



ESID Briefing No. 22

The politics of promoting social cash transfers in Uganda

KEY FINDINGS:

- The government's decision to expand the roll-out of the Senior Citizens' Grant (SCG), and to adopt a National Social Protection Policy, indicates a growing political commitment to social protection in Uganda.
- This support for social protection was finally secured after the decade-long efforts of a globalised policy coalition, built around government bureaucrats and international development agencies. The agenda only gained high-level political buy-in once a pilot cash transfer project had helped to extend this coalition to citizens, local community leaders and politicians.
- The eventual success of development agencies in aligning the social protection agenda with some of the ideas and incentives that characterise Uganda's political settlement helps reveal both the promise and pitfalls of 'thinking and working politically'.
- There is a danger that social cash transfers will be captured within the logics of patron-client politics, rather than helping to promote development and citizenship.
- Despite the SCG scale-up, levels of genuine political commitment to social protection, and the capacity of government to deliver it effectively, remain low. The small size of the current transfer and the notion of targeting the oldest hundred people per district both undermine the poverty-reducing effects of the scheme.



Photo: Will Boase

INTRODUCTION

In August 2013, the President of Uganda issued a letter to the Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) calling for an extension of the Senior Citizens' Grant (SCG) cash transfer project. 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. The policy request was resisted by some within government, including within the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED), on the grounds of affordability and sustainability. However, following further lobbying by donors and bureaucrats, as well as a major advocacy effort by many parliamentarians and civil society actors, the 2015-16 Budget Framework Paper included an increased contribution of 9 billion Ugandan schillings, as well as year-on-year increases, to help roll out the SCG to 40 new districts by 2020. A National Social Protection Policy for Uganda was also approved by cabinet in November 2015 and launched in March 2016.

“Promotion of social protection in Uganda has been a highly political affair”

The promotion of social protection in Uganda has been a highly political affair, closely shaped by political dynamics involving the perceived interests of the ruling coalition in securing its stability and legitimacy. The progress of social protection reflects the relative balance of power and influence between the interests and ideas of domestic and transnational actors. It raises a number of questions concerning the politics of policy adoption and implementation in Africa.

The political settlement in Uganda has shifted from being a potential 'developmental' coalition during the first decade of National Resistance Movement (NRM) rule from 1986, to an increasingly 'weak' dominant party settlement since the start of the 2000s. The difficulties of maintaining power in the face of increased levels of political competition have arguably made it more difficult for government to maintain the levels of capacity and commitment to delivering development that seemed to characterise its first decade in power.

The mid-2000s also saw government moving away from the poverty reduction agenda towards a focus on 'prosperity for all' and structural transformation, in ways that seemed to reduce the space

for pro-poor policy-making, including on social protection. This shift was catalysed by a number of factors, including the return of multi-party politics, a decreased reliance on international development aid, and the growing availability of alternative resources from the discovery of commercial quantities of oil and the signing of the Sino-Africa Agreement. In a context of declining reliance on foreign aid and a growing move towards 'resource nationalism', many government actors were keen to resist external efforts to promote social protection.

“International actors sought to promote social protection by forging alliances”

The process through which international actors sought to promote the social protection agenda in Uganda involved efforts to forge alliances with government bureaucrats, national civil society organisations and politicians, and can be broken down into three main stages:

- *Stage I – promoting social protection via the poverty agenda (2002-05):* World Bank and DFID persuading policy actors to adopt this agenda in line with global priorities, training civil servants and offering wider capacity-building support for the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. This approach achieved limited progress, with social protection weakly established on Uganda's policy, if not its political, agenda.
- *Stage II – a more politically attuned strategy of promoting social protection (2006-10):* increased harmonisation and co-ordination of donors, with a focus on securing a pilot cash transfer project (led by DFID) and a national social protection strategy (led by the Bank). Advocacy strategy targeting influential actors aimed at aligning cash transfers with the interests and ideas of the political and bureaucratic elite.
- *Stage III – pilot phase and roll-out (2011-15):* The Expanding Social Protection (ESP) programme, informed and shaped by new thinking on politically attuned development, seeks not only to design and deliver a specific project and promote a wider policy framework for it to sit within, but also to actively build a stronger political constituency to support the initiative. In 2015, government launched a roll-out of the programme, committing funds from domestic resources, and adopted a National Social Protection Policy.

FINDINGS

The progress of the social protection agenda in Uganda has been closely shaped by the extent to which the globalised policy coalition in support of social protection was able to align this agenda with the dominant and changing interests and ideas within Uganda's ruling coalition.

“Uganda's ruling coalition has become more vulnerable to bottom-up demands”

Uganda's shift away from a potential developmental coalition since the early 2000s has left the ruling coalition, already prone to a personalised and patronage-based approach to politics, to become still more vulnerable to bottom-up demands, particularly from regions where the ruling coalition needed to extend its support. This is indicated by the extension of the Senior Citizen's Grant to Yumbe in the north, where the ruling party was keen to consolidate its electoral gains after the 2011 polls.

“Struggles around social protection in Uganda have been about ideas as well as interests”

Observers feel that the programme has become a 'political fact' on the ground and some proponents consider it to have now become part and parcel of the political campaign scene in Uganda. There is even some evidence that the incumbent government garnered increased levels of political support from those districts where the pilot project was based.

The struggles around social protection in Uganda have been about ideas as well as interests. As indicated in Table 1, it was necessary for proponents of social protection to mobilise normative ideas as well as technical evidence at several levels, in order for social protection

to be seen as a credible policy agenda in Uganda. In particular, cabinet approval of the cash transfer pilot in 2009 only came once proponents changed their discursive framing of the agenda from a focus on poverty to a focus on the vulnerability of groups they knew were considered deserving of assistance, largely because of their lack of labour capacity.

“‘marginally pro-poor’, with little impact on poverty rates”

This suggests that the poverty agenda has become somewhat compromised in the effort to ensure that the intervention was seen as politically acceptable, both in terms of targeting a group widely seen as 'deserving', rather than necessarily the poorest, and in terms of the size of the transfer. The decision to target the elderly, rather than the poorest, and to cap the size of the cash transfer to avoid disturbing the social ordering of poverty in rural areas, reflects the trade-offs involved in seeking to 'go with the grain' in contexts where there is limited elite commitment to poverty reduction and where alternative targeting mechanisms are difficult to operate. Mid-term and final evaluation reports indicate that the programme has been only 'marginally pro-poor', with little impact on poverty rates, although it has performed favourably regarding the subjective wellbeing of recipients.

It is striking that donor agencies that are usually among the first to insist on 'evidence-based policy-making' have been largely happy to promote the scheme, despite little evidence being available to assess the extent to which it is actually achieving its objectives.

Certain key players within Uganda's government do not see social protection as an integral part of its overall development strategy. As set out in successive National Development Plans, leading figures within the executive and Ministry of Finance view the provision of broader-based services and infrastructure as more pressing priorities for Uganda at this stage of its development. Leading bureaucrats remain concerned that cash transfers may fuel patron-client politics, and could leave government more, rather than less, dependent on donors, and bearing unsustainable costs.

Table 1: The politics of ideas about social protection

Level of idea	Type of idea	Ideas around social protection
Paradigm/ philosophy	Normative	Shift from 'poverty reduction' to the 'deserving poor', namely the elderly
	Cognitive	Vulnerability
Problem definition/ programmes	Normative	Overcoming disruption to traditional mechanisms of support; securing dignity for older people
	Cognitive	Poverty and vulnerability assessments conducted
Policy ideas/ solutions	Normative	Cash transfers sold as good for local economic activity and empowering older people
	Cognitive	Promotion of cash transfers as a credible solution to the above problems through multiple means (studies, study tours, etc.)

Source: Adapted from Schmidt (2008) and Lavers and Hickey (2016).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Social protection has risen up the policy agenda in Uganda in recent years, but much higher levels of commitment and capacity will be required if it is to become an integral part of government's development strategy and to achieve lasting gains for the country's poor and vulnerable people. The current size of the transfer and the design of the roll-out make it difficult for cash transfers to realise their pro-poor potential.
- External efforts to promote new policy agendas in Uganda require a great deal of effort to build effective policy coalitions with the capacity to frame policy agendas in alignment with the dominant ideas and interests of political elites.
- This 'going with the grain' approach can increase the political acceptability of policies and interventions, but with the risk of policies becoming embedded within clientelist logics and doing little to address wider distributional problems.
- An alternative approach that could be considered would be to promote the long-term drivers through which social protection has become embedded within African polities over time, including bureaucratic capacity, domestic revenue generation and structural transformation.

FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing was produced from an ESID project on the political economy of social protection in sub-Saharan Africa. It draws on research framing by ESID researchers Dr. Tom Lavers and Professor Sam Hickey. The briefing was drafted by Kate Pruce, adapted from a forthcoming ESID working paper, with inputs from Professor Sam Hickey (ESID Research Director, The University of Manchester) and Dr. Badru Bukenya (Makerere University). The research was conducted by Professor Sam Hickey and Dr. Badru Bukenya (Makerere University), coordinated by Dr. Tom Lavers.

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