Social protection in Zambia – whose politics?

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Abstract

Social protection is supposed to be part of a contract that government concludes with its citizens. Even if most countries are still far away from instituting social guarantees and legally backed entitlements, the minimum expectation is for social protection to be defined, funded and driven by the country itself. The reality however often looks different. Even in countries that have been hard hit by the HIV AIDS epidemic and that are confronted with a growing OVC population, overwhelming rural poverty and where growth has increased rather than levelled off inequality, social protection has not always been the political answer. This has left academics and practitioners, in particular in the Western world, startled. Attempts have been made to explain why social protection has not surfaced as a budget line in a number of countries and has neither been actively demanded by the population nor actively sought by policy-makers. Often however, these attempts have not captured the rather complex politics in the countries in question. They have turned the Minister of Finance into the sole representative of political will, have equated low budgetary allocations with the political unattractiveness of the design of the programme and have forgotten that even social protection programmes in the Western world were not born overnight. The appropriate role of donors and civil societies in this political economy remains equally unclear. On the basis of other drivers of change studies, this study takes a closer look at the political dynamics behind social protection in Zambia and examines whether the observed stagnation in social protection is a result of stakeholders in Zambia not adopting policy-recommendations made, a result of the poor quality of these policy recommendations or a wrong assessment of progress.

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1. Introduction

Looking at the considerable socio-economic ripple effects of the HIV AIDS pandemic, the impact of the triple F crisis, the difficult transmission from economic growth to poverty reduction and the increasing pressure to show progress towards the millennium development goals, social protection would seem an obvious choice as a policy instrument in low income countries. The number of articles produced, the number of conferences and trainings held and the volume of foreign aid now being invested in social protection, give the impression that social protection is the new star on the development horizon. However, in some of the countries clearly most in need of a robust response to chronic poverty, scepticism regarding social protection appears to prevail. This despite exposure visits to Latin America, tailor-made training courses, much generation and communication of evidence regarding the many positive impacts of social protection initiatives and a series of social protection initiatives by the World Bank, the AU, UN and now recently the EU.

Zambia – in particular – has been frequently critiqued for the lack of government commitment to social protection and, especially, social cash transfers. Zambia's first social protection strategy dates back to 2005. It proposed different interventions for poor incapacitated households and poor low-capacity households (Government of the Republic of Zambia 2005). The coordinating Ministry behind the strategy, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS), was given the task of creating a holistic strategy on the basis of set of fragmented, erratic and grossly underfunded services to ensure that programs and new initiatives such as the social cash transfer scheme were well implemented and funded. There have been small victories, such as creating a budget line for the social cash transfer scheme, deploying more staff and winning over allies in the persons of some Members of Parliaments and a few previously opposed Ministers, but progress has been slow. It has taken the Ministry almost 3 years to scale-up further than the initial five pilot districts and development partners mostly foot the bill.

Many academics and development practitioners have tried to find answers as to why social protection has not taken a stronger root in Zambia, starting as early as 2005 with a ‘drivers of change’ study for Zambia (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005), studies featuring Zambia in 2008 (MA Candidate 63015 2008), in 2009 (Habasonda 2009; McCord 2009) as well as 2010 (Devereux, Davies et al. 2010; Devereux and White 2010; Niño-Zarazúa, Barrientos et al. 2010). Is the stagnation that we currently observe a result of stakeholder s in Zambia not adopting policy recommendations made, and if so, why? Is it possibly the result of recommendations being inadequate or are we, in fact, wrong to conclude that there has been no progress in Zambia? To capture the complexity of political will in Zambia, this study aims to take a first pass at dissecting the notion into its different components, using the framework developed by Hickey. This is briefly introduced in Section 2. This framework is then applied to assess in what way these different components can explain the political will behind social protection in Zambia (Section 3), critically reflecting on the criticism voiced by different authors. The paper then draws some lessons learned from this analysis (Section 4).
2. The magic bullet of political will

Commentators have been comfortable in using “lack of political will” to explain the lack of national funding and advocacy for social protection in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the term has different connotations for different stakeholders and provokes diverse policy-recommendations. Hickey's basic framework for understanding political will in the context of social protection distinguished between political institutions, political actors and agencies, socio-economic forces and the global dimension (see figure 1). Political institutions refer to the rules of the political game, including election rules, the nature of the political regime and ways for citizens to influence the decision-making process. Political actors are members of the overall political regime who operationalize and contest its (formal and informal) rules and include political elites, the executive, legislators, political parties, etc. Socio-economic forces encompass public attitudes as well as aspects of socio-economic development (degree of urbanization, inequality, social fragmentation) of a country, and global actors and discourses refer to donor practices and policy trends in the international arena.

Figure 1: Framework for political will in social protection

![Figure 1. The links between politics and social protection: a basic framework](source: Hickey (2007))

The model is interactive: political will is necessary to get social protection off the ground but the design and impact of social protection then have repercussions on the political processes and actors and may themselves contribute towards strengthening or weakening subsequent political will for social protection. The design and impact of social protection programmes also influence socio economic forces, leading, for instance, to a change in public attitudes towards the poor; they may also impact on donor perceptions and shape the latter’s engagement with social protection programming.
For our analysis, we will prioritize those areas of the framework most subject to criticism in previously cited studies, in particular, the nature of analysis and discourse on poverty, the limited knowledge base, the identity of national agents for change and the over-dominant international drivers, as well as the actual design and processes. We will therefore analyse in more detail:

- **Institutional factors**, examining the extent to which political will and the potential lack of it is really endemic to social protection and which systemic factors render the strengthening of political will extremely difficult

- **Discourse & thinking on poverty**, assessing whether political elites prioritize the productive poor in pro-poor policy making and whether the general public consents

- **Knowledge base**, analysing whether the pilots have lived up to their promise of informing evidence-based policy making

- **Drivers of change**, seeing in what way agents have done justice to their role and whether there are any new levers of support that have not yet been identified

- **Design & implementation**, scrutinizing in what way these may have stalled political progress by letting the best be the enemy of the good.

3. **The path of the bullet in Zambia**

Critiques of the processes and actors promoting social protection interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa have suggested that, “the extension of social protection can be thwarted by the lack of attention to domestic political and policy processes” (Niño-Zarazúa, Barrientos et al. 2010:16). We would argue that this is not an accurate representation of the situation in Zambian from 2003-2010. Rather, we contend that recent analyses of social protection in Zambia have taken insufficient account of the broader policy and programming environment of the country but have shone a spotlight on social protection in such a way as to make it appear a somewhat misguided and contrary case.

Several attempts were made by the cooperating partners (CPs) supporting social protection in Zambia – such as DfID, GTZ, ILO, Irish Aid, UNICEF and the World Bank – to analyse to analyse political processes in order to see how social protection might best be fitted into the political agenda. A key document was the Drivers of Change for Social Protection analysis in 2005 (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005). This married the more familiar Drivers of Change approach\(^2\) with Hickey’s conceptualisation of the politics of social protection in Africa. The document still impresses 6 years later in its systematic

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review of possible actors, discourses, institutions and processes that might support or oppose systematic pro-poor interventions – in the form of social protection. Its recommendations were sensible, if not always realisable by effort or strategy alone, depending as they did – ultimately – on convincing powerful gatekeepers who could choose neither to listen nor engage.

The report particularly criticized as a barrier to social protection interventions, the tendency towards a 'massification of poverty' - building on the World Bank Poverty and Vulnerability Assessment (2005) -, the complex and insufficiently understood language of social protection and a MCDSS with low human, organisational and financial capacity. Together with other major analyses of poverty at this time, from the Drivers of Change of Pro-Poor Growth (Duncan, Macmillan et al. 2003) to the Poverty and Vulnerability Report (The World Bank 2005), it argued that donors should step up to the task of pushing for a stronger focus on the poor and vulnerable. The study encouraged donors to make use of existing institutions, to influence the levers of power in engaging with powerful social and economic sector ministries and the Minister and Ministry of Finance, to ally with civil society and research institutions and prioritize monitoring and evaluation. The Constitutional Review Committee as well as the new pilots were seen as possible entry points for generating more political will.

In response to the weaknesses identified and recommendations made, we examine the nature of the policy process, programming and politics in Zambia and 'domestic' responses to poverty up to this point.

3.1 Institutional features

It is important to understand the institutional forces at play at the time in Zambia since these set the stage for policy-making. At the same time, the interaction of formal and informal policy making dynamics makes analysis of institutional incentives much harder. We argue that this interaction causes a degree of built in resistance to institutional change. We will now analyse to what extent Zambia’s political regime might be generally characterized as pro-poor, which political spaces offer entry, whether citizens have an opportunity to hold decision-makers accountable and whether the concept of social contract is of analytical assistance in the Zambian context.

Putting social protection into the broader context

Social protection should not be examined in isolation but viewed in the broader context of pro-poor policy-making. We argue that in the context of Zambia's long term economic decline from middle income to low income status and the resulting (and concomitant) structural adjustment processes, a policy and funding void emerged around responses to poverty which persists today. Poverty alleviation came third to growth and investment in health and education (and growth is limited by the need to maintain the prebendalist status quo of generating rents for the elite). Despite the fact that Zambia subscribed to a National Poverty Reduction Action Plan as early as 1997 and appointed one Ministry, MCDSS, as the focal point for poverty reduction interventions, poverty and vulnerability
Responses by government have been piecemeal, underfunded and projectised, and often delivered through 'social fund' based initiatives, NGOs, CBOs, faith based organisations and/or humanitarian and food security interventions.

Neglect of the poor is also reflected by the 2008 Social Protection Expenditure Review which estimated that only 0.1% of GDP was spent on social assistance (International Labour Office 2008). The budget that MCDSS has for poverty alleviation and social protection measures is equally telling: in 2010, the budget ceiling for MCDSS was fixed at 0.5% of total government revenue (about US$15.5 million). The allocation for the food security packs, a national program to support poor small-scale farmers, represented just 13% of this small budget (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2010) while that for the in-kind transfer provided by the Public Welfare Assistance Scheme (PWAS) – also supposed to be a national program – amounted to 7% of the entire MCDSS budget. Compared to these national programs, government allocations of about 5% of the overall MCDSS budget to the social cash transfer scheme is less nominal than it appears. For a nationally funded social cash transfer scheme that goes to 10% of all households (for calculations, see: International Labour Office 2008), government would have to more than double the present budget of MCDSS for the program alone. Alternatively it could decide to spare one third of the fertilizer support budget and the deal would be done.

These insights show that Zambia has been a difficult terrain for launching large-scale pro-poor interventions.

**Personalised decision-making**

There were developments on the social protection fronts, but whenever these constituted major policy shifts, a careful examination reveals the highly personal and opportunistic nature of such moves. One example from the health sector is telling in this regard: until October of 2005, rural health unit user fees, introduced in the 1990s, seemed a fixture. Although a new, somewhat populist and ambitious Minister of Health had taken office, the culture on financing in the Ministry of Health was pro-user fees, mainly because of the revenue raised at local level, (implicitly) to constrain demand in an overstretched health system and due to a focus on a reforming the system as it stood.

The reform trigger was actually a cocktail party, where the Minister, Honourable Sylvia Masebo, appalled by the fact that her gardener had not been able to afford a consultation due to the high cost of user fees, asked the Head of DfID if any work was being done on user fees in the health system. DfID had been leading on a set of Terms of Reference for a fee removal evidence generating pilot and the DfID social development adviser told Masebo it would be 2 years before the results were available. Masebo however wanted the proposal in the January 2006 budget. DfID were able to rapidly identify a consultant who had worked in fee removal in Uganda to summarise the experience in a non-technical paper and to brief the Minister in preparation for Cabinet discussions. In the end, the ‘killer fact’ came from an economist at the University of Zambia who produced evidence that the cost of collecting fees was equal to, if not greater than, the cost of the
revenue raised once the costs of central government systems of recording and accounting were included. Funds to smooth the policy change were provided by DFID.

This experience was much discussed in social protection circles in Zambia and stakeholders were eager to learn more about how to advance policies in a retrenched environment. The problem is essentially that this was an idiosyncratic combination of factors and events that is difficult to reconstruct: a visionary political champion, motivated by a personal encounter with poverty, teamed up with a donor who was already working on the topic and could mobilize support quickly and using ‘free’ political space - this minister was something of an outsider in the ruling party structure of the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) so was perhaps rather freer in her thinking than those more deeply embedded in the party structure. It might therefore not come as a surprise that the same Minister often speaks in support when cash transfers are discussed in Parliament.

Political spaces

What remained true then and now is that unofficial policy space is often more important and a lot more difficult to influence. Political economy analyses suggest that,

‘Zambia has long been characterized by a disconnect between its formal institutional structure, and the informal ‘rules of the game’. The country has a full array of formal institutions characteristic of a liberal democracy, and all of them function to some degree, but the actors within them do not necessarily operate within a norm of rule-boundedness.’ (Levy and Palale 2007: 10)\(^3\)

From independence onwards, important constituencies in Zambia, either ethnic, linguistic, regional or political elites or a mixture of all, have been balanced through access to patronage rents of one form or another. This has maintained the unity of the state but also served to concentrate and consolidate political power. These 'mutual guarantees of economic and political support within social networks' inhibit the functioning of the 'mechanisms of performance-based accountability' (Posner and Simon 2002: 332) and do not provide easy entry points for those seeking from outside this system to influence policy. The seismic political and economic shifts from the 1990s onwards did little to reduce the informal policy space. The move to multi-party democracy, continuing economic decline, high indebtedness and the introduction of the 1990s Washington Consensus package of reforms were accompanied by splits in the governing MMD and the almost total disintegration of the opposition party UNIP (United National Independence Party).

Rents had to be generated and the 'economic dimensions of development policy making became increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of creating and allocating the rents necessary for political management' (Levy and Palale 2007: 8). This meant that unofficial political-economic imperatives were as important as official ones but even less likely to be pro-poor. According to availability, these rents shifted from employment in or

\(^3\) The following discussion draws on a widely shared report authored by Levy and Palale, with contributions from Taylor and Simutanyi which built on a series of workshops on governance and development strategy with the World Bank Zambia Country Team in 2007.
diversion of resources from parastatals, the bureaucracy or ministerial posts to access to resources in land, the spoils of privatisation and procurement during the different decades. Thus, both official pro-growth and unofficial pro-rent generation dynamics limit the space and the paths along which the poor might be able to make themselves heard and in this way complicate the inception of national social protection interventions.

**Accountability**

In Zambia today political accountability remains limited. Policy makers do not face the consequences of bad or inconsistent policy-making to its full extent except at key moments (such as former President Chiluba’s bid for a 3rd term) which call for a major civil mobilisation. It is not clear to what extent politicians who fail to deliver are voted out of power. If a member of parliament, for example, depends on his relations with the leaders of his party for the resources and opportunity to be elected, then his constituents have much less influence than the formal structure suggests. A study examining the effects of economic conditions on support for the incumbent in Zambia in the 1991 and 1996 elections at subnational level found that 'noneconomic factors such as urban-rural location and ethnic background to have been at least as important as economic factors in shaping voters behaviour.' (Posner and Simon 2002: 319) They also found evidence that along the familiar exit/voice/loyalty spectrum (Hirschmann 1970), exit – in terms of not voting/abstaining – was still, as under the single party system, regarded as a valid strategy.

Most Zambians do not see their Members of Parliament (MPs) outside of the campaigning season. Anecdotal evidence of this was provided by the state of shock induced in MPs by exposure to extreme poverty, after an MCDSS organised field visit to social cash transfer recipients in Monze district. However, evidence of a small movement away from prebendalist voting patterns is taken as a positive development by Posner & Simon (2002) as, it is hoped, a sign that incumbents will increasingly be judged on their performance in office. This makes us more hopeful for the future of social protection as well.

**Towards a social contract?**

The issue of a social contract has been posed as a useful framework in the politics of social protection in Africa. However, here its greatest contribution to the debate is in showing the degree to which such a contract is absent. The description above of the coexistence of official and unofficial policy spaces illustrates that the majority of the population is excluded from influencing both spaces. The fact that there is one social pension pilot in Zambia does not mean that in this area the government has entered into a social contract with its people. A social contract has to be recognised by both sides and, to some extent, enforceable.

There has been a measure of success in Zambia in responding to extreme poverty: there is now a social protection strategy, a social welfare policy to be re-submitted to Cabinet this year, a social security policy, a social protection chapter in the National Development
Plan and an initial budget line. Yet, Zambia is well known to be good at agreeing and developing policies but poor at implementation (The World Bank 2004; Levy and Palale 2007). There is certainly nothing that allows citizens to take government to court as in South Africa. Yet, even in South Africa, following the injustices of apartheid, with a governing party, a powerful president, an active civil society and a constitution supporting the progressive realisation of rights to social protection, the Ministry of Finance has fought every attempt to extend these rights through the courts. Mostly it has lost. In Zambia, one of the key issues in the constitution debates concerns whether a country as poor as Zambia can risk promising even education let alone the progressive realisation of social and economic rights. The fact that the new constitutions currently with Parliament, has included a right to social protection, might make us more optimistic with respect to the longer term future of social protection.

3.2 Discourse & thinking on poverty

Elites

A mixed picture regarding views on poverty emerges from the political elites as well as the broader public. Earlier studies highlighted that fears of welfare traps and irreversible political commitments dominated the elite (the top 3-5% of the population) views on poverty. On paper, at least, elites prefer helping the productive poor as a tool to fight poverty (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005; Hickey 2007). However, there is evidence that the picture has changed in recent years. McCord argues that in social protection in sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a 'reworking of the concept of the ‘deserving poor’ in recent years, based on the assumption that households with available labour have the potential to generate income, regardless of labour market realities.’ (2009: 1)

There is still resistance in the Ministry of Finance and among some MPs to a cash transfer to the poorest 10% on grounds of fiscally sustainability and growth objectives (Habasonda 2009; McCord 2009). But a closer look shows progress towards a more nuanced view within the Ministry of Finance (MA Candidate 63015 2008; RuralNet Associates Limited 2008), a richer debate on social protection in Parliament and social protection advancing from a side chapter to the 5th National Development Plan to a right in the new Constitution.

We would therefore like to challenge the social protection regime typology by Niño-Zarazúa et al (2010), which concludes that governments in the Middle African countries

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4 The previous constitution did not grant full socio-economic rights. They even restricted basic rights such as the right to education, claiming financial and administrative incapacity to do full justice to it. The new constitution has a provision for socio-economic rights with a specific clause on social protection:

67 (1) Each person has the right to access social protection, including, if the person is unable to support themselves and their dependants, social assistance for that person and dependants of that person.

(2) Parliament shall enact legislation to regulate the provision of social protection.

such as Zambia favour policies for the productive poor while a greater concern for the 'unproductive/deserving' poor is discernable in the Southern African model.

In Zambia we find that targeting falls short of any international measure, whether for those who are suffering from chronic and extreme poverty or who hover around the 'normal' poverty line, as the previous budget figures have shown. In addition, are the political cultures and attitudes across the Southern and so-called Middle-African countries so fundamentally different? Historically, social protection schemes in the former apartheid regimes were originally targeted at their white populations. The slow and unequal extension of entitlements to all racial groups under apartheid regimes has been argued to be a means by which the regimes further consolidated power and policy. Directing funds to the 'bantu' economies inhibited migration to urban areas and aimed to stimulate their stagnant economies. It also helped to present a less inhumane face to the outside world (Pelham 2007).

Today, not to invest in the poor when funds are (arguably) available would be political suicide in South Africa, which also has the most vibrant and motivated civil society on the continent plus a majority parliament and president who represent the impoverished majority. This, combined with a functional constitutional court, means that citizens have rights which they have been supported to claim, as the Grootboom court case exemplified in 2000. Nor is it surprising that we see similar patterns emerging in the other southern African countries. South Africa’s close neighbours (Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland) share a small geopolitical world, mobile migrant worker populations, middle income status, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and extreme inequality. We see that these factors were much more influential than different attitudes towards the various categories of the poor.

**Public opinion**

Do Zambians not care about the incapacitated poor? We argue here that ordinary Zambians do – as much as they can afford to - and show this in their daily actions through, for example, assistance to poor family members, taking in orphans, sending remittances or participation in faith based care organizations. This is also confirmed by a small political attitude survey,\(^6\) administered among the urban population in Lusaka, students at the University of Zambia and the rural population of the district Monze, that explored how Zambians understand 'the poor' and which response to poverty they find acceptable.

When asked about the individual's duty and capability to work, the majority thought that supporting oneself through work extremely important, and that the majority of people were in a position to work, as demonstrated by table 1. Opinions were more divided on the question of the acceptability of receiving money without working for it. The median respondent is neutral for the urban and student sample and positive that it is not humiliating for the rural sample. This suggests that while there is limited belief in the ability of some not to work due to age, sickness or other caring obligations, these answers

\(^6\) For more information about the methodology and more findings, see Schüring, E. (2010). Strings attached or loose ends? The role of conditionality in Zambia's social cash transfer scheme. Kiel, PEGNET.
also show that a cash transfer without a work obligation, would not be completely unacceptable (Schüring 2010).

Table 1: Opinions about the importance and feasibility of labour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is humiliating to receive money without working for it</th>
<th>People who don't work become lazy</th>
<th>Everybody in society can and should work</th>
<th>Work is difficult to combine with caring obligations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban Students Rural</td>
<td>Urban Students Rural</td>
<td>Urban Students Rural</td>
<td>Urban Students Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>41% 34% 66%</td>
<td>34% 21% 24%</td>
<td>23% 13% 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>13% 23% 5%</td>
<td>13% 13% 15%</td>
<td>18% 12% 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>46% 43% 29%</td>
<td>54% 66% 61%</td>
<td>59% 75% 60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Attitude survey with urban and rural sample & students

When attitudes towards the degree of “deservingness” of the poor were investigated, a majority of urban and student respondents were clear that wrong government policies and an absence of opportunities for the poor are important causes of poverty (table 2). Rural populations focused on the impact of HIV/AIDS and a lack of opportunities. Only among students were the mindset or lack of initiative of the poor considered as main drivers of poverty. For the urban as well as rural sample, more structural factors dominate as the potential causes of poverty, which should translate into lower resistance towards state-funded social assistance programs.

Table 2: Opinions about the causes of poverty (Percentage who agree with the cause of poverty / Ranking of poverty causes according to the percentage who are in agreement)

| Lack of opportunities for the poor | 80% 2 | 66% 3 | 65% 2 |
| Lack of initiative of the poor | 42% 6 | 56% 4 | 42% 5 |
| Mindset of the poor | 47% 5 | 68% 2 | 39% 6 |
| Wrong government policies | 81% 1 | 80% 1 | 45% 4 |
| Wrong donor policies | 52% 3 | 43% 6 | 22% 7 |
| External circumstances | 39% 7 | 28% 7 | 63% 3 |
| HIV AIDS | 51% 4 | 44% 5 | 80% 1 |

Source: Attitude survey with urban and rural sample & students

Another positive precondition for a social assistance program to those that are not economically active is that the majority of rural respondents (89%) would be willing to support even those who cannot give anything in return, at least in the short term. Respondents of all samples also felt strongly that the government had primary responsibility to take care of the poor. No other stakeholders, ranging from the family to the community to the church and NGOs received such a high agreement rate. This expectation is at some contrast with the reality of the ‘residual non-developmental state’

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7 Question was not posed to urban respondents.
as Zambia is characterized in the drivers of change study (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005). In addition, the percentage of participants in the attitude surveys who, when asked to imagine themselves in the position of a policy maker, would not give any form of support was negligible.

Despite the fact that these attitude surveys are not nationally representative, they suggest that there might be more support for a programme directed at the incapacitated than previously believed. More important here is that the extent that citizens can voice their interests and place active demands on government is highly limited.

3.3 Knowledge base – getting the right message out to the right people

Merging science with reality

Evidence remains necessary but not sufficient for policy making. A robust and transparent knowledge base is vital for sound policy-making, but there is no guarantee that policymakers will make use of the information generated, as the example of Nicaragua showed (Moore 2009).

In Zambia, numerous studies have been commissioned to assess the impact of social cash transfers (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services and GTZ 2007; Tembo and Freeland 2008; Tembo and Freeland 2008; Wietler 2008; Hichaambwa 2009), operational efficiency with regard to targeting (Watkins 2008; Watkins 2008); payments (Langhan, Mackay et al. 2008); incentives (Mbandama and Musonda 2007); conditionality (Schüring 2010); institutional arrangements (RuralNet Associates Limited 2008) or the scheme as a whole (Devereux and Wood 2008). Much effort was given to ensuring the process was transparent as well as credible, data and studies were shared with a wider audience and areas to be improved were stressed as much as achievements. Additional internal audits as well as a fiduciary risk assessment (Hawkins and Mugala 2008) were conducted to react to concerns expressed by Ministry of Finance. The pilots have consequently been used to build an evidence base for Zambia as recommended in the ‘drivers of change’ study (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005). Findings attested that the social cash transfer scheme had positive effects on beneficiaries and their communities. The studies on the operational effectiveness confirmed that transfers were neither used for the wrong purpose, nor were they going predominantly to the wrong people.

The challenge is, however, that policy makers may not base decisions on evidence, in particular the “true believers” as Prichett (2002) calls them. The former Minister of Finance in Zambia, a “true believer” that cash transfers would either be captured or misspent, appears to have relied on his personal experience with a few cash transfer recipients in his home district, rather than examine the broader and more positive evidence. It is therefore unlikely that a randomized broad-scale experiment would have been the tipping-point. While evaluations are informative for design purposes, help counter critical arguments, can inspire other countries in the region and are of importance to sustain a program once political will has built up, it is unlikely that an impact evaluation alone can change the political dynamics in Zambia.
Market social protection in the right way?

Governments and CPs have been criticized for not finding the right channel of communication with respect to social protection. Habasonda (2009) hints at a lack of understanding about the program from the side of government and also notes that there was little public debate due to the relatively low transfer amounts. Looking at the parliamentary debates in 2010 on social cash transfers, we note that despite the many communication events noted above, certain misconceptions persist, mainly about dependency and affordability. This clarifies that continuous workshops, trainings and a regular information flow about the goals and methods of social protection are needed. This is normal in most sectors in Zambia as capacity building, technical training and government reforms continue.

Other authors such as Niño-Zarazúa et al. (2010) criticize donors for not emphasizing the growth potential behind social protection, selling it as a poverty reduction intervention and thereby putting off African elites. In Zambia, an active dialogue with Ministry of Finance about the economic effects of social protection was sought at an early stage and the economic spin-off effects were highlighted and supported with national and international evidence as far as available. Table 3, showing the opinions of the wider public, also demonstrates that growth is not the only factor that matters (Schüring 2010). While the majority of urban respondents chose growth policies, the majority of students opted for a policy mix.

Table 3: Opinions about whether interviewees would prioritise economic growth, redistribution or both as a policy-maker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistribution</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of observations</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Attitude survey with urban sample & students

Finding the right language is crucial in addressing the concerns and fears of the Ministry of Finance and also to correct misperceptions that social transfers are counter-productive. However, there is a real risk that one might oversell the concept of social protection and/or be unrealistic about the budgetary implications and difficult allocation decisions faced by governments.

Although we can identify an economic impact from social cash transfers aimed at the incapacitated, the lack of capacity of the recipient households and the low sums

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transferred necessarily limit the economic impact. The primary target is human capital, particularly that of children trapped in chronic poverty. If the intervention identified is to enhance the productivity of 'vulnerable but viable' households, then one should anticipate a stronger economic impact. The goal of a particular intervention must be made clear because if all social protection programs are classified primarily as programs to promote growth, they will be assessed against other productive programs, and with each other, which might work to their disadvantage. This would take us back to growth with no protection for those least able to participate.

Secondly, funding for social protection needs to be brought into context. While the ILO (2008) has advocated that a minimum package of universally acceptable benefits would be affordable – social assistance to the 10% poorest households plus a universal pension would cost less than 1% of GDP – we still need to realize that even a budget representing close to 1% of GDP effectively means a significant budget increase for countries that mobilize about 25% of GDP as government revenues.

3.4 Drivers of change – going the right way?

When it comes to drivers of change in the area of social protection, papers have recommended civil society to step up their efforts, donors to tone down their interventions and Ministries of Social Affairs to leave the field to the more powerful players.

Civil society needs to step up

Civil Society in Zambia is a diverse group of organizations, active in lobbying for the poor and vulnerable, for improved democratic processes, for women’s rights and in delivering a host of services on the ground. At community level, particularly through volunteers from faith based organizations, their members carry out much of the home based care for the incapacitated that the state does not provide or struggle to identify income generation activities to try and strengthen fragile and inadequate livelihoods. The larger, better funded and network organizations play a role at national level. Mass movement has only been generated at crucial moments in the democratic evolution. In between, from the point of view of social protection, sporadic pressure has been exerted on the government by organisations such as the Jesuit Centre for Theological Research or the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction for a greater focus on poverty reduction (Petrauskis 2007). Formally speaking, civil society has a consultative role in the Sector Advisory Groups and Technical Working Groups of the Joint Assistance Strategy but this has not been fulfilled as originally envisaged. Civil society is also invited to engage with the development of National Plans but this role too is insufficiently formal to permit much influence.

In challenging civil society’s failure to provide national leadership on social protection, we need to develop a more sophisticated and dynamic understanding of the limitations of civil society in a country such as Zambia. Comparisons with South Africa or even countries such as Kenya or Bangladesh are not helpful. The rump of the middle class and
absence of a pro poor activist elite has meant that Zambian NGOs are almost entirely dependent on funding from external sources. Over the last few years, there have been significant declines in funding as bilateral and multilateral donors switched their attention and resources away from civil society and parallel systems and towards trying to strengthen government. Thus, civil society engagement is curtailed by lack of funds and funds are curtailed by donor strategies. Many excellent NGOs are struggling to survive and must follow donor enthusiasms rather than expect to find funding for their own agendas. Civil society has also been undermined at the margins by less scrupulous ‘suitcase NGOs’ set up during this period. The NGO Bill, passed in 2009, has limited NGOs’ room for manoeuvre as well, introducing a government dominated NGO registration board which approves or denies establishment or mandatory re-registration of NGOs.  

What the funding gap and government’s assault on NGO independence meant in practice for social protection is that the influence Civil Society could and can bring to bear in Zambia is highly constrained. Politicians and civil servants know that NGOs and networks do not represent large blocs of easily rallied and irate voters. Thus the lament in the “Social Protection in Africa - Where next” paper that civil society has been treated as junior partners or subcontracted service providers is all too true, NGOs and civil society are indeed junior partners at best in the eyes of government and some donors. Even the Africa civil society Platform to Social Protection with a chapter in Zambia, founded in 2008, has yet to come to life. Thus, in Zambia, civil society organisation face limited possibilities to influence policy-making on poverty despite their long-standing demands for a more transparent and less corrupt government that cares about the poor.

**Donor taking too much of the initiative**

Have donors taken too much of the initiative in social protection? Let us reverse the question to establish what role we expect donors to play in order to ensure that the interests of those without a voice are taken on board. Our finding is that donors as a whole barely took a sufficient initiative in a policy void that was damaging to the poor and vulnerable, and that donors had also led in other similar policy and programming voids, for example, in promoting a response to HIV&AIDS or gender inequality. While there is always a risk that the best is the enemy of the good, donors in social protection had a mandate of their own to push for a focus on the poorest and more vulnerable. In addition, donor support has not always been detrimental to the process of improving national service delivery. Long standing donor engagement in the Ministries of Health and Education show these ministries in Zambia today are in a better shape than they were twenty years ago (even and especially if this means that grand corruption can be identified and is dealt with more swiftly than in earlier years). A strong engagement with donors has brought funds needed for capacity building, infrastructural development and material resources.

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9 [http://www.ms.dk/sw139035.asp](http://www.ms.dk/sw139035.asp)
10 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10331717](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10331717)
It is true that donors have taken initiatives in social protection in Zambia according to more than one agenda and that may not have fostered consistency in policy-making and ministerial ownership. GTZ, DfID and Irish Aid supported a cash transfer project aimed at helping elderly carers and AIDS orphans through targeting 'incapacitated' and the 'labour constrained', UNICEF with DfID and Irish Aid funding has pushed for a set of 'emergency' five year universal child grant programmes in the districts with the worst outcomes for child survival, HelpAge and the ILO seemed at times to regard social pensions as the only true way to establish a framework for social assistance (and are now working primarily with the Ministry of Labour that has this mandate).

In their favour, it must be stated that CPs made extensive use of official policy space, particularly through the Technical Working Groups (TWG) that fed into the Sector Advisory Group (SAG). Despite at times erratic meetings and low-level representation from other key Ministries, the SAG, the TWG and the CP meetings were slowly institutionalised within the MCDSS and became useful arenas for widespread discussions on responses to the different forms and levels of vulnerability and poverty with other parts of the ministry and with civil society.

We argue, therefore, that without the support of donors, poverty and social protection would not have risen on the agenda of those who make decisions. Although the shift has not been dramatic, the role of MCDSS has been strengthened and its mandate has gained greater recognition. The support was even more welcome given the unintended consequences of donor harmonization, which limited access to the better resourced social sector ministries such as Education and Health.

**Appropriate institutions**

Choosing the appropriate institutions for a particular intervention is key to ensure capacity, the right skill-set and sustainability. Whether to work with existing or new institutions has been much debated in academic and practitioners’ circles. There is a tendency to advocate for a ministry with more muscle than the Ministry of Social Affairs, which has the mandate but not necessarily the political clout. The reason, of course, that Ministries of Social Affairs are usually highly resource constrained is directly related to the fact that poverty-reduction and social protection do not enjoy high priority.

To shift a social transfer program to a different institutional home pre-supposes an interest in the recipient for such an inter-sectoral adoption. This does not seem to hold for any of the social grants in Zambia for the Ministry of Finance or the office of the Vice-President. The Zambian Minister of Finance was among the few Ministers of Finance absent at the regional Livingstone conference on social protection and was reluctant in 2007 to even sign a grant agreement with donors for social cash transfers scheme for which the MCDSS was lobbying hard.11

Furthermore, social protection interventions at a time of alignment, harmonisation, division of labour and delivering results should be about promoting systems and

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11 The South African example helps us to realize that this is not an abnormal occurrence.
supporting a broader Ministry of Social Affairs' mandate, rather than elevating a single intervention. Micro-credit, public works, community projects as well as the food security packs are all housed by MCDSS and would lose out if social grants were managed by a different Ministry. This suggests that a move to a more powerful Ministry for SCTs might not be the most sustainable strategy.

**The government – homogeneous, static & representative?**

Most critics of the failure of social protection bemoan the lack of political will of government. Hidden here is an assumption that government is a) an homogeneous and static body and b) represents the will of the people. Whilst we have argued that (b) is not true, our description of a top down and personalised political elite needs to be further deconstructed (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005). When talking about the Zambian government, there are, of course, different ministerial mandates as well as a ministerial 'pecking order' (for example, the MCDSS comes 19th in terms of allocations, just before the Cabinet). It would probably help the debate on political will to deconstruct this notion of 'the government' into different actors.

MCDSS, initially seen as a more passive actor in the social protection scene in Zambia (Barrientos, Hickey et al. 2005) has turned into an active driver of change (Devereux and White 2010). The Ministry has made numerous attempts to engage actively with critics such as its colleagues at the Ministry of Finance. Looking at the nature of the Parliamentary Debates led by the Minister of MCDSS in 2010 on the social cash transfer scheme\(^{12}\), MCDSS increasingly comes across as an informed and determined Ministry rather than just a strong ally to the CPs as characterized by Devereux and White (2010). Similarly, the once baffling language of social protection is now handled with relative ease.

The debate also overlooks that several MPs have recognized the political potential behind the social cash transfer scheme and demonstrated keen interest in the scheme being extended to their constituency. Add to this the evidence we have presented on the views of the broader public in a strong role for government in the area of poverty reduction and some form of social assistance. Strategically it would probably be a better choice to strengthen and encourage those stakeholders in the Zambian regime that believe in and promote social protection rather than criticize them for not doing enough.

Neither MCDSS nor donors have been as inactive as some of the studies have suggested in finding new levers of support (Devereux, Davies et al. 2010; Niño-Zarazúa, Barrientos et al. 2010). MCDSS together with CPs actually started searching for new allies as early as 2006. Several workshops with the Ministry of Finance were held, social protection trainings and sensitization tours were organized inviting stakeholders from different Ministries as well as Members of Parliament and media representatives, the Livingstone conference was hosted with the President making opening remarks in 2006, strategy

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meetings with civil society were called in, radio and television were used to share information about the pilot, a website was set up to document everything and donors with good relationship to the Ministry of Finance such as World Bank and ADB were identified as strategic allies. A Civil Society Thematic group set itself up and the Constitutional Review Commission was approached. The UNICEF steering committee for the situation analysis of women and children was housed in and chaired by the Ministry of Finance to try and bring home to the financial technocrats the extent and depth of poverty and the urgent need for more adequate responses.

So how can these new levers of support be more effectively mobilized in Zambia? Can we expect to find the new levers of support in the formal political arena, when informal political processes have a great impact on political processes around social protection, as several authors have highlighted (Grindle and Thomas 1991; Hickey 2006; RHVP 2008; Devereux and White 2010)? What is there to be done if no visionary Prime Minister stands up and commits himself to a pension as Lesotho? The search for new levers of support will most likely continue in Zambia.

3.5 Design & implementation – the devil is in the detail?

Finally, we turn to the question of the nature of the interventions. This is a further explanation given as to why social protection has failed to blossom, that the MCDSS and CPs may perhaps have opted for the wrong interventions, placed too much focus on just a single intervention, given preference to the wrong target group or failed to acknowledge a public preoccupation with assistance always being conditional.

Best as enemy of the good?

Devereux & White (2010) emphasize that donors often opt for less politically popular interventions due to technical deliberations instead of reinforcing those that government fully supports. They cite, for example, the potential to engage with government supported fertilizer support programs in Malawi as well as Zambia. This rather begs the question as to why interventions such as fertilizer support (in particular) enjoy greater priority and support from the Ministry of Finance and what the role of MCDSS and CPs should be in this regard. Fertilizer support is a hot topic in SSA these days. The IMF and the World Bank made a lethal case for their inefficiency under structural adjustment reforms but they have crept back into government programming with remarkable ease.

The recent World Bank evaluation in Zambia highlights problems with the Fertiliser Support Programme ranging from leakage to incomplete, late and inefficient delivery, to badly managed and non pro-poor targeting(The World Bank 2010). The political attractiveness of the program therefore appears not to result from the impact of the program per-se but from the political buy in of those who benefit. Yet again, the imperatives of clientelism serve to maintain regimes that offer little space for citizens and

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groups to participate in policy-making (Grindle and Thomas 1991). These findings also suggest that proponents of the fertilizer support programme would have limited interest in fine-tuning this intervention to make it more pro-poor although this is not to say it is not worth trying.

Similarly, Devereux et al. (2010) have critiqued CPs for ignoring what they argue was a national social safety net scheme in the Public Welfare Assistance Scheme (PWAS) of the MCDSS. We would like to put this criticism into the context of the performance and history of PWAS as well as the linkages with the later SCT program. A mid-term review by MCDSS in 1995/6 came to the following conclusions:

> With a degradation of the economic conditions, rising poverty levels and a high population growth, the PWAS became increasingly unable to offer any meaningful services, as highlighted by the 1995/96 evaluation of the scheme. The latter also pointed out, besides a paternalistic approach, the inappropriate use of resources: inefficient targeting of beneficiaries, vote-catching attitude of the local politicians and administrators, total lack of accountability.’ (cited in the The Mid-Term Review of the 'new’ PWAS, (2002))

Following the 1996 report, the EU funded the re-designing of the PWAS by a project support unit based in MCDSS. PWAS emerged as a participatory community-based programme, targeting the 2% of the population most destitute and vulnerable with one off grants in kind. Unfortunately, the Medium Term Review of this process found it grossly underfunded, behind schedule, lacking objective indicators to measure progress and that government budget dispersals were seriously erratic (Johnson and Do Rosario Advirta 2002). Given that donors also have to account for how they spend their tax-payers’ or constituents’ funds, further funding was not granted.

Not all was wasted, however, as the framework set up by this reform process provided the basic structure for the Social Cash Transfer schemes initiated in Kalomo, Kazungula and Monze. The SCT programmes went a step further in technical terms, however, by giving small monthly cash payments rather than benefits in kind to make social assistance operationally easier, reduce leakage and ensure that the greatest proportion of the budget is spent on benefits rather than administration. The issues of monitoring and evaluation, probity, planning and training were also carefully addressed to build on, re-activate and improve the 'new' PWAS. Consequently, while it is important to build on existing structures, it should not limit the room for innovation or necessary modifications.

**Over-emphasis on just a single intervention**

We agree with Devereux et al. (2010) who criticize the over-emphasis on social transfers in social protection strategies. There has been a great flurry of excitement over the flexibility, the effectiveness, the range of impacts and the ‘respectful’ dimensions of regular cash transfers to the poor that have sometimes made these look like the only social protection tool in the bag. However, as the example of removing health user fees discussed above shows, there are many more interventions under the umbrella of social protection. Zambia’s social protection strategy lists social cash transfers as just one type of intervention for the incapacitated, next to measures for those who are more vulnerable
to economic shocks and others who suffer from limited legal protection. The emphasis on social cash transfers for incapacitated households started after a scoping study detected that there was no adequate intervention to support HIV and AIDS affected households in Zambia (Schubert 2003). As there was little experience with the modality, the pilot and this segment of the social protection strategy received a lot more attention than the other interventions for which some preliminary experience existed.

While it is true that social protection is more than just cash transfers, countries need to start somewhere and prioritize interventions, given budget as well as capacity constraints. MCDSS and CPs even revisited the previous implementation plan for the social cash transfer scheme in this light (Devereux and White 2010). When the MCDSS presented the social protection strategy at the World Bank conference on mainstreaming social protection in 2005 (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services 2005) it received recognition for keeping a national strategy focused and for prioritizing interventions. Being visionary is important but being too ambitious can equally be politically dangerous. Whereas a broader strategy allows for broader coalition-building in society to lobby the government for social protection, it might also lead to a situation where the interventions for the better off are eventually prioritized or scarce resources are spread too thinly.

Wrong choice of target group

A number of authors discussing the political economy of targeting (Sen 1995; DeDonder and Hindriks 1998; Gelbach and Pritchett 2002; Hickey 2006) concluded that a categorical transfer as opposed to a poverty-targeted transfer would not only be politically more popular but also result in greater benefits for the poor. We could thus question whether the poverty focus of the initial pilot projects (excluding the old age pension in Katete as well as the child grants which have recently been launched) could have resulted in less support and interest from the population as well as the political elites.

Figure 2: Choice of one the preferred target group for social transfers (one choice only)

![Choice of target group for social transfers](image)

Source: Attitude survey with urban & rural sample & students
This is not supported by the evidence from the public attitude surveys (figure 2) by Schüring (2010), where we see the greatest support across all samples for targeting the extremely poor, followed by people with disability, for the urban and rural sample as well as children among the students. The elderly seem to enjoy the lowest priority, in particular in urban areas. When answering this question, few respondents probably reflected on the difficulty of selecting the extremely poor but these results show that there should at least neither be great opposition to the target group selected for the social cash transfer scheme nor would the political dynamics change greatly if we opted for a categorical scheme (all elderly or all children for instance).

When it comes to political elites, there does not appear to be a great deal of opposition to the selected target group either. The previous Minister of Finance (who was otherwise very sceptical of social cash transfers) welcomed the idea of targeting (Habasonda 2009) in order to ration resources. The MCDSS has a long tradition of poverty targeting and is wary of disregarding the poverty dimension. Out of 44 interview partners with stakeholders at community level (CWAC members and teachers), representatives from different Ministries at national and district level, NGOs, CPs and politicians, only 14% prioritized categorical targeting and most of the proponents came from international organizations.

**Going conditional?**

The form of the transfer may also influence political acceptability (Das, Do et al. 2005; de Janvry and Sadoulet 2005; Bastagli 2008; Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Schüring 2010). The attitude survey by Schüring (2010) demonstrated that the majority among the urban respondents (73%) and students (74%) opted for in-kind support, that is, support that is indirectly conditioned. When respondents only had the choice of cash as a medium, 35% of the urban public and 20% of students actually decided to give no support at all (see table 4). Only about 1/6 of respondents would vote for unconditional cash. The same preference is reflected by the 73 qualitative interviews with different stakeholders where 2/3 expressed themselves in favour of conditionality. MCDSS, facing implementation difficulties regarding conditionality, and CPs familiar with the mixed international evidence, were more sceptical.

<table>
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<th>Table 4: Choice of transfer type</th>
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<td><strong>Unconditional</strong></td>
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<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conditional</strong></td>
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<td><strong>No cash transfer</strong></td>
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<td><strong>No of observations</strong></td>
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Source: Attitude survey with urban sample & students

14 For more information about the methodology, see Schüring 2010.
From a purely political and short-term perspective of getting initial buy-in, a conditional cash transfer might increase political will. At the same time, we cannot ignore the evidence that programs such as the food security pack, school feeding or the in-kind PWAS support, all programs that should, according to this argument, resonate more with public and elite opinion, have not received huge financial support either.

**Choosing the wrong process - never-ending piloting**

The recommendation by Devereux et al. (2010) that pilots be abandoned in favour of going national is hard to judge without a counterfactual. A quick google of ‘pilot projects’ demonstrates that pilot projects are ubiquitous. In the public and private sectors and in every practical discipline, trying out an idea or hypothesis in a small way is regarded as the sensible/cautious method to find out if it works, what might be improved, where there are problems, what resources are needed or which of a set of approaches works best.

Although the criticism that in a pilot anything can be made to work is true to an extent, not testing an idea is highly risky in terms of potential problems and wasted resources in countries with limited financial and human resources. The example of Lesotho's independent decision to grant old age pensions is something of a trope for independent national concern for the elderly poor in the social protection discourse. However, the somewhat sudden and arbitrary decision of the Prime Minister/President in 2004 to fulfil a long standing government commitment on pensions (dating back to 1993) resulted in the grant going national in a very short period of time. Pelham comments,

'The haste with which the Pension Bill was put together obstructed the transparency of the process and the quality of the design. The programme fails to address security issues of pension delivery, justice and potential fraudulent claims or corruption on the part of administrators; there is no clearly defined structure of administration; an inappropriate and unclear complaints process; and, as yet, no supervision or evaluation procedure to monitor the pension over time. In contrast to the extensive research that has backed the reforms for the South African pension over the years, in Lesotho, there was no assessment into the demand, use or feasibility of a pension.' (2007: 25)

This suggests that going national fast can embed problems that could be avoided by testing and proceeding more gradually. For Kenya, piloting and a more gradual up-scaling process has proven the right strategy for the Cash Transfers program for Orphans and Vulnerable Children that began as a pilot of 500 households in 2004, and has slowly grown to approximately 86,000 by 2010 (Davis 2009).

Not going national can also be a precautionary measure: although it has been argued there that it is hard to identify anything that counts as fully government owned in terms of genuine responses to poverty in Zambia, it is surely more ethical to resist scaling up until there is some engagement from government. In what way would donors pumping in funding to a social protection system disowned by government be more promising – let alone possible – than the conservative approach of getting increasing government financial contributions?

As much as we concur that a proliferation of national social protection programs would be much more desirable than the mushrooming of pilots in Sub-Saharan Africa, the
statement that “The pilots have very precarious institutional and financial arrangements, and reflect directly the interest of donors rather than a considered strategy by the government, which has been reluctant to endorse them” (Niño-Zarazúa, Barrientos et al. 2010: 12) is a misrepresentation of a more complex reality. In the context of Zambian cooperation, social protection was undertaken in as normal a way as anything else and with increasing stress on strengthening and rebuilding government systems. The pilots have all involved “government” through personnel and infrastructure; pilots are enshrined in policy documents and capacity has been built at all levels of service delivery around social cash transfers.

It is also worth reconsidering what is an acceptable and realistic timeframe for a program to go national. A program that does not go national overnight is not necessarily a failure. A programme which has not scaled up for a number of years is also not a success story. However, when to pull the plug and stop pursuing any further measures in the area of social cash transfers is a difficult call to make in a country where policy-making is highly personalized, volatile and little influenced by the public vote. Sometimes having patience and perseverance are necessary in producing policy changes.

4. Conclusion

Observing no tangible progress in important policy areas such as social protection in low-income countries as Zambia is not always easy to understand from a technical point of view. It is frustrating for Ministries of Social Affairs, cooperating donors, analysts but, most of all, the poor themselves. How to locate and strengthen the political will for issues that clearly come low on the list of priorities for influential political players such as the Ministry of Finance is complex, a matter of trial and error, often gradual in nature and requiring readiness to seize the moment when it comes. This is particularly true for countries where only some policy-making or political incentives exist in official policy spaces. Here, citizens are still waiting to be able to hold their leaders accountable and conditions are absent for government to be viewed as entering into a social contract with its citizens. We argue that despite the seeming stagnation of Zambia in social protection, some progress has been made.

We have seen that Zambia’s discourse and thinking on poverty have a wider remit than the productive poor. In fact, we wish there were greater concern and many more interventions targeting this group. Over time, a greater recognition for the incapacitated poor can be noted in the discourse of political elites. There is also evidence that the greater public opinion is not necessarily opposed to a social assistance program. We now gained a much broader and deeper knowledge base as to how to refine interventions to meet the needs of the poor. Different avenues have been explored regarding how to communicate findings to policy-makers and the wider public. During the lifetime of the Fifth National Development Plan, the MCDSS has turned into a more active agent for change and has made considerable effort to garner support from influential Ministries, members of Parliament, civil society as well as the media. Even if progress is slow and
strategies are not always successful, more acknowledgement should be given to the efforts of the actors who drive the process despite institutional adversities.

Donors have been influential in terms of agenda-setting in social protection in Zambia and it is important that not only government, but also the citizens it represents gain more space to further shape the social protection agenda in the future. At the same time, we need to recognize donors’ crucial contributions to keeping poverty and social protection on the agenda and supporting the gradual integration of social protection into various policy documents and formal policy channels.

In terms of politically desirable design and implementation features, we have noted the importance of building on existing structures while not ignoring innovations. This requires balancing vision with realism when it comes to the number and choice of social protection interventions. While the target group seems to be politically acceptable, the unconditional nature of the grant appears to be a greater cause of concern. With respect to piloting, we suggest that given the choice between a slow and gradual process through pilots or waiting – possibly in vain- for a visionary leader who launches a national programme, the pilot might be the lesser evil and can represent a first step towards a national programme.

Coming back to our initial questions, we can therefore conclude that a number of recommendations by the different drivers of change studies have been taken up, suggesting that there is some good intention to engage in an evidence-based policy process. At the same time, the paper has also demonstrated the complexities of the political game around social protection and that adoption of policy recommendations has not always translated into progress. While further recommendations for strengthening political are definitely welcome, they need to be attuned to the systemic features and political realities in Zambia without abandoning a care for the majority still trapped below the poverty line. Last but not least, we should fine-tune how we gauge success for complex political processes in low income countries, possibly less against the rapid advances of countries like South Africa and more against the events and processes in the national context and history of pro-poor policy-making.
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