as this. MPs said unanimously that you put this with 10bn, or we do not pass the budget" (interview with ESP official, January 2016).

In the context of an election year, the combined effects of donor, presidential and parliamentary pressure was too much for MFPED to withstand and they finally agreed to commit 9 billion Uganda shillings for 2015-16, with incremental annual increases for the whole second phase of the project. This commitment, which was written into the Medium Term Expenditure Framework and would see the SCG extended to the 100 poorest old people in 40 new districts by 2020, was sufficient for DFID and Irish Aid to agree to proceed. According to one senior MFPED official,

> "Parliament exerted its powers: SAGE is very popular, everyone in rural areas wants to associate with SAGE, so when we went to parliament they forced us to increase. It was a combination of donor threats to withdrawal and parliament. It was a condition" (interview with senior MFPED official, January 2016).

By now, even the IMF were advocating cash transfers as a sensible fiscal strategy, leaving the same senior official to lament that: "We were surrounded from all sides. Even…when the IMF talk to us they bring this" (op. cit).

4. Ideas and interests within Uganda's shifting political settlement

The progress of social protection in Uganda has been defined by the interplay of transnational factors and the country's domestic political economy (Lavers and Hickey 2015). More specifically, the increased commitment to social protection identified here flowed from the decade-long and increasingly politicised efforts of a transnational policy coalition and the eventual convergence between this campaign and Uganda's shifting political settlement dynamics. This political alignment was both incentive-based, with regards to electoral popularity, and, to an extent, ideational, with regards to ideas around vulnerability and deservingness in particular. This section therefore looks at more depth at the character of these political settlement dynamics and ideational struggle, and at the broader issues arising from transnational actors working as well as thinking politically.

Political settlement dynamics in Uganda: cash transfers as a political fix?

> "That one (Yumbe) was chosen because a delegation visited Museveni in his home, he was pushed into a corner. Plus the district had been in conflict, so had suffered a lot. So, politically he instructed that they get it on board" (interview with MP, Kampala, 18 February 2014).

Uganda's shift away from a dominant developmental political settlement since the late 1990s had left the ruling coalition and president even more prone to a personalised and patronage-based approach to politics. By the 2010s, weak dominance had set in, with the president increasingly vulnerable to bottom-up demands, particularly from regions where the ruling coalition needed to extend its constituency. The fact that northern districts were chosen for the political launch of the cash transfer programme in 2011, and its extension in 2013, is significant in this respect. The north is not only the poorest region in Uganda, but also the one that failed to secure inclusion within the NRM's otherwise broadly based coalition, a failing that helped catalyse the rebel insurgency in the region between 1987 and 2006 (Lindemann, 2011). Northerners had consistently voted against the NRM in all elections between 1996 and 2006.

Concerned by the increasing level of support for opposition parties at the 2001 and 2006 elections, the president quietly launched a charm offensive in the north from the late 2000s onwards; aided by the peace process from 2006 onwards, this included the president undertaking poverty tours to the region and launching new policy initiatives for the north. From 2009 to 2011 the president located his brother in the West Nile region, which includes Nebbi and Yumbe. This offered a conduit through which local concerns could be channelled back to the presidency and a means through which a local NRM network was established to counteract opposition forces and build a support base (interviews with Ugandan political analysts, 2014). This strategy, alongside the increased security and the growing economic opportunities offered by the region's proximity to South Sudan, paid off, with a majority of northerners voting for the NRM in the 2011 elections (Conroy-Krutz and Logan, 2012). Launching and extending the cash transfer programme in this region arguably constitutes an extension of this strategy of clientelist inclusion.

The somewhat tortured rise of the social protection agenda in Uganda's weakly dominant settlement contrasts starkly with the route through which the social protection agenda took shape in a dominant political settlement in neighbouring Rwanda (Lavers, 2016). In that case, it was the executive that went searching for a policy to fix a problem (reduced rates of poverty reduction), rather than allowing donors the room to set the agenda and effectively shift the political dynamics by getting a pilot programme on the ground. Once the idea of implementing social protection programmes had taken hold in Rwanda, political and bureaucratic elites identified the particular type of intervention that fitted their ideas and perceived problems, integrated it fully within their productivist development strategy and pursued it rigorously. Seen in this light, Uganda's 'commitment' to social protection emerges as a somewhat half-hearted and instrumental embrace of yet another form of vote-buying clientelism, rather than a return to an ideological form of developmentalism. For example, whilst government has extended its financial commitment to the SCG somewhat, the same ministry's Youth Livelihoods Programme remains by far the biggest benefactor of presidential and budgetary support, being awarded 80 billion Uganda shillings in 2015-16, compared to 9 billion for the SCG.

The discursive politics of social protection in Uganda

Nonetheless, the struggle over social protection in Uganda has been about the ideas as well as interests that define Uganda's political settlement and its interaction with specific policy domains. The transnational policy coalition had to mobilise and contest a variety of ideas in order for social protection to become a policy agenda in Uganda, including normative beliefs around how the world should be and cognitive ideas around evidence (Schmidt, 2008). In particular, proponents had to overcome the paradigmatic belief amongst most of Uganda's ruling elite that it was wrong to offer 'handouts', particularly to 'able-bodied people' who might then become dependent on them.[12] As detailed above, cabinet only approved the cash transfer pilot in 2009 when the policy coalition changed their discourse from a focus on poverty to vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly, who were seen as deserving, given their lack of labour capacity.[13] This discourse was also employed by the president during one of his early engagements with the programme, in the northern district of Nebbi:

> "My government therefore aims to restore the dignity of our senior citizens, empower them to participate in social and community life and enable them to continue supporting their families, through in particular the provision of Senior Citizens Grants … Launching these grants in Nebbi today, represents a clear delivery on our manifesto promises." President Museveni, Nebbi, International Women's Day 2012/Launch of SAGE.

The targeting of cash transfers at the elderly had the additional benefit of effectively neutralising elite (and popular) concerns that handing out cash to poor people would result in 'dependency'.

[12] This belief runs deep in Uganda: according to Mosley (2012), President Museveni initially rejected the World Bank's proposal to offset the social costs of adjustment in the mid-1990s, saying that his government did not give 'handouts', whilst other research points to the emphasis given to the 'productive poor' in Uganda's development policy regime (Hickey, 2005). Even some supporters of the current cash transfer scheme argue that age of recipients should be raised to 70, given that some over-65s are fit enough to work (interview with MPs, February 2014).

[13] This perception it is at odds with the facts about poverty in Uganda: the majority of the poorest households have at least some labour capacity, and yet are still unable to move above the poverty line.

In terms of cognitive ideas, the presidential call in August 2013 for the programme to be scaled up did not flow from new evidence on the programme: the first evaluation had not been published at the time. As finance ministry officials noted even a year thereafter, “We need to see more on the impact. But we are waiting for that impact evaluation that they are doing” (interview with MFPED official, 19 February 2014). It is striking that donor agencies that are usually amongst the first to insist on ‘evidence-based policy-making’ have promoted a scheme so vigorously, despite so little evidence being available regarding whether it was actually achieving its objectives.[14] This, and the fact that donors promoting social protection were largely moving against the tide of Uganda’s productivist development strategy from the mid-2000s raises interesting questions concerning not only the old Paris Declaration issues of ‘ownership’ and ‘alignment’, but also the newer move by donors to ‘think and work politically’ (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Putting donors in the frame: the trade-offs of thinking and working politically

Most discussions within international development on the politics of promoting social protection tend to portray donors, and the policy coalitions that they manufacture and support, as idealists promoting a worthy policy agenda against the vested interests and wrong-headed ideas of national policy-makers, particularly those within the finance ministry tendency (Kanbur 2001). However, matters are more complex on both sides of the equation, and if we are to take a political settlement analysis seriously, it is important to interrogate the interests and ideas of transnational actors as well as those of African political elites. For example, many of the same donors who have been promoting social protection over the past decade were advocating diametrically opposed ideas during the 1980s and 1990s, and were critical to embedding the values of neoliberalism and fiscal probity within the same ministries of finance that they now encourage to loosen up, splash out on cash transfers and more generally get with the civil society tendency.

Nor are things as straightforward as the growth versus poverty reduction divide suggested by Kanbur’s two tendencies. Uganda, along with many other African countries that found themselves free from debt and apparently resource-rich in the mid-2000s, has increasingly sought to move beyond both market-led neoliberalism and the poverty agenda, in favour of a more productivist development strategy aimed at structural transformation (Republic of Uganda, 2010). The key players within Uganda’s government do not see social protection as an integral part of this strategy, at this stage at least, not because they are anti-poor, but because they view the provision of broader-based services and infrastructure as more pressing priorities for now. They would rather not borrow and spend more on an additional policy agenda that they see as delivering fewer benefits, and which will leave them more rather than less dependent on donors. This is a valid position, and resonates with historical

[14] The case of Uganda reflects the broader finding that political commitment to social protection rests more on ideological grounds and instrumental incentives than technical evidence concerning its efficacy (Hickey 2009).

evidence that the impulse for social protection is more likely to emerge in contexts where processes of capitalist development and state formation have progressed more thoroughly than they have in contexts such as Uganda (Hickey, 2008).

The fact that some donors have chosen to actively promote social protection in the face of these obstacles is generally justified with reference to their pro-poor mandate. That the development agencies and, indeed, the specific development advisors involved in promoting social protection are committed to poverty reduction and directly improving the lives of poor people in Uganda is not contested here. However, things are also more complicated on the donor side of the equation, where agencies and individuals also operate according to incentives as well as ideas. In this regard, it may be going too far to suggest, as one senior government official did, that “social protection is here for DFID to get prestige” (interview 18 February 2014). Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that aid agencies such as DFID and others have placed a lot of reputational value on their promotion of social protection over the past decade within the broader establishment of this global policy agenda, and that promoting new policy agendas that get taken up by governments is a highly incentivised activity within donor agencies.

There is also evidence here that donors have been willing to trade a focus on poverty reduction with what they perceived to be the realities of getting things done in a particular political context. This included moving away from vulnerability targeting towards a focus on the elderly because they were considered ‘deserving’, and limiting the size of the transfer in order to avoid disturbing the social ordering of poverty in rural Uganda (cf. Green, 2009). This has been for understandable reasons, both operationally and politically, and was taken under advice from the kind of political economy analysis advocated and undertaken by many development academics, including the authors of this paper. Nonetheless, such trade-offs, and also the evaluation data that is available on the SCG to date, raises questions around the pro-poor mandate of international donors. The mid-term evaluation had already suggested that the programme had little impact on poverty rates, although it was performing favourably regarding the subjective wellbeing of recipients (OPM 2014). The final evaluation of the programme’s first phase, which only captured two years of the programme’s impacts, was similarly muted in its findings. The report notes that the programme had been “… marginally pro-poor, meaning that poorer households increased their welfare proportionally more than wealthier households”, and was unable to identify positive outcomes with regards to education or health (OPM 2016: 2). More positive impacts were identified with regards to households being able to retain and build their productive assets, and helping to increase the self-perceived dignity of elderly beneficiaries by reducing their dependence on others (ibid: 8). According to the report,

> “The fact that the SAGE transfer has not significantly impacted areas beyond basic consumption implies that it is unlikely to prove

> transformative: it has made an often vital difference to beneficiaries' lives, but due to the relatively low value of the transfer, its potential to alter the welfare trajectories of households over the longer term is somewhat curtailed" (OPM, 2016: 12).

Whilst even small improvements in the wellbeing of households are clearly to be welcomed, this seems, to date at least, to be a fairly limited developmental return on such a major investment of time, effort and resource by donors and their coalition partners. Even after the current roll-out is completed in 2020, it will only have reached less than half of the country's districts (40 of over 100) and an estimated total of 226,085 beneficiaries. That the latest roll-out will target the 100 eldest pensioners in the new districts, reflects a political move to distribute a small financial commitment broadly for largely political reasons, rather than the hallmark of technicallyl nformed and pro-poor design. This outcome reflects more clearly the incentives and ideas of Uganda's political elite, with the policy coalition only agreeing to this roll-out model to avoid an even more diluted and politically driven approach (interviews with ESP and aid agency officials, January 2016).

5. Conclusion

The (somewhat) increased commitment of the government of Uganda to social protection directly reflects the success of a transnational policy coalition in aligning this agenda with some of the ideas and incentives that characterise Uganda's shifting political settlement. Tilting the balance from a technical to a political mode of policy influencing, particularly by creating cash transfers as a political fact on the ground, was successful in persuading erstwhile opponents of the political logic of cash transfers, in the context of a wider shift towards a more competitive and weakly dominant form of political settlement.[15] The 2015 roll-out does constitute a significant advance, in that it further institutionalises the SCG as part of the 'deal' between rulers and ruled in Uganda. The logics of Museveni's increasingly populist brand of vote-buying clientelism means that the SCG has become part and parcel of the political campaign scene in Uganda and could not now be removed: according to one government minister, "It is more difficult to stop social protection than if you stopped UPE" (interview with government minister, 17 February 2014). However, the limited level of political commitment and governmental capacity to deliver on this agenda also reflects the fact that these are not the most powerful ideas and incentives within Uganda's ruling coalition. Handing out cash to elderly people may offer the ruling coalition a useful means of appeasing some lower-level demands, particularly in terms of consolidating support within a previously oppositional region, but it currently remains a marginal strategy, both in terms of the ruling coalition's wider mechanisms

[15] This stands in contrast to the case of Zambia, where there was a more balanced emphasis on building the technical as well as political case for cash transfers (Pruce and Hickey, 2016, forthcoming). In Zambia robust evaluative data was used to persuade erstwhile opponents of the effectiveness of social cash transfers, particularly those within the finance ministry tendency. This may mean that it will prove more difficult to disentangle SCTs from political logics in Uganda than in Zambia.

for securing votes and legitimacy, and the wider productivist development agenda focused primarily on energy and infrastructure.

Achieving even the limited degree of commitment identified here involved a transnational policy coalition actively seeking to alter the political dynamics at play in a nominally sovereign country, both through intense lobbying and through generating local political pressures by the establishment of a pilot project as a political fact on the ground. This raises interesting questions concerning both the interpretation of Paris Principles around ‘ownership’ and ‘alignment’ by donor agencies working towards the rolling out of a new global public policy, and also the implications of the newer ‘thinking and working politically’ agenda. The transnational policy coalition examined here was armed with the ideas and techniques of this new governance agenda, including the use of political economy analysis and ideas around ‘going with the grain’, that development academics have been so eager to promote. The outcomes, particularly in terms of the limited levels of poverty reduction achieved so far at least, raise concerns regarding what happens when development agencies take on board the exhortation to move beyond being part of the ‘anti-politics machine’ and to start acting, as well as thinking, politically. This further highlights the potential costs to the ‘going with the grain’ strategy that so often flows from a political settlements analysis: aligning policy agendas with dominant interests and ideas may render interventions politically acceptable whilst further embedding clientelist logics and doing little to address distributional problems. This in turn suggests that a degree of caution is required amongst those (including the authors of this paper), who advocate that development needs to get more political.

These problems flow more fundamentally from the shifting nature of the political settlement in Uganda than from the contemporary nature of aid per se. Over the long run, it remains to be seen whether cash transfers remain just one amongst a number of populist measures designed to increase political support via the logic of patron-client politics, rather than reflecting a genuine commitment to institutionalising social protection in ways that help reduce poverty and forge a citizenship-based social contract. The evidence to date is not particularly encouraging. According to the final evaluation of the programme’s first phase, it “has not produced a change in people’s perceptions of the social contract, or their ideas about the duties of citizens and the responsibilities of the state” (OPM, 2016: 12). It may be that rather than spend so much energy on promoting a form of poverty reduction that is marginal to the dominant interests and incentives of the ruling coalition, there is perhaps a case for working more parametrically to promote the longer-term drivers through which social protection has become genuinely embedded within African polities over time (Iliffe, 1987; Hickey, 2008), including higher levels of bureaucratic capacity, domestic revenue generation, and structural transformation.

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