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INTRODUCTION

Social policy in Africa: Risks, protection, and dynamics

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Introduction

The ideas, practicalities, and challenges of establishing effective social protection in Africa are steadily, if somewhat slowly, gaining notice in both policy-making forums and mainstream social policy analysis. The world's second largest and populous continent, Africa is also its poorest region, with chronic poverty, vulnerabilities, and preventable hardship. Despite some significant developments in social welfare interventions and outcomes since the turn of the century, the policy agenda and dynamics in most countries remain complex and tenuous, arguably more so than other lower and middle income (LMIC) regions. This special edition contributes to a critical analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing social protection systems in Africa. It also seeks to examine the extent to which the staple explanatory concepts of welfare dynamics in the northern and western hemispheres – the role of actors, ideas, and institutions – need to be modified or adapted when analysing welfare dynamics in Africa. The focus is on Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) rather than the more diverse and heterogeneous Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While, it is important to acknowledge that SSA nations are also distinct and varied; nevertheless, they share important characteristics in terms of historical contexts, average incomes, development outcomes, and most relevant for the purpose of this analysis, social policy strategies, and challenges.

Current needs and the need for urgent action

Of the 46 economies designated by the United Nations as being globally the least developed, 33 are in Africa, and on almost all indices of deprivation, SSA has a concentration of hardship, risk, and underdevelopment (UNDP, 2019). More than 48% of those living in the region live in poverty, close to 20% of the population face chronic hunger, and the region houses roughly 60% of the world's population living in extreme poverty (on less than $1.90 per day).

More than 80% of all employment on the continent takes place in the informal sector, resulting in subsistence income for workers and lack of access to decent work or employment benefits and protection. While 26% of young women and 16% of young men (aged between 15 and 24) are not in employment, education, or training, perversely, there are now more children involved in child labour in SSA (87 million) than the rest of the world combined. Youth literacy rates remain the lowest in the world: 72% compared to 90% in the MENA states and 97% in Latin America and the Caribbean. The region also has the highest maternal mortality, with estimations that pre-Covid, 66% of all maternal deaths globally, occurred in SSA (ILO, 2021, 2022). Despite the optimism for a better future of development and social progress following the struggles for independence, 60 years on, the continent continues to display the legacies of colonialism, and underdevelopment, with weak state institutions and democratic governance mechanisms.

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Traditional mechanisms for social protection

Despite this obvious and urgent need, according to the recent ILO "World Social Protection Report" (ILO, 2022) as of 2020, excluding health services, only 17% of Africa's population was covered by at least one social protection benefit. That is, the remaining 83%, including children, the elderly, those with disabilities, injury, and the unemployed, are left wholly unprotected by any public support. Significant underinvestment means that SSA spends on average only 2.1% of GDP on social protection (compared to the global average of 13%), although this figure masks wide variation among 36 observed African countries, where pre-Covid social assistance ranged between 0.02% (Chad) and 5.55% (South Africa) of GDP. In terms of health care, on average, SSA spends 1.8% of GDP compared to global averages of 6%.

Moreover, as illustrated by several articles in this special issue, where protection systems do exist, they are frequently characterised by gaps in coverage and unreliable and poor quality of service delivery. This social policy vacuum and lack of confidence in the reliability of the state forces those affected to revert to customary mutual support and local systems of reciprocity and risk pooling. These informal family and community arrangements are extensive and entrenched and include self-help associations, rotational savings and credit schemes, lotteries, remittances, community-based health insurance, and home-based childcare (Awortwi, 2018; Gough and Wood, 2004). This "unofficial" mobilisation of gifts, loans, food and care is vital for the wellbeing and security of the majority of households and spreads risk, facilitates intergenerational transfers and covers all aspects of social protection.

These traditional welfare systems typify what Gough and Wood (2004) characterised in their seminal work as informal security regimes – and range along a continuum of effectiveness (Gough and Wood, 2004). Despite being labelled as "informal," much welfare provision of this kind involves "thick institutions" with elaborate and deep-rooted structures. Subsequently, recent work has proposed that rather than seek to simply displace informal local social assistance, policy makers and the donor community should seek ways of incorporating and linking them with formal social protection system provided by the state and market (Dafuleya, 2023; Nowak-Garmer, 2023). These authors suggest various opportunities and novel approaches to link parallel systems of informal and formal welfare, such as enhancing the financial capabilities of informal savings and insurance societies or partnering government social workers with informal carers. Until such time, however, Dafuley et al. concur that as presently constituted, informal mechanisms, despite their pervasiveness, are too small scale to address systemic or multiple deprivations, or do anything other than provide emergency relief and are ultimately inadequate.

Current trajectories

Despite this context, it is also the case that since the turn of the century, formal social protection mechanisms, largely in the form of social assistance grants, cash transfers, public works, and food assistance programmes, are increasingly prominent on the agendas of both African governments and international donor agencies (Ellis et al., 2009; Pater et al., 2023). However, given the high levels of informality and low tax collection capacity, state-backed unemployment protection instruments are largely absent from current formal social protection devices, and social insurance is the least utilised of all instruments. Where formal insurance systems exist, participation and coverage are extremely low. Across the continent, only 5% of the unemployed receive unemployment benefits and 8.5% of the working age population contributes to pension schemes (ILO, 2023).

Instead, social assistance in the form of non-contributory means tested transfers, is the main vehicle for delivering formal welfare protection; mainly targeting non-working cohorts, that is, those outside the labour market due to age or disability (working adults typically get tiny allocations of social assistance budgets). In particular, the mid-2000s saw a massive surge in utilisation of cash transfers as the principal poverty alleviation instrument. One hundred and twenty pilots and schemes were rolled out between 2000 and mid-2009 in SSA, and there now exist over 110 national social assistance cash transfer

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programmes with indications of deepening institutionalisation and national ownership (UNICEF, 2017).

While the enthusiasm for direct cash (rather than food or in-kind benefits) in part stemmed from the experience with conditional cash transfers in Latin America, designed to simultaneously address both income and human capital deficits, when translated to African contexts, the conditionality was often dropped. In contexts where education, health, social services, and employment training are of limited capacity and quality, the attempt to impose conditions to attend them became unfeasible (Huijbregts et al., 2023). Though as Beland and Haang'andu's article in this issue illustrates, there are schemes that adapt the model of conditionality. The establishment of "Community Implementation Committees," as part of the LEAP programme in Ghana, was designed in part to empower citizens to participate actively in programming decisions rather than being "passive" beneficiaries.

Evaluation evidence of widespread advantages from cash transfer programmes (Barrientos, 2019) has led to their further roll out across SSA in recent years. However, despite this expansion, it is important to note that prior to the Covid pandemic, on average still only 10% of the population of SSA was supported by transfers, with coverage at less than 5% in 24 countries. While cash transfers have been a popular crisis response by most governments in the region, funding constraints have limited their impact for local communities and vulnerable populations. Older persons are the group that has highest coverage from non-contributory transfers (20%), while only 7% of persons with disabilities and 11% of households with children receive benefits (ILO, 2022).

Although overall, domestic financing of social protection programmes now exceeds that provided by overseas development aid (UNDP, 2019), there is wide variation between countries, and funding continues to be a major challenge for most states. Additionally, lack of fiscal and staff capacity at both central and local government levels means that many of the core administrative functions necessary to deliver social assistance (including targeting registration and payment systems), as exemplified in several of the papers in this issue, are often absent.

New opportunities for progress?

Despite these challenges, there is growing optimism in some sectors about indications that social policy is becoming normalised and embedded in Africa. A recent UNDP Report (UNDP, 2019) states that "not only are governments taking on steadily rising proportions of programme financing, they are publishing policies, passing laws and establishing institutions that strengthen the delivery capacity of social assistance programmes." It is progressively argued that as these trends continue, the goals for social assistance can be expected to evolve in ways that emulate "western" social policy trajectories, including embracing a social rights basis for social policy.

Several scholars have also suggested that the recent global COVID-19 health crisis may provide impetus for greater reform (Beland et al., n.d.). The progress made in extending social protection in SSA in the first two decades of the 21st century was clearly tested in 2020 as the impact of COVID 19 led to a sharp deterioration in livelihoods in Africa. Significant inequalities and gaps in access to health care and unemployment protection were exposed – as was the fragility of any semblance of a social contract between governments and populations. Nevertheless, according to many policy experts, the crisis also served as a catalyst for state action and provoked an unapparelled social policy response on the part of individual national governments in Africa who "*… marshalled social protection as a frontline response to protect people's health jobs and incomes… extended coverage to hitherto unprotected groups, increased benefit levels… adapted administrative and delivery mechanism and mobilized additional resources*" (ILO, 2022).

The extent to which the emergency measures implemented post 2020 will gain traction and be transformed into lasting reforms is debated (Beland et al., n.d.). Views vary from advocates who argue that the pandemic provides a window for policy learning and for greater ambition in reconfiguring state-led social policy – to those who argue that in the absence of fundamental shifts in underlying norms and

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politics, the transition to comprehensive and universal systems of social welfare remains uncertain. The role of exogenous factors and critical junctures in driving major policy change (such as war, rapid economic collapse, or radical change of government) has been long documented and prominent in social policy theory and discourse (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Hall, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 1988). However, despite the prominence of external factors in explaining policy change, the precise mechanisms that link exogenous factors to policy change remain obscure. The impact of the Coronavirus on social policy dynamics and trajectories in SSA will undoubtedly add to our understanding, not only for Africa but also for social policy theory more generally.

Social policy analysis: Fit for purpose for Africa?

Despite the expansion of policies and programmes on the ground in SSA during the past two decades and the significance of social policy in the management of welfare and risk in the wake of Covid, it nevertheless is the case that social policy analysis about the region continues to be relatively under researched and theorised. Where research does exist, it often tends to be descriptive accounts or evaluations of interventions, rather than the development or testing of analytic frameworks (Midgley et al., 2019).

Some have argued that the reason for this is that the complexity of welfare arrangements, novel channels of funding, and the impact of colonialism, means it is difficult to apply social policy theories developed in relation to 20th century European societies to present day developing economies (Surender and Walker, 2013). Most of the conditions and capabilities associated with the emergence of state-led welfare in the now "developed" world remain largely absent in the global South. This includes industrialisation, formal labour markets and, most crucially, the development and power of the state – both in terms of its functional capability and public authority and legitimacy. Subsequently, classic explanatory theories employed for industrialised economies, such as varieties of institutionalism, class competition, and power resource models, are inappropriate for the study of arrangements in the South (Gough and Wood, 2004).

Mkandiwire (2004), however, takes a less benign view, arguing that the undertheorising or neglect of social policy in Africa (and other developing regions) in mainstream policy analysis does not simply flow from the fact that the underlying conditions between North and South are different. It is also the case that there is considerable western chauvinism, "normative dissonance" and "OECD bias." This includes the tendency in western accounts to disparage social policies in developmental states as paternalistic or productivist, thereby depriving them of more "valid" normative properties of rights-based transformative social policy. Moreover, the fact that social policies in developing economies are often implemented in a top-down manner by "unsavoury authoritarian regimes" adds to the unwillingness of western theorists to countenance them. Relatedly, Mishra (2004) argues that the experiences of developing countries has remained largely opaque, if not invisible often because the social protection instruments used have not been drawn from the familiar arsenal of social policy mechanisms utilised in developed counties. In contrast to Western-style social insurance and assistance, they include redistributive measures such as land reform, security of tenure, pan-territorial pricing, commodity stabilisation programmes, food subsidies, and micro-insurance programmes. According to Mishra, the neglect of this "social protection by other means" has produced a "measurement bias" which in the extreme has led to the misreading of social policy dynamics in LMICs.

The articles in this special issue address several of these issues and debates and between them provide a critical analysis of the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics facing social policy and social protection systems in SSA. Covering a range of sectors, actors, policy instruments, countries, and case studies, the authors contribute to our knowledge and understanding of how social policy and welfare systems are now evolving in Africa. Between them, they highlight the legacies of historical contexts, the weaknesses of state governance, the subsequent continuation of traditional and informal protection systems, the wide range of actors, from local to supra national, and the impact and challenges of current social assistance

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strategies. Notably, the papers bridge both empirical and theoretical approaches, thereby allowing the work to be located and integrated within wider policy frameworks and welfare debates. In different ways, most underscore the statement by Seekings and Siachiwena in their paper, that the "process of social protection is messier and more contingent than much of the literature has suggested."

In their paper, *"Understanding the Origins of Social Policy in Colonial Contexts: An Actor-Centric Approach,"* Shriwise and Schmitt provide a comparative and historical analysis of two ex-colonies of French West Africa, Benin and Cote d'Ivoire, in order to understand the impact of colonialism on social policy making. Focusing on the role of actors, their findings support the view that the collective influence of non-domestic transnational and regional actors was a key determinant in the choice of programmes, mechanisms, expenditure and nature of policy objectives in African states. However, they also demonstrate that in contrast to the relatively large degree of homogeneity among transnational bodies, the heterogeneous nature of and tensions between domestic actors, across economic, private, social, and civil sectors, were also important factors in understanding the origins and direction of post-colonial policy. They argue that a traditional focus on government elites and colonial administrations alone, has often missed this more complex and nuanced set of dynamics.

Continuing this premise, Beland and Haang'andu similarly argue that in order to fully understand how in Africa, policy ideas move from the transnational level to the national level and are "recast" to fit particular cultural and institutional contexts, it is important to take an actor-centric approach. Their paper, "*Scales of ideational policy influence: A multi-level actor-centric and intuitionalist perspective on the role of ideas in African social policy"* presents their research on the design and implementation of the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme in Ghana. In keeping with Shriwise and Schmitt, they acknowledge that international development institutions constitute a powerful and influential dimension to the social policy agenda in all LMIC and particularly so in Africa. However, their study also highlights the prominence of policy administrators at the subnational level in the policy process. The involvement of bureaucrats at the regional and district levels, together with local traditional leaders was, they argue, instrumental in both policy making and implementation. They call for a greater focus on these variated "scales of ideational policy influence" and a more systematic mapping of the linkages between local as well as national and transnational actors.

In a slight divergence of emphasis, Seekings and Siachiwena stress that party and electoral politics and competition between policy coalitions are central to understanding the uneven adoption of social protection across Africa. Their paper, *The politics of "institutionalising" social protection in Africa: The retrenchments of social cash transfers in Zambia, 2015–2021*′, traces in detail the course of the main cash transfer programme in Zambia. It exposes how despite public commitments of expansion, the programme in reality was retrenched, and that funds that were available and budgeted for were not disbursed but diverted to agriculture and infrastructure sectors. The authors conclude that while social policy analysis reminds us that everywhere, policy pathways are rarely linear – this is particularly true in contexts where factional politics, patronage-based coalitions, unstable ruling administrations, and weak systems of accountability exist. They argue that in an African context, it means that fully embedding and institutionalising social protection is not straightforward. They acknowledge that their conclusions will be particularly discouraging to those who predict that the emergency programmes instituted in response to COVID-19 may become institutionalised and permanent. Notably, Seekings and Siachiwena argue that across much of the continent, there is a deep and overriding belief that individuals have a responsibility to work and family and community have an obligation to provide welfare. If social investment is to be advocated – the investment must be in the "productive" and developmental sectors (hence, the diversion of cash transfer funds to the agricultural sector). They contend that the transportability of "western" notions of state-led welfare and a rights-based agenda are still less orthodox than a "productivist" approach.

Zembe-Mkabile's paper *"Social protection as a nutrition-sensitive instrument to address malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa: The utility of the UNICEF conceptual model of care for maternal and child nutrition"* outlines the extensive health deficits and needs of mothers and children in SSA. Her research demonstrates that maternal and child health and nutrition are closely intertwined and take on particular significance at an early stage – with maternal health during and after pregnancy impacting child health

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and developmental outcomes, including growth and stunting. Utilising a UNICEF conceptual model for the determinants of maternal and child nutrition outcomes, she advocates for a multisectoral approach that includes both mother and child and comprises both "nutrition-specific" and "nutrition-sensitive" interventions. She uses the case study of the South African Child Support Grant to argue that while in theory, cash transfer programmes when implemented as part of a "Cash Plus Care" framework (i.e., a systems strengthening approach, which supports the building of complementary services and community-based care) potentially represent this multisectoral approach, in practice, there are severe gaps. Echoing the themes of the other papers, Zembe-Mkabile argues that in South Africa, deficits in governance, political will, and fiscal and institutional capacity mean that many services and benefits are not fully operational or accessible. Limited capacity to operationalise policies and monitor compliance and lack of integration with social work services targeting children and families, ultimately result in incomplete and inconsistent implementation.

Lambin's paper *"Philanthropic donor agencies and social policy in sub-Saharan Africa – new perspectives to the welfare mix"* returns to the role of actors, but this time, to the emergence of a new category of non-governmental actors – contemporary philanthropic donors. While much has been written about the fact that the social policies of "developing" countries are regularly determined by the role of bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor and development agencies, relatively little is still understood about the role and impact of philanthropic aid – despite its rising influence in both financing and shaping social policies in the global south. This knowledge gap is particularly important in the context of SSA, which is the primary recipient of international philanthropic aid globally, and where philanthropic funding is essential for key social policy sectors, including health and education. Lambin's critical overview of the financing, service delivery, and policy-making functions of philanthropy in the welfare mix in SSA is therefore timely. Her analysis suggests a dynamic and rapidly changing welfare policy landscape that includes not only familiar Western Foundations, but also increasingly, locally formed African philanthropic Foundations and Trusts within SSA itself.

Finally, Virk, Nelson, and Dele-Adedejis' Policy Brief on *"The challenges of youth unemployment in Nigeria"* examines wider social policy developments and challenges through a case study of youth unemployment policy in Nigeria. Home to 40% of the world's youth population, they pessimistically argue that Africa's "youth bulge" may nevertheless fail to deliver the demographic potential for development that it should. Poverty, unemployment, health challenges, and limited educational opportunities will result in a missed opportunity for a "demographic dividend" and also potentially exacerbate social and political unrest. While acknowledging the significance of wider factors, they nevertheless argue that present-day state capacity and legitimacy have additionally undermined progress. Significant failings in state management, corruption, and inefficiency, together with a narrow "productivist" approach to tackling unemployment, mean that despite recent government efforts and adoption of various policies and international charters, the prospects and outcomes for the region's youth remain very poor.

In a similar vein to the argument by Seekings and Siachiwena, Virk et al. also point to the importance of local normative and cultural factors in driving or inhibiting policy reform. They suggest that international and donor norms may overlook or misunderstand the critical cultural framings of the importance of even informal work (as opposed to training schemes) in transitions to adulthood and for fulfilling expected social roles, and the extent to which a "social rights" and redistributive approach remain subordinate to policies attempting social investment and economic growth.

Towards the analysis of social policy for Africa

It could be argued that Mares and Carnes (2009) proclamation over a decade ago that *"our grasp of the variation in the design and economic consequences of social policies in developing economies, is sketchy and preliminary…"* continues to apply to SSA today. Examining the different influences of policy actors, ideas, and instruments, the papers here between them begin to address this knowledge deficit and

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highlight a number of distinct yet interrelated themes. In particular, they show both that the welfare mix in Africa is more complex and potentially challenging and that several of the assumptions and frameworks of "mainstream" policy analysis need to be adapted and expanded.

While increasing attention has been paid to the collective influence of international development institutions on the social policy programmes and levels of expenditure of African states, the various analyses presented here highlights that other actors and variables are also crucial determinants. Domestic actors, whether political, economic, or civil are shown to be key in shaping policy direction. Likewise, new powerful philanthropic actors outside and within the continent are increasingly challenging the traditional focus on the international and multilateral governance organisations. Similarly, assumptions about the normative and ideological goals of "western" social policy (formulated under a very different set of ideational and political conditions) come under the spotlight and questions are raised about the extent to which "western" ideas of rights, individualism, and state welfare are fully transportable – or indeed whether they ought to be.

The empirical research and analysis in this special issue illustrates that in many respects, social policy in Sub-Saharan Africa is a dynamic and fast-moving terrain. It invites us to consider the extent to which current developments represent the future trajectory for social policy dynamics and outcomes in the region, and if so, the implications for the theoretical frameworks traditionally employed within the subject. Furthermore, it suggests caution – that not recognising potential divergences in social, normative, and cultural ambitions may undermine a more thoroughgoing analysis.

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