

Pilots, principles or patronage: what makes social protection succeed in southern Africa?

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Abstract

The Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) has commissioned studies of 20 social transfer schemes and a range of thematic papers on the conceptualisation, design, implementation and impacts of social protection programmes in six southern African countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This set of studies provides a rich evidence base for addressing the themes of this workshop. In a region where the influence of international development actors is excessively pronounced, we argue that it is the articulation of international (donor/INGO) ideologies and national (government) political processes that dictates what specific social protection instruments are adopted, how they are designed and implemented, and whether they 'succeed' or 'fail'. We define 'success' in political and institutional terms rather than immediate impacts on poverty and vulnerability. We draw a fundamental distinction between social transfer schemes that are effectively implemented by donors and international NGOs, on the one hand, and government-run programmes with negligible donor/INGO involvement, on the other. We conclude that programmes that emerge out of domestic political agendas and respond to local conceptualisations and prioritisations of need are more likely to 'succeed' in terms of their coverage, fiscal sustainability, political institutionalisation and impacts than those based on imported projectised interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Social protection in southern Africa

The emergence of social protection as a dominant policy framework for grappling with deepening livelihood vulnerability in southern Africa since the 2001/02 food crisis has been remarkable. While there are a range of views across the region about what 'social protection' should include and exclude, there is a general acceptance that it is about "policies and

actions that protect and promote the livelihoods and welfare of poor and vulnerable people”<sup>1</sup>. A central theme is a broadening out from short term, mainly food-based responses to periodic crises, to the setting up of sustainable, institutionalised systems that can provide guaranteed, predictable public assistance for the very poor and protect vulnerable people from livelihood risks and social discrimination. The number and diversity of social protection schemes put into operation has been growing rapidly, and several countries have taken steps towards a national social protection policy. In general, the impetus has come from international development actors, while most governments have shown a reluctance to commit to long-term programmes that might be fiscally unsustainable and an aversion to creating a ‘dependency mentality’ among the poor. But there are some notable exceptions, as we highlight below.

Among the various actors involved, three overlapping agendas seem to be shaping these developments in southern Africa:

- technical (‘what works’): a concern with evidence about efficacy, cost-effectiveness and implementation capacity;
- ideological (‘what’s right’): a concern with universal rights (to food, health, freedom from poverty etc) for broad groups of the poor and vulnerable (children & their mothers, older people, people with disabilities, the chronically sick, poor farming households etc);
- political (‘what’s popular’): a concern with the political impact of social protection, in particular its voting-winning potential.

This paper argues that it is the articulation between these agendas that determines the outcome – what gets taken forward, what goes to scale, what succeeds and fails. We define ‘success’ here in terms not of immediate benefits for target groups, but of progress towards social protection systems that have nationwide coverage, can be sustained into the long term, have broad political support and institutional buy-in, and can ultimately make a significant impact on deprivation and vulnerability.

## **1.2 The RHVP studies**

Over the past 18 months the DFID-funded Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) has been gathering evidence to support its policy-related work on hunger and vulnerability in six focus countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In all, 20 case studies of social transfer schemes have been commissioned from local researchers across the six countries, complemented by cross-cutting thematic studies on conceptualisation, design, implementation and impacts, and a further set of country studies on institutional and policy contexts for social protection.<sup>2</sup>

Case studies, conducted with the collaboration of scheme implementing agencies, have covered a cross-section of unconditional cash and food transfers, conditional food transfers, farm input and asset transfers, schemes to improve access to education and schemes that seek to build on ‘traditional’ practices and norms. While most schemes were implemented on a project or pilot scale, six were national level programmes. Again, while most could be considered welfare-oriented schemes, seven were aimed at livelihood promotion. Cases

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<sup>1</sup> National Social Protection Technical Committee, Malawi, October 2006

<sup>2</sup> Full study reports will be posted on [www.wahenga.net](http://www.wahenga.net) in Jan/Feb-08. A series of more accessible ‘Briefs’ is in preparation. The Case Study Briefs series, which includes an introduction and a synthesis of regional lessons emerging from the case studies, is already available on the site. Thematic and Institutional & Policy Context Briefs will follow in Feb-08.

spanned a range of different approaches to and impacts on vulnerability reduction, coordination, targeting, cost-effectiveness, market contexts and assets.

These studies are still undergoing analysis, but together provide a rich evidence base for addressing the themes of this workshop and underpin the observations that follow.

## **2. Social protection schemes in southern Africa: who's in the driving seat?**

In terms of the relative roles of international and national actors in their initiation, design, funding and implementation, social protection schemes in southern Africa tend to fall into three clusters, which we illustrate below by reference to selections from our case studies.

### **2.1 Donor/INGO-initiated projects with varying degrees of government buy-in**

These are projects in which international actors, usually through a partnership between a donor and an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), provide the driving force in terms of project initiation, funding, design, technical assistance and monitoring and evaluation. The degree of 'host' government involvement varies, from mere official endorsement to designation of relevant line ministry staff, from central down to project area level, with responsibility for day-to-day implementation. Traditional authorities and community-level structures may also play a part, in particular when it comes to beneficiary selection.

#### *a) Malawi: innovation in isolation?*

The Dowa Emergency Cash Transfer (DECT) project in Malawi represents one end of spectrum in having, for all practical purposes, no government involvement in implementation, though line ministry staff and traditional authorities did collaborate in targeting and beneficiary selection. The project, designed and implemented by Concern Worldwide with DFID funding, aimed to address a localised seasonal food deficit in part of Dowa District during the 2006/07 lean season. Some 10,000 food deficit households were provided with monthly cash transfers which were banded according to household size and adjusted to accommodate fluctuations in basic food prices. Along with this innovation came another: partnership with a commercial bank, Opportunity International Bank Malawi, to trial the use of smartcards backed up with fingerprint recognition, so that beneficiaries would be able to withdraw cash from mobile ATMs at a time and place of their choosing.

Considerable resources were devoted to evaluation of various aspects of the DECT, so that the project had a significant demonstration effect. In addition to meeting its primary humanitarian objective, this generated many useful and mostly positive lessons concerning cash rather than food transfers, variable payment rates, effective targeting using participatory wealth ranking and community triangulation, technical innovation in delivery, market and social impacts, local multiplier effects and so on. The project did, however, remain very much outside the mainstream of social protection discourse in Malawi, with very few links to, for example, the government-led and UNICEF-assisted cash transfer programme in Mchinji District, soon to be scaled up, or to parallel government efforts to develop, with aid partners, a national social protection framework, policy and programme. Though to some extent this is inevitable in a short-term humanitarian operation, it does leave unanswered a number of critical questions about how such an emergency programme could be replicated on a wider scale, and how it would fit within a national social protection policy and programme.

#### *b) Zimbabwe: bypassing government – and politics?*

A similar lack of government involvement, though for different reasons, is seen in the DFID-funded Protracted Relief Programme (PRP) in Zimbabwe, the framework programme for our case studies in that country. The PRP represents an important and innovative attempt to move beyond a traditional set of relief responses in a protracted humanitarian crisis involving

a 'fragile' state with which donor engagement is subject to severe political and policy constraints. During the 3 year, £30m Phase I of PRP which has just ended and reached as many as 1.5m vulnerable people, interventions focussed on agriculture (including seed and fertiliser packs, livestock fairs, conservation farming, gardens and micro-irrigation), water and sanitation (water points, latrines and health/hygiene training) and home based care for the chronically ill, along with an urban food voucher programme. Implementation has been via 12 INGOs and their local partners, with a Technical Learning & Coordination (TLC) unit to coordinate partner contributions and oversee monitoring, evaluation and learning. Phase II will cost £50m over 5 years, reach 2m people, focus more explicitly on social protection for chronically poor and labour-constrained households, including those affected by HIV/AIDS and disabilities, on community based approaches and on the involvement of civil society. The TLC remit will extend to management, formerly handled directly by DFID-Zimbabwe.

DFID Zimbabwe and other donors have become accustomed to treading carefully in their dealings with government. The political crisis which lies behind the present macroeconomic and humanitarian crises has seen a progressive blurring of boundaries between state, ruling party and the military since the late 1990s. Organs of the state including the legislature, judiciary, civil service, electoral institutions and parastatals have been subject to increasingly authoritarian control, while repressive legislation has curbed the activities of civil society including the media and opposition. A political elite closely connected with the ruling party has prospered through privileged access to land, foreign currency and other resources, but has shown only token commitment to tackling poverty, vulnerability and human rights failings. Government distribution of subsidised maize has been manipulated for political gain, and there has been a general weakening of the rule of law.

While bypassing central government and working through NGOs in the PRP has been a logical response, as has selective engagement with local government, parastatals such as AREX and even some central ministry staff, there has been an inevitable tendency for the outcome to be a patchwork of small, standardised NGO initiatives only partially integrated into a cohesive programme by the TLC (Jones *et al.* 2007). A more fundamental issue is that of limits to what such isolated local initiatives can achieve – as RHVP's study on asset protection and asset building in Zimbabwean social protection programmes points out, intervention mechanisms need to be both attuned to context and part of an integrated approach located within national, district and community frameworks for sustainability and predictability (Dengu, forthcoming). Yet this in turn begs the broader and so far largely unanswered question of what prerequisites, especially in terms of donor-government relations, would make such integration into national frameworks possible and acceptable to both parties. (Cliffe & Raftopoulos, 2007)

*c) Cash transfer pilots in Zambia: to scale or not to scale?*

Zambia has no less than five cash transfer pilots currently in operation. The well-known Kalomo Pilot Cash Transfer Project began implementation in mid-2004 with German funding and GTZ technical assistance, and has provided a model for later schemes in four other districts: Monze (also GTZ assisted) and Chipata, Kazengula and Katete (DFID-funded, with technical assistance from CARE International). While all five schemes have been and remain largely donor/INGO driven, they fall under the auspices of the nationwide Public Welfare Assistance Scheme (PWAS), dating back to the 1950s, implemented by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) and funded by government but at a much lower level in non-pilot areas. The institutional set-up is, nominally at least, one of donor-government partnership through joint commitment to social protection objectives and mechanisms under the Fifth National Development Plan, with coordination and reporting through the Social Protection Sector Advisory Group (SP-SAG), Chaired by the MCDSS Permanent Secretary, and its various Technical Working Groups. Implementation at district level uses PWAS structures: the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO) guided by a District

Welfare Assistance Committee (DWAC), and at lower levels Area Coordinating Committees (ACCs) and Community Welfare Assistance Committees (CWAC). These committees are central to the process of targeting and beneficiary selection.

With the exception of Katete, transfers are targeted at the ten percent most needy (destitute or food deficit), incapacitated (labour constrained) and asset-deprived households in any given community. The pilots aim to provide each beneficiary household with sufficient cash to buy a 50kg bag of maize per month, or a third more if they have children. Chipata differs in being an urban scheme which offers additional transfers for each child enrolled in school. Katete is trialling age based targeting as an alternative to using the aforementioned committee structures, which in many areas have been found to demand more oversight than the DSWO can reasonably provide, leading to unacceptable levels of inclusion and exclusion error. The linked problems of targeting and DSWO implementation capacity, along with a lack of hard evidence on impacts, have led DFID to resist an ambitious SP-SAG 'implementation plan' for a rapid donor-funded scale-up of these cash pilots to cover all 72 districts by 2011, and to propose an alternative 'action plan' which focuses on continuing implementation of the five pilots while undertaking training and awareness raising, analysis of studies, and establishing a decision making process on the way forward. The context for this is one in which the MCDSS, in Zambia as elsewhere, has only a weak influence on the Ministry of Finance, which remains sceptical when it comes to welfare handouts.

## **2.2 Government-led programmes with donor buy-in:**

In some cases governments have initiated social protection programmes with little or no support from donors – even in some cases against the advice of donors – which the donors later endorse. Two such case studies are discussed here.

### *a) Malawi: from input subsidies to free inputs to input subsidies*

The Fertiliser Subsidy Removal Programme (FRSP) was imposed on the Government of Malawi by the international financial institutions (World Bank and IMF), and was implemented reluctantly and extremely slowly over a period of eight years (1987-95). This 'donor'-imposed policy reversed a government-led initiative to ensure that Malawian smallholders had access to fertiliser at affordable prices. The abolition of subsidies was associated with a rapid and severe deterioration in food security in rural Malawi in the 1990s, which was largely attributed to constrained access to agricultural inputs, suggesting that the adverse food security consequences of this policy had not been thought through by those who designed it (Peters 1996; Devereux 1997). The assumption that the private sector would rapidly and efficiently fill the gap in input provision following the withdrawal of the state proved to be unfounded, and in the late 1990s a group of donors (led by DFID) responded by delivering 'Starter Packs' – a package of free seeds and fertilisers – to every farming household in rural Malawi. This intervention, which amounted to a 100% input subsidy, was popular with farmers and the Government of Malawi, but unpopular with other donors and the IFIs, which saw it (accurately) as a repudiation of the FRSP – an acknowledgement that the FRSP had failed.

The universal Starter Pack (1998-2000) was superseded by the Targeted Input Programme (TIP) immediately before Malawi's first post-independence famine in 2002 (Devereux and Tiba 2007), which was triggered by bad weather but exacerbated, according to the Government of Malawi, by the scaling down of the free inputs distribution that preceded it. The TIP ran from 2000 to 2004, before the donors decided to stop funding it ('projectisation' is a risk with all donor-led social protection initiatives). The Government responded by reintroducing subsidies on fertiliser and maize seeds in 2005/06 and again in 2006/07, at a cost (to the Government) of \$51m and \$73m respectively. The objective was the same as when inputs were originally subsidised in the 1970s and 1980s: to raise crop yields, thereby reducing vulnerability to food deficits and seasonal food insecurity in poor rural households.

However, these subsidies are not universal but are delivered in the form of coupons to approximately half (45-55%) of smallholder households in Malawi.

The Input Subsidy Programme is credited with significantly increasing the national maize harvest in Malawi (Dorward *et al.* 2007). Perhaps because international donors remain ambivalent about subsidies that allegedly 'distort the market' and are 'fiscally unsustainable', they were initially sceptical. (It is also possible that the donors are less likely to endorse programmes that are financed and implemented entirely by governments, when they have their own social protection projects and programmes to promote.) One reason for the success of this programme is that the Government of Malawi was decisive in implementing the subsidy in spite of donor antipathy, and financed it using domestic fiscal resources. Recognising the positive impacts on production and the Government's determination to continue the programme, several donors are now preparing to offer their support, despite their initial reservations.

*b) Mozambique: edging towards a government–donor partnership in social transfers*

The Food Subsidy Programme (PSA) is in fact a predictable unconditional cash transfer intended to be used to buy food, which has been implemented by the Government of Mozambique since 1990, as a social welfare scheme for a range of designated 'vulnerable groups' who are destitute and unable to work. The programme is implemented by the National Institute of Social Action (INAS), in the Ministry for Women and Social Action. Although the programme is included in the national Poverty Reduction Strategy (PARPA), which enjoys strong support from Mozambique's donor partners, the Food Subsidy Programme receives no donor funding or technical support.

The precursor of the Food Subsidy Programme, known as 'GAPVU', was originally designed as a safety net for rural Mozambicans who were disabled or displaced by the civil war of the 1980s. Interestingly, GAPVU initially received technical and financial support from the donor community, until a series of corruption scandals in the late 1990s caused it to be closed down, re designed and re launched as an entirely government run programme. At that time, social safety nets were falling out of favour in the international development discourse, and the PSA received very little attention until recently. Now that social protection is back on the donors' agenda, the PSA is being recognised as a rare example of a nationally owned social transfer scheme in southern Africa, and several donors have recently expressed their interest in supporting it.

It would be easy to dismiss this revived donor interest in the PSA as opportunistic, and to argue that the PSA has performed well enough as a national programme without external interference. But there are reasons for believing that offers of donor support might be extremely timely, not least because the Government of Mozambique has recently displayed an ambivalent attitude to the PSA. As is not uncommon for social transfer schemes in Africa, the implementing ministry is weak and has limited negotiating power with the Ministry of Finance, which – equally commonly in Africa – is sceptical about allocating scarce public resources to the 'unproductive' poor. As a consequence, the PSA has been consistently underfunded, which has kept transfer levels low and restricted the number of transfer recipients to a fraction of actual needs.

This might be the ideal time for a partnership between the Government of Mozambique and its donor partners, to assure the future of the Food Subsidy Programme and scale up its coverage towards a fully national programme. The Government has demonstrated its capacity to deliver social transfers reasonably efficiently, while the donors have the resources to finance the programme adequately and are looking for success stories in social protection to support.

### **2.3 Government-run programmes with no donor support**

Two contrasting examples are here provided of programmes which have been established without donor support. Both operate nationwide, reflecting the political imperatives for governments to avoid favouring one area over another, as would be implied by any pilot scheme even on a temporary basis.

#### *a) Zambia: inputs for (some) 'vulnerable but viable' farmers*

Since 2000/01 the Zambian government has been funding the Food Security Pack (FSP) scheme, which is implemented by a national NGO, the Programme Against Malnutrition (PAM) across all 72 districts. PAM, collaborating with district-based NGOs, distributes small packages of farm inputs to poor farming households that are deemed to be 'vulnerable but viable'. The original concept was for a three-year programme that would reach 600,000 households (200,000 per year), providing them with seed and planting material for .25ha each of cereals, pulses and tubers, along with fertiliser for the cereal and lime where soils are acidic. The scheme began with a complex set of 10 objectives, chief of which were: i) to provide basic inputs to farming households otherwise unable to obtain them; ii) to encourage crop diversification, and iii) to promote conservation farming practices. Targeting criteria have been similarly complex, with three primary criteria (access to land but cultivating less than a hectare, having adequate labour, and not being in gainful employment) and a range of secondary ones. Beneficiary selection uses the PWAS structures described earlier. The intention was that beneficiaries would 'graduate' out of the programme after two years, and be able to take advantage of the government's Fertiliser Support Programme.

The scheme has been maintained for seven years now, and can claim a number of strengths. It is one of the few social transfers programmes with a clear vision for tackling causes as well as symptoms of vulnerability, it operates across the entire country, and for those reached it has achieved the three main objectives listed above. However, it suffers from major weaknesses, chief of which is its ambitious and over-complex design, combined with a serious problem of under funding which has drastically curtailed coverage. After a slow start-up with beneficiary numbers at only 60,000 in the first year, numbers rose to a maximum of 145,000 in 2003/04, before falling dramatically to around 25,000, 32,000 and 23,000 in the last three years respectively. The need to cover all districts means that implementation is spread far more thinly than was envisaged, adversely affecting efficiency. Proper monitoring of impacts has been lacking, again largely due to resource constraints, so that it is not possible to distinguish which aspects of the scheme performed well. Overall, the scheme has suffered from a lack of commitment on the part of government, which has instead chosen to allocate the bulk of the Ministry of Agriculture budget to the Fertiliser Support Programme which benefits better off farmers.

#### *b) Lesotho: a bold step for older people*

In his budget speech for 2004/05, Lesotho's Minister of Finance announced the introduction of a universal non-contributory pension for all citizens aged 70 and over. The Old Age Pension came into force in November 2004, set at a level of M150 (US\$25) per month, and became law in the Old Age Pensions Act passed in January 2005. The pension is entirely funded out of domestic resources with no technical or financial support from donors, costing M126m (US\$21m), or about 2.7 per cent of government expenditure, in its first full fiscal year of operation 2005-06. By May 2005, the pension was reaching 69,046 beneficiaries, or roughly 3.3 per cent of the total population of Lesotho. Roughly 60 per cent of recipients are women. At the time of its introduction the pension amount was almost exactly equal to the official national poverty line in Lesotho, set at M146 in 2002. On its return to power after the 2007 General Election, the government fulfilled an election pledge to increase the pension from M150 to M200 (US\$29) a month, a nominal one-third increase, or one fifth in inflation-adjusted terms. (Croome and Nyanguru, 2007)

A remarkable feature of the Lesotho OAP is that it is overseen directly by the powerful Ministry of Finance, rather than the social services ministry. For distribution of the pension, advantage was taken of the capacity of the Post Office service to use its countrywide network, at a very competitive rate. Funds are deposited by the Ministry of Finance into the Post Office Central Bank account in Maseru, from where Post Office officials, with military and police escorts, distribute them to some 300 pay points around the country. Advantage was also taken of the fact that, following the 2002 elections, most citizens possessed a voter registration card that could reliably be updated for use as a pension registration card since it had personal details that had been certified by the Independent Electoral Commission. Registered beneficiaries are given pension books to take to their local Post Office to collect their monthly pension. This system means that administrative costs are very low.

In a country characterised by deepening poverty and vulnerability, extreme income inequality, an HIV prevalence of 23% (third highest in the world), suffering from a drastic decline in remittance income along with adverse changes in trade regimes, the OAP is a life-line to older people, many of whom are responsible for the care of orphaned grandchildren. For 95% of recipients, the pension is the only dependable source of cash income. Given Lesotho's open economy, well integrated into South African markets, inflationary effects of the pension are not in evidence. Research suggests that around 70% of the pension is spent on food, but again the widespread availability in Lesotho of South African maize limits the upward pressure that the pension might exert on food prices. Money is also spent on non-food groceries, household items such as blankets and clothes, services (health, education, transport, funeral societies), assets (chickens and pigs) livelihood activities such as petty trading, and savings.

The Lesotho pension is now firmly entrenched as a right, with nationwide coverage of the over 70s. In contrast to the previous example, its operation emphasises simplicity, not least in targeting, and impact. At less than 2% of GDP, it has been shown to be affordable even in a country as poor as Lesotho. It has been shown to have positive impacts on food security, reducing the vulnerability of all members of beneficiary households. It reduces the stigma of poverty than older people have to bear, and increases society's respect for them.

It is tempting to see the pension as a social protection magic bullet. This it is not. Impact on poverty levels is minimal – few beneficiaries move above the poverty line. Development impacts are limited. In countries where reliable voter registration cards are absent and markets fragmented, there could be adverse impacts and/or higher costs. Inflation, especially in food prices, will erode the value of the pension as it has recently in Lesotho, suggesting that index linking should be considered. Yet Lesotho has certainly taken a bold step in the right direction, and created much interest amongst other countries in the region.

### **3. Agendas at work**

The RHVP case studies shed light on how the three agendas described above are expressed in the current drive towards introducing or expanding social protection systems in southern Africa. We recognise of course that the distinctions we draw here between 'technical', 'ideological' and 'political' approaches are somewhat artificial and stylised – there are overlapping objectives and multiple implementation modalities within most social protection interventions.

#### **3.1 Technical approaches: pilots and evidence**

Many social transfer initiatives in southern Africa are driven by international donors and NGOs. Donors have an interest in avoiding livelihood crises – much of the impetus for strengthening social protection in the region is driven by the failure of local governments and the international community to prevent the food crisis of 2001/02 – and in meeting the

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on poverty reduction – which is looking very challenging in most African countries. Many donors are supporting INGO-implemented ‘pilot projects’, with the objective of gathering evidence on impacts and best practice in design and implementation, as a prelude to broader support for national social protection systems.

This approach fits well with the modus operandi of INGOs, as these interventions are projectised, intensive, localised (a few communities or districts), participatory (e.g. they involve communities in targeting), and lesson-learning. Donors are wary of supporting rapid scale-up without evidence of efficacy and implementation capacity, as we have seen in the case of DFID in Zambia. Donors also face budget constraints and restrictions on long term funding commitments, which means they find it easier to support time bound, small scale, discretionary pilot projects.

### **3.2 Ideological approaches: principles and rights**

In this cluster are programmes that embody some notion of rights, claims or ‘entitlements’, being based on an implicit ‘social contract’ between governments and citizens – in stark contrast to interventions that are discretionary and implemented by unaccountable actors such as donors and INGOs. Government run social pension schemes are perhaps the prime example in southern Africa. Currently social pensions are operational in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland, they are being piloted in Zambia and are under consideration in Malawi. A crucial feature of social pensions is that they represent a recognition by society as a whole that older people deserve and need support, and this finds its expression in the delivery of regular and predictable social transfers to older citizens, which rapidly assumes the status of a ‘citizenship right’. For this reason, all five national social pension schemes in southern Africa are fully funded out of domestic fiscal resources – they are an intergenerational transfer from younger to older citizens – and, as discussed above, they are politically impossible to reverse once introduced.

There are other initiatives that embody elements of a rights based approach to social protection, such as efforts to mobilise civil society to campaign for a universal ‘Basic Income Grant’ (BIG) in South Africa and Namibia, or efforts to hold signatory governments to their promises to extend social protection in the ‘Livingstone Declaration’. Some of these efforts are driven by domestic civil society activism, but others are driven by external actors – certain UN agencies (e.g. UNICEF-supported national programmes for orphans and vulnerable children) and rights-oriented INGOs (e.g. the ‘Grow Up Free From Poverty’ coalition). Unfortunately, with the partial exception of Zambia and Zimbabwe, civil society is weak in most of southern Africa outside of South Africa, and has been slow to mobilise around the opportunities for advocacy and campaigning for social rights that the new social protection agenda offers.

Mobilisation to claim rights or entitlements from the state is an essential complement to ‘technical approaches’ to social protection, given that governments and donors are understandably wary of the irreversibility, heavy financial commitment and accountability that is inevitably associated with implementation at scale. Civil society needs to be equipped to fight the good fight!

### **3.3 Politics and patronage**

Social protection can become politicised by national ruling and opposition parties, especially in the lead-up to local or general elections. Politicisation is usually seen as negative interference, being associated with patronage based allocations of resources and with distortion of targeting procedures that should be technical, objective, needs based and politically neutral. In Zimbabwe there have been persistent accusations that food aid and other social transfers are being targeted at government-supporting communities and diverted away from areas that oppose the regime, irrespective of the severity and scale of need in

these communities. In Malawi and Zambia, input subsidies have been closely related to the quest for electoral advantage. In Zambia the ruling MMD party successfully countered the urban appeal of Sata's PF among urban voters during the 2006 elections, buying support from rural voters by pledging to increase the already substantial subsidy on fertiliser to 60%.

On the other hand, some forms of politicisation are not necessarily bad, since this implies that social protection has become an important item on domestic political agendas. The example of Lesotho's Old Age Pension is illustrative of 'positive politicisation'. The idea of introducing a social transfer for older Basotho citizens first emerged as a pledge by the Prime Minister during the 2004 election campaign and was implemented after the elections were won. Though the Old Age Pension proved to be a popular and effective programme (Croome and Nyanguru, 2007), the value of the grant was low and opposition parties seized on this feature during the 2007 election campaign, pledging to more than double the pension if they won power. The government was forced to promise to 'review' the pension if they were returned to power, which they were and did, immediately raising the monthly transfer as we saw above.

#### **4. Conclusions**

There are many plausible explanations for the rapid rise of social protection up the development policy agenda in recent years. Some reasons are valid and defensible: genuine expressions of humanitarian concern for people suffering from chronic food insecurity and malnutrition, or a commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger by 2015. Other reasons are more problematic and less defensible: development 'faddism', or 'flag planting' by donors and NGOs on 'boutique projects' that deliver social assistance to a few thousand people, creating temporary islands of privileged access to international charity in vast oceans of poverty and hunger. These initiatives generate positive publicity and useful 'lesson learning' about targeting, impacts of social transfers and so on, but they are unlikely ever to scale up into institutionalised national programmes that are government led, government financed and government implemented, because they were never 'government owned' from inception.

Moreover, these 'pilot projects' often bypass or even undermine existing government systems of social provision – for instance, incipient social welfare programmes that deliver social transfers to people with disabilities, war veterans and other locally designated 'vulnerable groups'. The usual justification given for this neglect is that African Ministries of Social Development or Departments of Social Welfare are so weak and under resourced (financially, managerially and in terms of qualified personnel) that they lack the capacity to deliver large scale social transfers efficiently to their citizens. A second argument is that African governments often lack the political will needed to invest in social protection, which Ministries of Finance dismiss as an expensive extravagance that merely creates 'dependency', so they need persuasive evidence demonstrating that social transfers are an investment that can generate pro poor economic growth and poverty reduction.

In response, we would ask the relevant donors and international NGOs three questions:

- 1) If government capacity constraints are the binding constraint, why not invest in building the capacity of Social Welfare departments, instead of continuing to run stand alone 'boutique projects' outside of government structures, using the significant technical and financial resources that these eternally-financed projects absorb?
- 2) If government institutions and structures are so inadequate, where does that leave assertions that the primary purpose of 'pilot projects' is to scale up and hand over these

interventions, to become permanent, institutionalised programmes – implemented by national governments?

3) If lack of political will is the underlying issue, how to explain successful government initiated social protection programmes such as the ‘Old Age Pension’ in Lesotho and Swaziland, which were not only designed, implemented and financed entirely out of domestic resources, but repudiated international donor opinion which dismissed them as ‘unaffordable’?

Instead of perpetuating an unhelpful dichotomy between pilot projects and government initiatives to deliver social protection to their citizens, it is time for convergence and harmonisation. Perhaps the most important lesson to emerge from the RHVP review of 20 social protection programmes in southern Africa is that initiatives that evolve out of domestic political agendas and respond to local conceptualisations and prioritisations of need are more likely to ‘succeed’ – in terms of their coverage, fiscal sustainability, political institutionalisation and impacts – than those that are based on imported projectised interventions. Even if government systems are under resourced, and even if government priorities differ from those of external actors (for instance, governments might favour input subsidies where donors prefer cash transfers), donors and INGOs should support home grown responses to poverty and vulnerability by national governments and local civil society movements. This requires identifying and strategically engaging with potential synergies between the complex combination of technical, ideological and political agendas that are driving social protection in contemporary southern Africa.

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