SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:

A WHOLE-SYSTEMS APPROACH TO PROSPERITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), Esping-Anderson theorised that most Western welfare states fall into one of three categories – liberal, conservative, and social democratic – each characterised by a specific configuration of state and market influences. A key difference between the regimes is the degree to which citizens exist within them as commodities and are able to determine their quality of life independent of market forces. In the decades since it was first published, Esping-Anderson's framework has often been a starting point for studies of welfare states and social protection, despite drawing on theories of political economy and state-building developed in, and largely applicable to, the global north.

Social protection is a central function of modern welfare states, yet it is defined and enacted differently across contexts, shaped by respective histories, political climates and institutions. Broadly, the term refers to the mechanisms and policies designed to mitigate vulnerability and shocks (Ellis, Devereux & White, 2009; ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2021; FAO, 2017; European Commission, 2020). A formal call for universal social protection by 2030, in support of Sustainable Development Goal 1.3, was made in 2019 by a coalition of national and multi-lateral partners including the African Union, the ILO, USAID and UNICEF (USP2030). This IGP working paper addresses social protection from a whole-systems perspective, exploring case studies from sub-Saharan African countries with their own histories of welfare policy and practice. The intersection of the climate emergency with changes in demographics, urban/rural life, technology and population health is creating a new landscape of vulnerability across the region, that presents social protection policymakers with a complex set of challenges. While there is a growing body of literature that explores how income support in particular can reduce vulnerability to climate-related risk, (Costella et al, 2023; Ulrichs, Slater & Costella, 2019; Etoka et al, 2021; Weingartner et al, 2019), we argue for a transformative approach. In response to new, intersecting vulnerabilities, and in light of historical injustice in the delivery of social protection, the mechanisms we implement today must be different. Social protection for the 21st century must not only mitigate risk but deliver the necessary conditions for prosperity. To do so, and to deliver sustainable justice on a social and planetary level, social protection systems must ultimately begin from a different perspective, operate proactively, and address the intersections between precarities.

2. SOCIAL PROTECTION: THEN AND NOW

There is no single historical narrative of social protection across sub-Saharan Africa, and colonial, post-colonial, and Indigenous systems have served different populations and purposes across space and time.

.2.1 THE COLONIAL-POST-COLONIAL CONTINUUM

Colonial social protection can be traced back to the introduction of social pensions in the early to mid-20th century. South Africa established a non-contributory pension scheme in 1928, and Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Mauritius followed suit in 1930, 1949, and 1950 respectively. These supports were initially offered exclusively to white settlers, and only began to be extended to black populations during formal processes of decolonisation in the second half of the 20th century. This process was highly political, as social protection measures gain strategic importance during periods of institutional instability. Independence struggles prompted elites to re-evaluate the paradigms that guided social policy, as they renegotiated their relationships with citizens (Lavers & Hickey, 2016).

The post-colonial expansion of social assistance and pension schemes was cut short by the debt crisis of the 1980s. The IMF and World Bank began lending to countries that were struggling under the weight of falling exports and the loss of bilateral aid money. However, these loans came with conditions: structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) mandated that countries receiving loans restructure their economies, ostensibly to ensure they were able to repay them. As many have argued, SAPs were first and foremost an attempt to transform developing economies to serve free-market economics. The scale-back of public services, in line with this agenda, had major implications for livelihoods, and has been well-documented in subsequent research. In Zambia for example, cuts to primary health care funding and the implementation of user fees brought a 60% drop in outpatient clinic visits, as those experiencing economic instability were deterred from seeking treatment (Packard, 2016). Meanwhile, local fertiliser subsidies in Malawi that had supported small-scale agricultural efforts were removed altogether, prompting a rapid decline in household food security (Devereux, 2010).

The structural adjustment period highlighted that when public services are reduced, livelihood security deteriorates with immediate effect. This reduction triggered a widespread crisis, as poverty levels rose and public infrastructure failed to mitigate the effects (Gibbon, 1992). No mechanisms or resources were left to deliver social protection in a state context, so social policy discourses shifted towards poverty alleviation in the form of social cash-transfer programmes. These were largely delivered by bi- and multilateral donors: the World Bank, UNICEF and HelpAge were pioneers in this area, closely followed by the ILO towards the end of the 2000s, in a bid to reach informal workers. Social cash transfer schemes across Africa took inspiration from Latin American programmes such as Brazil's Bolsa Escola, and Prospera in Mexico, which had proved effective at reaching those at the very bottom of the income distribution in a systematic and timely manner (Ojong & Cochrane, 2022). But this efficiency was achieved at the expense of investment in public services: by addressing vulnerability as a technical problem, rather than a structural one (Ferguson, 2015).

Cash transfers were highly targeted from the outset. They corrected for failures in the markets and reflected a neoliberal emphasis on liberating individuals from poverty, rather than addressing collective livelihood security (Hickey et al., 2021).

Importantly, they were strongly depoliticised in development discourses, as poverty was rendered a technical problem (Murray Li, 2007; Peck and Theodore, 2015). Depoliticisation in these terms is a familiar trope in post-colonial development practice that has served to legitimate foreign involvement in national policy through a devolved form of governmentality, at the expense of African political agency (Ndolvu-Gatsheni, 2015; Harman, 2010, 2012).

Cash transfer programmes, and colonial and post-colonial social protection provision in Africa more broadly, are marked by processes of policy transfer, by which knowledge and norms regarding policy, administration, and service delivery are transferred from one context to another (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). This usually takes place in two stages: first as an act of coercion, and then in a more voluntaristic capacity.

KENYA

Kenya was one of the earliest adopters of cash-transfer programmes, influenced by DFID, the World Bank and UNICEF. While the concept was marketed to government as a means of mitigating the effects of structural adjustment, the dynamics were eerily similar. From 2003 onwards, four schemes were established, each driven by a respective bi- or multi-lateral donor: the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, the Older Persons Cash Transfer, the Persons with Severe Disability Cash Transfer Programmes, and the Hunger Safety Net Programme (Ouma, 2020). The role- and agenda-setting powers of local politicians were limited in the name of mitigating political influence and bypassing clientelism. Only in the second phase did Kenyan officials begin to modify the programmes and their conditionalities to better reflect the country's political and economic landscape.

MALAWI

A similar scenario played out in Malawi, where two key transfer schemes were established between 2005 and 2007: the Food and Cash Transfer, and the Dowa Emergency Cash Transfer. Both were designed and implemented by Dublin-based NGO Concern Worldwide, with secondary funding from bi-lateral donors Irish Aid and DFID, and operated almost entirely independently of the Malawi government (Devereux, 2010).

ETHIOPIA

Cash transfer programmes took different forms across sub-Saharan Africa, however, and while donor influence often shaped their agendas, national governments and civil society organisations exerted considerable agency. Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), launched in 2005 to address the Millennium Development Goal for Poverty and Hunger, is Africa's single largest social protection programme. Through the provision of cash transfers rather than food aid, it sought to provide smallholders with greater autonomy over consumption patterns and stimulate local agricultural markets in the process. The PSNP was funded by a coalition of donors, among them the European Commission, the World Bank, USAID, DFID, and the Canada International Development Agency (Slater et al., 2006). Yet despite foreign influence, the Government of Ethiopia retained relatively strong ownership over the programme and sought to ensure that service delivery (which reached 8 million Ethiopians at its peak, equivalent to 12% of the population) was nationalised, rather than entirely donor-driven.

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is an outlier in the region. Relative to its neighbours, it has a more extensive network of social protection programmes that have been largely government-led, with considerable influence from civil society. These policies reflect the country's relative wealth, unique political landscape and strong civil society movements, which proved crucial to both independence and HIV/AIDS struggles. While still incomplete and unevenly extended, South Africa's social protection systems are rooted in a rights-based, developmental discourse, founded on a contract between citizen and state that was established in the constitution. This approach harks back to the anti-apartheid struggle, when the ANC deployed social assistance discourse to redress historical injustices and inequities (Devereux, 2011). In recent years CSOs have fought successfully to extend child-support schemes to older children, lower the age of eligibility for social pensions to 60, and reduce barriers to accessibility for refugees and people without formal documentation.

2.2 THE SOCIAL PROTECTION PARADIGM

Despite significant variation, colonial and developmental social protection provision across the region largely operated within a pro-market paradigm, characterised by "a refusal to challenge the economic instruments and philosophies that generated the crisis that it wishes to fix" (Adesina, 2011). Multilateral involvement across the region continues to reinforce this logic, as agencies such as the IMF exert considerable influence over public spending and service provision. In response to sustained criticism of the Fund's austerity measures, and growing evidence of their harmful effects on the health of populations and societies (Kentikelenis et al, 2015; Labonté & Stuckler, 2016; Thompson, Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2017; Stuckler & Basu, 2013), the IMF introduced 'social spending floors' in 2019 (Oxfam, 2023). These are minimum social spending targets that were designed to protect people from the sharp edges of austerity, but have proven vague, inconsistent, and inadequate compensation for the harm caused by other IMF policies (Oxfam, 2023). Many of the spending floors were jettisoned altogether as soon as they contradicted pro-austerity conditionalities. As of March 2021, 85% of the 107 loans negotiated by the IMF responding to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated plans to implement austerity measures. One of the most common stipulations made to secure these loans was cutting public spending that might otherwise go to public services (Oxfam, 2021). The IMF's 'Strategy for IMF Engagement on Social Spending', published in June 2019, strongly implies that spending on social protection, health and education is a key policy lever for addressing inequality, but also for promoting growth; put differently, distributional goals must be compatible with market-based ones (IMF, 2019; Engström, 2022).

KENYA

In April 2021, Kenya was granted a 2.34 billion USD loan, to be delivered over 38 months through a combined Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF). The IMF's programme for Kenya demanded rapid fiscal consolidation through increased tax revenue and cuts to public spending. Central to these cuts was a cap on the growth of public sector wages. Overall, spending in this area (which included healthcare, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic) was set to drop from 4.3% of GDP in 2021/21 to 3.7% in 2022/23. Within these parameters, the IMF committed to social spending floors of 15% of government expenditure, which stayed stable throughout the period. However, after adjusting for inflation, this amounted to a major cut to Kenya's social ministries. The State Department for Social Protection, Senior Citizen Affairs and Special Programmes saw a cut of 13% between 2021/2022 and 2022/23, while the Ministry of Health's budget fell by 6% (Oxfam, 2023).

In its review of Kenya's loan programme, the IMF identifies rising inflation and climate change as key threats to economic and livelihood security. Unseasonal temperatures and drought have devastated agriculture production, causing food insecurity and malnutrition to spike, and increasing inter-communal conflicts over land. But the Fund makes no reference to the need for expanded social infrastructure amidst this new landscape of vulnerability. Elsewhere in the report, it argues that where social services do need to be scaled up, such as in the case of affordable housing and water supply, this should be done in partnership with the private sector (IMF, 2022).

UGANDA

Like Kenya, Uganda agreed to a major IMF loan in June 2021, totalling 1 billion USD. Social spending floors were successfully implemented over the loan period, though much of this expenditure was directed towards targeted social assistance funds, rather than universal social protection policies. Only nominal fiscal space was allocated to broader social programmes, and major cuts were made to compensate. This stropped the hiring of new doctors, teachers and other public sector workers, and hampered the expansion of social infrastructure more broadly (Oxfam, 2023).

The loans negotiated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic continue a longer history of IMF involvement across Africa, and reflect a trade-off between social protection spending and fiscal restraint. African examples from structural adjustment to the present day highlight the fallacy of this calculation, and it is only becoming clearer as the climate crisis intensifies. The IMF model, which bears similarities to those implemented by other bi- and multilateral donors, is preventing the development of strong and universally accessible public services.

2.3 A PARALLEL HISTORY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

The 'social protection paradigm' discussed so far obscures a far richer history of Indigenous social protection practices, well established across sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas European-style welfare systems were designed largely to correct for failures in the labour market, Indigenous practices have for several centuries been addressing livelihood security more holistically, through a network of community-level initiatives. South African *stokvels*, for example, are an informal form of social security where a group of 12 or more community members make regular cash contributions into a shared pool. Each member then has a turn to use the total of the pool to cover the cost of food, clothing, or furniture. Burial associations across Botswana and South Africa are another example of informal mutual aid, where members pay a lump sum to join, and are then entitled to claim money, goods, and services towards a funeral when a loved one dies.

Unlike the welfare states of Beveridge or Bismarck (Tshoose, 2009), or the social protection paradigm that dominates contemporary development agendas (Adesina, 2011), informal social protection initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa are often underpinned by an explicit articulation of solidarity and interdependence. In South Africa this is expressed in terms of *ubuntu*, which translates roughly to 'a person can only be a person through others.' The Kenyan concept of *harambee* means to 'all pull together', to place the needs of the collective above those of the individual. These expressions of solidarity exist in various iterations across African contexts, informing social protection initiatives that do not merely provide financial assistance in times of crisis (as donor-led cash transfer programmes do), but support individual and collective livelihoods through a deeply 'social' approach (Tshoose, 2009). This is not a rights-based approach to social protection but a responsibilities-based one: it is deemed everyone's responsibility to ensure collective wellbeing (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) argue that Ubuntu brings the 'human face to every aspect of life… using human methods to achieve human goals.' This shapes the delivery of social protection. According to Metz (2016), goods or services must be distributed in a way that 'esteems relationships of identity and solidarity,' and programmes are therefore more likely to be participatory. Cooperative agriculture initiatives such as *letsemas*, for example, are underpinned by the recognition that small-scale farming is made easier and more productive by some degree of collectivity. Alliances of four or more families come together to devise duty rosters and share the responsibilities of feeding and supporting working teams during periods of cultivation and harvest. The family is arguably one of the most enduring social protection institutions; informal social protection is often delivered through networks forged along family or kinship lines (Patel et al, 2012; Gelsdorf, Maxwell & Mazurana, 2012).

Principles of solidarity and interdependence have developed political capital and been expressed in institutional contexts. The Kenyan notion of *harambee,* for example, was instrumental to post-colonial nation building and *Ubuntu* was deployed widely during South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. The latter came to signify the transition from structural injustice and individualism to a more 'human' style of government, and was enshrined in the constitution of 1996 (Tshoose, 2009). However, the degree to which these concepts have informed formal state-led social protection is limited.

2.4 WORKING PAPER SCOPE

The parallel histories of social protection across sub-Saharan Africa highlight the imperative to decolonise policy. There is a powerful body of work exploring this in theoretical terms. Particularly compelling are calls for a shift from social protection to state-instituted 'transformative social policy' that addresses the structural factors that give rise to vulnerability and inequality in the first place (Mkandawire 2004, 2010, 2015; Adesina 2011; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). But the gap between theory and policy has yet to be bridged.

The IGP is addressing this shortfall. Informed by Indigenous practices, we argue for a decolonial, whole systems approach to social protection that acknowledges how the drivers of livelihood insecurity interact. Our work redefines prosperity, not as a function of economic growth but as a place-based, emergent feature of a complex assemblage of elements, resources, and embedded interactions over time (Moore & Woodcraft, 2022; Moore & Mintchev, 2021). The siloed policies that continue to dominate the social protection landscape are therefore unlikely to bring about necessary transformation. Our framework for social protection changes the terms on which it is delivered. This means broadening our focus from poverty alleviation to prosperity, rethinking how our economies are run, and providing support pre-emptively, not only to the ultra-poor, but to those in the 'missed middle' of wealth distribution. Social protection, in this context, has the power to deliver sustainable justice on a societal and planetary level.

3. ADDRESSING A CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF VULNERABILITY

The need for a decolonial approach to social protection is increasingly urgent as sub-Saharan Africa undergoes an intensive structural transformation, driven by shifts in demographics, climate, technology, and health. There is widespread recognition in social policy circles that these changes are taking place, but few are looking at how they intersect. This is a significant oversight, because while the shifts exist in global context, the character of their intersection is both unique to Africa and specific across each African country. Social protection systems need to be radically rethought in order to support people through the resulting structural transformation.

3.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

The region is experiencing the world's last, and largest, population boom. According to UN estimates, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is set to increase from 1 billion in 2016 to 2 billion in 2046. By 2100 this figure will have surpassed 4 billion, and the region will account for 35% of the global population. This boom will have major implications for demographic structures: today's youth will be the largest cohort to ever enter the workforce, and by 2065 they will have reached retirement age. An ageing population of this scale will need comprehensive elderly care, health care, and pension schemes.

This population boom coincides with rapid urbanisation. By 2050, Africa will be 56% urban, and the urban population of Kenya in particular is expected be more than three times higher than it was in 2015. This process of urbanisation is to a large extent taking place in 'urban villages': the interface between cities and rural areas (OECD, 2017). This is driving demand for more extensive infrastructure, governance, and public service provision, and intersects with existing issues concerning employment.

3.2 CLIMATE

The climate emergency poses a growing threat to the African continent. Temperatures have already risen by more than 1 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels and are predicted to exceed 2 degrees of warming by the last two decades of this century (Trios et al., 2022). Rising temperatures combined with falling rainfall levels, ocean acidification and widespread biodiversity loss will interrupt agricultural processes, with major implications for the economy, food security, and population health. Governments will also need to have strong contingency plans in place to address the shocks caused by extreme weather events and sea level rise.

3.3 HEALTH

Sub-Saharan Africa faces a rising burden of chronic diseases and the emergence of new syndemics (Singer et al., 2017). This shift is commonly framed in terms of the epidemiological transition model (Omran, 1971), first coined in 1971 to explain 'patterns whereby pandemics of infection are gradually displaced by degenerative and man-made diseases as the chief forms of morbidity and primary cause of death. In 2015, cardiovascular disease, common cancers, respiratory conditions, and type two diabetes accounted for almost a third of all deaths in the region, and they are set to overtake communicable diseases as the leading causes of disability and mortality within the next decade. The rising burden of chronic conditions brings with it a need for long-term medical and social support, and a major increase in disability adjusted life years (DALYs), yet less than 20% of regional health budgets is currently allocated to addressing this issue (de Graft et al., 2010).

3.4 TECHNOLOGY

Innovation and expansion in digital technology has been called the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' (4IR) (World Economic Forum, 2022; Brookings, 2020), and presents both opportunities and risks. Changes to Africa's digital landscape cut across all the areas discussed so far – demographics, health and climate – though labour and agriculture are two areas where it could have the biggest impact. The ITC sector across the region continues to grow, and as of 2020 had generated 1.7 million direct jobs, in both formal and informal settings. This is part of the broader expansion of 'industries without smokestacks': agroindustry, tourism, ICT-based services, transport and logistics. Farming still accounts for 60% of total employment, however, and as climate change threatens crops and food security, the sector will be placed under even closer scrutiny (Brookings, 2020). The future of both work and productivity are therefore closely tied to Africa's digital transformation.

Developments in the digital space are already transforming citizenship and democratic participation, enabling the formation of new networks and ways of sharing information that are, ostensibly independent of mainstream media or political institutions (Bosch & Roberts, 2023). However only 24% of the African population currently has access to the internet, and while this gap is narrowing, uneven access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy mean these opportunities are unequally distributed. Similar risks are notable on an economic level. In an analysis of platform economy growth across sub-Saharan Africa, Rodima-Taylor (2022) equates the extraction of value through data to colonial land-grabbing. She argues that new networks of private capital and financial technology are exploiting local practices of *ubuntu* and replicating colonial dynamics. In a region where notions of citizenship are already contested (Mamdani, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2006), and economic inclusion is shaped by disparate identities and traditions, these inequalities are particularly significant.

While the potential for positive change in agriculture, health, governance and economics is high, expansion in the digital space both exacerbates historic inequalities and forges new ones. Existing research explores the implications of digital inequalities for gender (Anwar, 2022; Jos, 2021; Rogan & Alfers, 2019), citizenship (Roberts and Bosch eds., 2023), education (Jantjies, 2020; Oyedemi, 2011) and employment (Anwar, 2022; Anwar & Graham, 2022). However digital expansion has the power to determine how vulnerabilities across all these areas intersect; it will shape both the problems that social protection systems need to respond to, and the ways in which social protection is delivered. Social protection systems need to be sensitive to these intersections and address arising inequalities.

4. HOW CAN SOCIAL PROTECTION BE RECONCEIVED TO BEST ADDRESS THIS LANDSCAPE?

Social protection was firmly on the agenda for the Indian presidency of the G20, and the expansion of coverage to the gig and platform economies, as well as sustainable financing, have already been identified as key areas of focus (Government of India, 2023; Sakar and Bhowmick, 2023). These are important and timely developments, but we are yet again seeing the confinement of social protection to questions of employment and the market.

Debates about the effectiveness of cash transfers have intensified in recent years. There is convincing evidence to suggest that unconditional cash transfer schemes can have both protective effects (Farrington and Slater, 2006) and productive ones (Daidone et al., 2019; Frankman, 2010). However, more recent analysis, such as Hajdu et al's study of South Africa's Child Support Grant, finds that programmes of this kind fail to provide the structural changes necessary to secure livelihoods in the long-term (2020). There can be no debate that the poorest households need cash supports, though cash transfers alone cannot replace public service provision as means of delivering social protection (Gelsdorf, Maxwell & Mazurana, 2012). This is because social protection has a broader purpose than the support of individual livelihoods. It needs to adapt to sub-Saharan Africa's changing landscape of vulnerability and help manage the next phase of structural transformation. The prevailing social protection paradigm, powerfully theorised in existing scholarship, must be replaced with a truly transformative approach (Adesina, 2011). Here, we provide a framework for what this could look like, and argue that it must fulfil three key requirements:

4.1 BEGIN FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Development, as imagined through western political and economic structures, has failed to deliver livelihood security for people and planet. To address the problems of the 21st century without replicating the power imbalances and dynamics of the 20th, social protection programmes in Africa must begin from a different perspective. This means subverting the epistemic hierarchy inherent in colonial and post-colonial discourses about modernity and development that regard Africa as a source of raw, unprocessed data, rather than complex and inventive responses to both global and local problems (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). New approaches to social protection, unconstrained by existing, failing, macroeconomic orthodoxy, are desperately needed, and many powerful examples already exist across the continent. Change in complex systems must be shaped through connecting knowledges, livelihoods and assets, first into purposeful problem definition – what needs to be done here and now – and then into a set of potential solutions (Moore and Mintchev, 2021). National and global policies must therefore be informed and driven by Indigenous actors, and delivered through a framework that facilitates collaborative policymaking between community and national-level actors, to best support livelihoods in a context-specific, sustainable, and effective way.

Universal Basic Services (UBS) facilitate policymaking on these terms. UBS is a collection of core public services that are free at the point of need, and work to deliver a common floor to society by guaranteeing a minimum standard of life to all

(Percy, 2021a, 2021b). UBS doesn't stem from any particular culture or economic tradition. Rather, it pays attention to what kinds of environments stimulate human productivity, in both a qualitative and quantitative sense, and creates the conditions for societies to thrive.

Public services are not immune to politicisation. In Uganda, the ruling National Resistance Movement government has more than tripled the number of electoral districts since it came to power in 1986, ostensibly to facilitate basic service delivery. However, this has been highlighted as a powerful means of extending political patronage (Green, 2008; Gelsdorf, Maxwell & Mazurana, 2012). UBS is a collaborative framework, that fulfils Adesina's (2023) call for social protection systems based on the principle of subsidiarity: the power to decide what these services are and how they are provided is devolved to a community level, while national and regional governments, and actors such as the African Union, can act as norm-setting institutions and provide much of the infrastructure for service delivery. Collaboratively solving such problems within communities derives from shared purpose, problem definition, defined strategies clear pathways to deliver and social solidarity; all the while building the capacities and capabilities to tackle the next challenge (Moore & Mintchev, 2021).

UBS is an inherently critical framework that thinks beyond the structures and hierarchies that have defined colonial and post-colonial social policy and development across the continent. It therefore provides a viable blueprint for transformative social policy, as developed by Adesina (2011, 2019, 2023) and Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004). UBS begins from a different perspective, one of decolonial practice and epistemic justice, and carries these principles through to the delivery of public services (Moore & Boothroyd, 2023).

4.2 OPERATE PROACTIVELY

Preventative action is often lauded in the context of social protection, but so far this has failed to translate into action. Dominant policy frameworks such as cash transfer programmes serve to fill gaps: they kick in to mitigate the effects of extreme poverty without changing the structural conditions that give rise to such poverty in the first place. They foreground the primacy of the market in the distribution of resources and correct for its failures by design (Mkandawire, 2004, 2010).

Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) argue convincingly for a 'transformative' component in social protection that addresses the power imbalances that create and sustain vulnerability. This could mean additional support for trade unions that enable socially marginalised groups to access and develop rights to 'livelihood enhancing assets'; or changes to regulatory frameworks to better protect vulnerable people from discrimination and abuse. Yet Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's proposal, made nearly two decades ago, focuses largely on the social conditions that pattern vulnerability.

UBS goes a step further, working broadly with the principle of 'predistribution'. Through a network of universally accessible public services, it creates a proactive environment for societies to meet their needs. These services look different across contexts, but begin with the same question: how can we create the necessary security for humans to maximise their capacities and capabilities, and respond to adversity in the best way possible? At the core of UBS is the notion of a social wage – the value of a public service to an individual citizen, expressed as a replacement for financial income (Portes et al., 2017). Rather than relying on monetary subsidies, UBS uses the architecture of the state to provide citizens with an expanded programme of public services. Working proactively in this way would mean that social protection systems would become net-positive, producing more social goods than they consume, saving resources and expanding capacities and capabilities (Moore & Mintchev, 2021).

Crucially, UBS is underpinned by a focus on prosperity rather than poverty alleviation. A prosperity-led directed towards targeted social assistance funds, rather than universal social protection policies. Only nominal fiscal space was allocated to broader social programmes, and major cuts were made to compensate. This stropped the hiring of new doctors, teachers and other public sector workers, and hampered the expansion of social infrastructure more broadly (Oxfam, 2023).

4.3 ADDRESS THE INTERSECTIONS

The nexus between precarities and their respective determinants is well theorised across the social and environmental sciences (Whittle et al, 2020; Link and Phelan, 1995; Pellow et al, 2015; Dedeoglu, 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Brosemer et al., 2020; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020). Yet social protection systems continue to address individual vulnerabilities in a highly targeted, siloed way. In sub-Saharan Africa today, the climate crisis, shifts in demographics, digital infrastructure and health overlap in new and intensified ways, giving rise to an increasingly complex landscape of vulnerability. These intersections are specific to locale, shaped by respective histories and geographies (Moore and Mintchev, 2023). Social protection for the 21st century must therefore go beyond poverty alleviation and work instead to secure the livelihood matrix. It needs to be fundamentally place-based, acknowledging how the drivers of livelihood insecurity interact, and equipping people with the capacities and capabilities to move beyond them.

African scholarship in this field increasingly argues that the strength of social policy lies not in individual instruments but in the synergy between multiple instruments (Adesina, 2011; 2020; Ouma &Adesina, 2019). Put differently, only by acting systemically can we address the intersections between precarities effectively. This approach overlaps broadly with Munasinghe's (1992, 1994, 2019) framework for 'sustainomics', which builds on the findings of the 1987 Bruntland Commission (UN, 1987). These analyses defined sustainable development as a 'process for improving the range of opportunities that will enable individual human beings and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time, while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental systems' (Munasinghe, 2019). UBS shares these aspirations but moves beyond the development framing. We argue instead for progressive social protection systems that aim higher, towards human and planetary prosperity.

UBS operates holistically by design, addressing the intersections that make up a sustainable and secure livelihood. Unlike monetary subsidies, or vertical welfare interventions, universally available public services provide flexible and need-specific support, reducing the basic cost of living, and 'raising the floor' of what citizens can expect from their state. A social wage, in this context, frees people to make decisions about what wellbeing means to them. It empowers them to care for their communities according to their own definitions and practices, and in turn increases social cohesion by emphasising the 'principles of solidarity, collective responsibility and shared needs' (Portes et al, 2017). UBS frames livelihood security as an interdependent phenomenon, emphasising that the provision of high-quality support is of mutual benefit to society as a whole. This support is provided holistically, through an integrated approach tying together housing, food, information, transport, and utilities.

4. CONCLUSION

One of the first challenges of writing about social protection is defining it. Social protection has been enacted in different ways across time and space, but dominant theorisations largely address Western-style welfare states. In sub-Saharan Africa, Indigenous practices have long predated colonial and national-level interventions, which since the structural adjustment period have been dominated by cash transfer programmes. This 'social protection paradigm' is not working; it operates reactively, and addresses vulnerability as a technical problem, solvable within a market context.

In 2019, the World Bank launched the Human Capital Project, an effort to 'create the political space for national leaders to prioritise transformational investments in health, education, and social protection' (World Bank, 2019). Despite a cursory nod to the need for investment in essential service delivery and 'policy-based financing', the project's commitment to social protection is limited to cash transfers. This approach is flawed: two decades on from the rise of cash transfer schemes, they have failed to provide the lasting structural change necessary to secure livelihoods. We urgently need a new form of social protection to address the changing landscape of vulnerability, expand capacities and capabilities and create the conditions for societies to thrive.

Universally available public services, free at the point of need, are a powerful alternative to the cash-transfer schemes that continue to dominate the social protection landscape. These services should begin from a place of epistemic justice; their design and delivery determined by the communities they serve, in response to unique practices, needs, and challenges. Integrated networks of public services operate proactively, addressing the intersections between precarities

and securing the livelihood matrix. Ultimately, this approach to social protection raises the bar from poverty alleviation to prosperity, accommodating for its relationality by design.

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