

COMMENTARY**SOCIAL SAFETY NETS AND PERVASIVE POVERTY
IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH****Karanu MN*****Mary Njeri Karanu**

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This commentary is inspired by a July 2021 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report¹ about irregularities in targeting cash transfers in Nairobi slums during the pandemic in 2020. In March 2020 after the very first cases of Covid-19 were confirmed in Kenya, the government issued targeted interventions² to cushion Kenyans from shocks arising from the pandemic. These included income tax relief for individuals earning up to KES 24,000 monthly (about US\$240), reduction of the income tax rate from 30% to 25%, reduction of value-added tax from 16% to 14% for taxable goods and services to make these more affordable, and the disbursement of an additional KES 10 billion (about US\$100 million) for social protection cash transfers for the elderly, orphans and other vulnerable groups for eight months. Tax relief measures lapsed at the end of 2020. Cash transfers to vulnerable people were also short-lived, some reporting to receive the cash transfer for only one month. But Covid-19 effects continue to be felt up to now.

Social protection (SP), the various policies, and programs aimed at preventing, reducing, and overcoming negative impacts of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion fall under three main categories: social insurance, social safety nets, and labour market policies. In social insurance, participants contribute premiums over time to help them manage sudden changes in livelihoods caused by sickness, retirement, or disability. Examples of these include social health insurance and retirement benefits. Social safety nets (SSN) or social assistance programs. These programs are targeted towards the poor and vulnerable to help them cope with chronic poverty, destitution, and vulnerability. These include cash transfers, social pensions, food distribution, school-feeding programs, public works, subsidized agricultural inputs, and waivers and exemptions.

The right to social security and social protection is enshrined under Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³ (UDHR) and is explicitly articulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁴ (ICESCR) Article 9. This right is also incorporated in a handful of the UN's core human rights conventions, including *inter alia*, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵. As a result, the right to social security and social protection can be found in the constitutions of UN member states. In Kenya, social protection is a constitutional right provided for under Article 43

¹ Human Rights Watch. "We Are All Vulnerable Here". July 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/07/20/we-are-all-vulnerable-here/kenyas-pandemic-cash-transfer-program-riddled> Accessed July 24, 2021

² <https://www.mfa.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/presidential-address-25th-march-2020.pdf> Accessed September 4, 2021

³ UN. Universal Declaration on Human Rights. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> Accessed September 10, 2021

⁴ OHCHR. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx> Accessed September 10, 2021

⁵ Bebe, O., 2018. Social protection and the UN human rights system. [socialprotection.org. https://socialprotection.org/discover/blog/social-protection-and-un-human-rights-system](https://socialprotection.org/discover/blog/social-protection-and-un-human-rights-system) Accessed September 10, 2021

on Economic and Social Rights, Article 21 on rights and fundamental freedoms, and Article 2 on the supremacy of the constitution.

Social protection policies and SSN spending

Different countries focus on different social safety net instruments depending on their social protection policy objectives. Many SSN policies and instruments are designed to help people bounce back to normal after hard times. Kenya's social protection policy⁶ is anchored on three pillars: social assistance which includes direct cash transfers to poor and vulnerable people, social security, and health insurance. In this commentary, I will focus on social safety nets.

According to the World Bank report, The State of Social Safety Nets 2018⁷, sub-Saharan African countries spend the lowest average of US\$16 annually per citizen on safety net programs, Latin America and Caribbean countries spend an average of US\$158 annually per citizen, and Europe and Central Asia region spends the highest average of US\$253 annually per citizen on safety net programs. Many of the social safety net programs in sub-Saharan Africa are donor-funded. Few countries have fully government-financed SSN programs. These include Angola, Botswana, Gabon, Mauritius, Namibia, and Seychelles. Other countries' SSN programs are fully donor-funded. These include the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, and South Sudan. Kenya's SSNs are about 40% donor-funded.

Targeting for safety nets and other assistance programs

Many social safety net programs are targeted at the household level, assuming that every member of the household benefits from the assistance. But the cash is never enough to benefit entire households. Persons living with disabilities, caregivers of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC), and the elderly live with and care for other family members, and the KES 2000 (about US\$20) monthly cash transfer, in the case of Kenya, barely covers food and medical needs for these households. Further, disbursements in cash transfers are delayed, coming after every two or sometimes three months, or even longer.

Targeting for food subsidies and direct feeding programs in rural areas during the pandemic was mired in patronage and rent-seeking behaviour. These problems were not unique to rural areas, as the HRW report reveals.

⁶ Government of Kenya. 2011. Kenya National Social Protection Policy 2011. <https://www.socialprotection.or.ke/images/downloads/kenya-national-social-protection-policy.pdf> Accessed September 4, 2021

⁷ World Bank. 2018. The State of Social Safety Nets 2018. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1254-5. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29115/9781464812545.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y> Accessed September 4, 2021

In rural areas of the country, vulnerable groups recount the challenges they face during enrollment registration. Local administration chiefs and assistant chiefs who assist social workers in identifying and verifying persons and households to enroll in the various programs demand bribes from those seeking to be registered. The whole exercise lacks transparency because targeted beneficiaries are not educated about their entitlements and, therefore, cannot hold the government accountable or seek redress.

Of concern is how to fairly target beneficiaries of social assistance when everybody is vulnerable? Who benefits and who is left behind when there is not enough for everybody? In September – December 2020, Rural Outreach Africa conducted a series of community meetings in Vihiga County of western Kenya to sensitize people on their right to food. The initiative was funded by BMZ and Welthungerhilfe. We asked participants about their awareness of government assistance programs and how beneficiaries are selected for various schemes and programs. The responses were like what is observed in other places – the most vulnerable did not benefit, the selection was done on a who-knows-who basis, or if you are in good terms with the chief or assistant chief, and family members of local administration benefited first. In selecting beneficiaries, some local administration officers judged by the look of the house/homestead. Homesteads with stone or brick houses were deemed to be ‘able’ and were left out of assistance programs.

We also heard the perspectives of chiefs and assistant chiefs. They lamented that the assistance-food, or farming inputs (seed and fertilizer)- was never enough. They would be told to identify 10 households out of 300 or more in their villages. It was an impossible task. Clearly, they fell out with some community members.

Attaching numbers to demonstrate coverage for SSN in Kenya, 36.1% (about 17 million) of Kenyans live below the international poverty line (2015/16)⁸. The estimated number of beneficiaries with predictable and regular social assistance transfers in 2018 was KES 1.3 million⁹.

For Covid-19 relief in our work, we donated a basic food package to some 700 very poor households in Vihiga county. We also came face-to-face with the problem of having too many vulnerable people. Though we used ward administrators to help us fairly identify VERY poor households, during distribution, more would show up and we would not have enough to cater for all. It was quite a challenge.

⁸ World Bank DataBank. 2020. Poverty and Equity Brief. https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_KEN.pdf Accessed September 12, 2021

⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. State Department for Social Protection. 2020. Kenya Social Protection Sector Annual Report 2018/19. <https://www.socialprotection.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Kenya-Social-Protection-Sector-Annual-Report-2020-1.pdf> Accessed September 12, 2021

Social safety nets during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic brought significant setbacks in sectors that had achieved great milestones. The World Food Program, which funds school-feeding programs around the world, reported that at the beginning of 2020, national school feeding programs delivered school meals to more children than at any time in history¹⁰. A decade of progress was brought to an end by the pandemic. Gender progress – participation in politics and the economy, access to healthcare and education – was set back roughly 36 years, effectively the span of another generation¹¹. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World¹² (SOFI 2021) report estimates that another 70 – 161 million people are facing hunger due to the pandemic.

The Oxfam report Shelter from the Storm¹³ compared spending on SSN during the pandemic and found that 28 wealthy countries had spent an average of US\$695 per person, middle-income countries had spent US\$28 per person, and as little as US\$4 in some low-income countries¹⁴. These disparities in spending are atrocious. The research suggests bold recommendations for wealthy countries such as establishing a global social protection fund, increasing the quantity of international aid towards social protection, canceling debts and extending debt relief for heavily indebted countries to lessen inequities, and a significant allocation in Special Drawing Rights through the IMF alongside a commitment from the IMF and World Bank to end austerity.

What has the pandemic shown us? 1) There are great inequities between the ultra-wealthy and ultra-poor (individuals and countries), 2) Economic inequality breeds corruption which is a driver of people into poverty, 3) Household economies are very fragile, and most people are one paycheck away from hunger, 4) Many developing countries' economies were unprepared to support additional healthcare and social protection needs, and 5) Social protection in the developing world is inadequate and short-lived. Yet, Covid-19 persists. As the virus mutates and new variants emerge, we do not know how long the pandemic will last. There is no end in sight, even with ramped-up vaccination efforts.

¹⁰ Jordan Kelly-Linden; Covid-19 has ended a decade of progress in school nutrition, WFP says, The Telegraph, February 24, 2021. Accessed February 25, 2021, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/covid-19-has-ended-decade-progress-school-nutrition-wfp-says/>

¹¹ Ishaan Tharor; The pandemic may set women back by a whole generation, The Washington Post, April 2, 2021. Accessed April 2, 2021 from [here](#)

¹² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2021. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb4474en>

¹³ Marcos Barba, L. 2020. Shelter from the Storm: The global need for universal social protection in times of COVID-19. Oxfam International December 2020. DOI: 10.21201/2020.7048. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-social-protection-covid-19-151220-en.pdf> Accessed September 10, 2021

¹⁴ Oxfam. (2020), ReliefWeb. News and Press Release. 15 December 2020 <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/oxfam-over-third-population-without-safety-net-cope-covid-19-economic-crisis> Accessed September 10, 2021

In this decade of action towards realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social protection is key to realizing several SDGs. SDG 1- No poverty, SDG 2- Zero Hunger, SDG 3- Good Health and wellbeing, SDG 5- Gender equality, SDG 8- Decent work and economic growth, SDG 10- Reduced inequalities, and SDG 16- Peace, justice and strong institutions. With the increasing trend in poverty levels in the global south, do we require a new design for SSN programs, or perhaps more adaptive SSNs to cater for all types of shocks including climate change disasters, conflicts, and pandemics? The impetus is there for social protection program reforms in the global south where the majority of the world's poorest live.

In conclusion, developing countries have a lot to do to ensure adequate social safety nets for their citizens. Expanding SSN to reach more poor and vulnerable people can be done through increased budget allocations (share of GDP), increased funding from traditional donors, and securing new sources of financing, reforms in program design and implementation, and transparency in targeting for SSNs. Investing in rural development where poverty levels are up to 70% and tackling high unemployment rates of the working-age population who can contribute to social security.

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