

Rivalling Social Protections

The interacting politics of agricultural input subsidies and social cash transfers in Malawi and Zambia

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PhD thesis summary

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Addressing poverty through social policy is not just a question of resources, but also one of politics. In the absence of sizeable and organised working classes in most Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, no social groups have been able to generate enough bottom-up political pressure to demand broad-based social policies. Instead, domestic social policymaking is highly centralised and best characterised by ongoing negotiations between domestic political elites and international donors.

This thesis interrogates the politics of social protection, which refers to those social policies that directly address the vulnerability of poor and marginalised citizens. Broadly speaking, domestic elites and international donors have varying interests in social protection and are embroiled in ongoing competition. Many political elites in SSA emphasise the importance of kinship-based and community-based social protection and the promotion of self-reliance. Moreover, governments often have redistributive policies in place that fulfil functions of social protection, political distribution, and stabilisation, such as agricultural, fuel, or food subsidies. The aid sector, by contrast, has strongly advocated for replacing these policies with more individualistic and rights-based forms of social protection, including social cash transfers and pensions. The success of the aid sector in doing so has been substantial, but it varies by context.

This thesis investigates how this competition influences the ability of domestic governments to reduce poverty through social protection. It does so by taking the perspective of interacting politics, meaning it investigates in detail how domestic elites and donors negotiate policy outcomes amid multiple competing options. It does so by comparing the cases of agricultural input subsidies (AISs) and social cash transfers (SCTs) in Malawi and Zambia. AIS programmes annually offer chemical fertiliser and hybrid seeds to smallholder farmers at highly subsidised prices and have been a major form of distribution from the governments of Malawi and Zambia since independence. SCT programmes distribute a regular (often monthly) and unconditional small cash sum to a targeted group of poor and vulnerable citizens. They have been introduced by international donors in many SSA countries, including Malawi and Zambia, since the early 2000s. This thesis identifies that AIS and SCT programmes interact and often compete on the fiscal, ideological, electoral and clientelist levels.

The cases of Malawi and Zambia offer a productive comparison because they have several striking similarities. They are both electorally competitive, face high levels of poverty and food insecurity, and are highly dependent on donor financing. At the same time, their social protection outcomes strongly differ. With ups and downs, the government of Zambia has increasingly embraced and institutionalised SCTs, while maintaining its commitment to a large AIS programme. The government of Malawi has more systematically opposed SCT institutionalisation, while the AIS programme has been subject to high degrees of volatility in scale, costs and implementation.

This thesis combines monograph-style Chapters and article-style Chapters. Each Chapter compares Malawi and Zambia, but differs in its level of analysis and the specific programme. Chapter 2 offers a literature review of the political economy social protection in Eastern and Southern Africa. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate SCT and AIS-related policy reform in the pre-2020 and post-2020 periods, respectively, and seek to investigate the drivers behind the diverging trajectories. Chapter 5 zooms in on the effects of donor-driven SCTs on domestic politics, while taking a cross-country perspective with five cases. Chapter 6 investigates the local politics of AISs regarding a specific group of interest, namely members of parliament. Chapter 7 offers overall conclusions.

Theoretically, the thesis builds on two ‘schools’ identified in the literature on the politics of social protection in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA). The *realist* school, which derives its name from the critical realist research tradition, examines how structural conditions, political processes, and ideational influence different levels of expansion and forms of social protection programmes. The *developmentalist* school takes a more radical and institutionalist position, arguing that current SP programmes in SSA have a strong neoliberal character and are too limited in scope to support transformative development. The thesis offers three main theoretical contributions. First, it argues that the interacting politics of competing social protection programmes is an important lens, offering a clearer perspective on policy drivers and long-term trajectories than focusing on one programme in isolation. Second, it argues that donors use soft power and hard power in complementary ways, and one needs to analyse these in conjunction with the ideological and fiscal constraints under which domestic elites operate. Third, it argues for the importance of understanding long-term reform trajectories that go beyond the “noise” of short-term fluctuations, which are a feature of the competitive nature of social protection reform.