

ESP has robust systems

I would like to thank Robinah Nakawunde for her interest and support for the Expanding Social Protection (ESP) Programme (**The New Vision Saturday, October 29, 2011**). At the same time, I would like to allay her fears; that lists for beneficiaries will be inflated with “ghosts”; that money for the elderly and vulnerable people will be stolen and proof that money actually reaches the targeted beneficiaries through mobile money will be hard to verify.

On the first point, as Robinah probably knows, we are currently piloting two types of direct income support; the Senior Citizens Grants and the Vulnerable Family Support Grants. Both approaches have been specifically chosen as they are more resistant to fraud than other forms of targeting.

The Senior Citizens Grants is relatively straight forward; all people 65 years and above (60 years in the case of Karamoja) automatically qualify. The challenge here is how to establish people’s correct ages. So far, our existing mechanisms tap into available verifiable and genuine documentation such as Baptism cards, voters cards, old graduated tax tickets, etc. that provide a basis of computing people’s age. Of course some people have their birth certificates.

The second grant we are piloting is the Vulnerable Family Support Grants. This grant targets households with the least capacity to work and /or highest number of dependents (known as Labour Capacity and Dependency ratio targeting). This includes households with high numbers of people aged 65 or above, and / or high numbers of children below 15 years, orphans, as well as those households with people with severe disabilities. Again, these characteristics are relatively visible and straightforward to verify, compared to many other forms of beneficiary identification. Households are scored according to their capacity to work and / or number of dependents and all data is fed into the ESP computerized system (MIS) based in Kampala, which identifies the households to be targeted.

For both grants after the list of beneficiaries in a particular area is generated, a village meeting is convened to verify from the residents in the village that they actually know the people on the list and they believe they fit the criteria to benefit. Those on the list and are found not to meet the eligibility criteria at this point are removed. Those who were omitted and yet they are eligible will be included in the list.

As a further back-up, a Grievance System is a core part of the Programme, ensuring that beneficiaries have a clear process to follow to raise any complaints about targeting or other concerns with the programme. This Grievance System is highly publicized to ensure that all beneficiaries are aware of it and its procedures.

The point is that it is hard for anyone to include a name that cannot be accounted for and that has not gone through due process to the list of beneficiaries.

On the fears that the money will be stolen, I would like to inform Robinah that a private sector company has been contracted to deliver payments directly to beneficiaries and cutting edge technology is employed to ensure accountability. This way, it is only the final beneficiary who actually touches money. Along the way there is no real cash, until it reaches a final beneficiary who uses their SIM card and personal password to withdraw the money.

And by the way, beneficiaries don't need to own a phone to access their money. All they need is their ATMcard- sized SIM that the Programme has given them. They don't need personal cell phones to access this money; all they need to do is go to the MTN mobile money agents who have public phones which read their SIM cards. And these have been brought nearer to beneficiaries to ensure that they don't travel long distances to get their money. Verification that the money reaches beneficiaries is provided through an MIS based detailed monthly reporting and accounting system managed by the Programme's central office in Kampala.

All said, it is important to observe that the Programme has spent time developing system and these systems being piloted have already been tested and beneficiaries are receiving the cash in three pre-pilot districts of Kiboga, Kaberamaido and Kyenjojo . Nonetheless, the whole Programme being a pilot, we can we will closely monitor, learn and adjust from lessons and evidence coming out from implementation. But experience from other countries indicates that such payment systems and the targeting mechanisms being used are less open to abuse than other approaches.

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