

Social Protection is important for Uganda

By George K. Beekunda

Two weeks ago, the Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development, launched a new programme – Expanding Social Protection. Since then, there has been a lot of vibrant discussion in the media (and the public sphere generally) on what exactly Social Protection is and if Uganda needs it. In writing this, I aim to explain what Social Protection is about, and to show its importance and that Uganda needs it.

Social Protection is not at all a new phenomenon in Uganda. The poor and vulnerable have always been cared for in Ugandan society through family and community systems. But with increased urbanisation and modernisation, this is no longer a reliable safety net. A working family man in Kampala may be able to assist his mother in the village only a few times a year, owing to his own varied financial demands. An aging widow, who lost her children on whom she could have depended in her advanced years, ironically finds that it's her role to bring up the orphaned grandchildren. If she should pass on, these children then have to fend for themselves. The bond that once had communities looking after each other has thinned and traditional social protection systems are under threat.

So while Uganda has made good economic progress over the past two decades, there is a section of society increasingly being left behind, sometimes in destitution. Indeed, 31% of the population still live below the poverty line. Of these 26% are chronically poor – unable to afford the basics of life. Chronically poor people are likely to be born into poverty, live their lives in poverty and die in poverty. Their children are also likely to inherit this poverty and carry it on. Studies show that over 7million Ugandans are chronically poor!

Recognising the dire situation, many African countries are putting in place institutionalised and formal Social Protection systems – specifically social assistance grants which provide regular, predictable grants to poor and vulnerable households. These social assistance grants support individuals and households to prevent, mitigate, manage and overcome life's risks and vulnerabilities. In fact, Social Protection is a key element of the African Union's Social Policy Framework, to which Uganda is a signatory. Examples of countries with formal social protection systems include, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa. Up till now, Uganda has been one of the only two countries in the East African Community that did not have a formal Social Protection system.

The Expanding Social Protection (ESP) programme has now been launched. It is a unique opportunity in Uganda's development process, targeting a distinctive group of people who are most vulnerable and poor and cannot access other social protection programmes already in place. NAADs programmes offer little opportunity to that old man or disabled mother who is unable to till the land (if they have it) and cannot afford to hire labourers. UPE may be next door, but for child-headed families, with no income to buy the mandatory exercise book required by the school, it is still an unattainable dream. The Expanding Social Protection programme complements these already existing initiatives. It will deliver non-contributory pensions, or old-age grants, to older persons, and vulnerability grants to households with limited labour capacity. If it achieves sustainable results, it will usher in the national planning and budgeting processes a provision for allocating to older

persons, persons with disabilities, orphans and other vulnerable children. This will be in line with the specific outcomes of the National Development Plan.

Social assistance grants, the form of Social Protection that Uganda is now adopting, have been proven to bring about several benefits. In addition to reducing household poverty, these include improved enrolment of children in school and reduced drop-out rates, increased use of health services, improved nutrition (because people are enabled to buy food, or because, now that they have alternative income, they can spare food from their farms that they previously sold to take care of other pressing needs) and increased investment in productive assets. Indeed, cash transfers can stimulate local economies and bring widespread benefits to all, beyond the improvement in the welfare of direct beneficiaries and their families. Very importantly too, cash transfers will allow the poor and vulnerable people to make their own choices on how to improve their situation – a chance at security and opportunity with dignity.

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