Negotiating coherence in the social protection systems of South Africa and Uganda

Abstract

Policy coherence has gained considerable normative appeal as a remedy for fragmentation and inefficiency in contemporary social protection policies in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in practice, coherence remains ambiguous, allowing the concept to accommodate multiple agendas across donor and state communities. Its diverse interpretations and applications have often resulted in broad generalisations that social protection systems in the region are fragmented, while obscuring variations in how coherence and fragmentation coexist. Social protection literature has only implicitly explored the concept within broader scholarship on universalism versus targeting, institutionalisation, and coordination. In mainstream public policy literature, the focus has been on aligned policymaking and optimal policy mixes. Both strands of scholarship do not sufficiently account for how coherence is conceptualised and negotiated in complex social protection systems, nor for how institutional reform processes produce enduring patterns of coherence and fragmentation. This gap motivates the question: *How do actors and institutional reform processes shape coherence and fragmentation in the governance of social protection systems in South Africa and Uganda?* The thesis reframes coherence as a contested, uneven process and asymmetrical outcome of historical trajectories and actor interpretations across legal, policy, and administrative governance functions. The research applies a comparative sociolegal approach drawing on historical institutionalism and policy coherence traditions to the contrasting cases of South Africa and Uganda. Data were sourced from 67 expert interviews with international and local policy actors in the two countries, conducted in 2023. Other sources of data included statutory law and court judgments, policy documents and reports. The empirical findings reveal that although the South African and Ugandan systems have evolved along contrasting historical paths. Persisting institutional legacies have produced system constellations that are stable on the one hand, but not amenable to alignment with newer forms of provisioning on the other. Coherence is consequently mobilised through the asymmetrical deployment of policy, legal, and administrative authority. In South Africa, social protection policy visioning is dispersed horizontally across nine departments without a central policy, while in Uganda, it is vertically vested in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. This asymmetry has varying implications for how coherence is negotiated and the pace of reforms. Where judicialisation (reliance on courts for policymaking) is prominent, as in South Africa, coherence and fragmentation are shaped along legal lines, producing integrated rights-based subsystems. In donor-dominated settings such as Uganda, the system, particularly social assistance, tends to be fragmented along target groups to accommodate multiple donor interests. In both settings, these power constellations have produced enclaves of coherence within fragmented policy landscapes. This thesis, therefore, advances the argument that policy coherence cannot be conceptualised simply as a binary process of aligned policymaking or as the outcome of optimal policy mixes. The findings underscore the critical need to rethink the generic models of coherence, which ignore the centrality of diverse actor rationalities in negotiating and mobilising coherence.