



Redesigning Social Protection in Post COVID-19 Era in Africa

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Introduction

The emergence of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has led to numerous responsive safety nets by different governments, civil societies, NGOs, donors and philanthropists in their common efforts to contain COVID-19 and combat poverty in Africa. In spite of these intensified efforts, the impact and spread of social protection is far from being ubiquitous in the continent owing to the differing regional and national contexts and realities. The vulnerability of different African groups, categories and identities of people continues to be exposed and exploited by plethora of crises ranging from economic to health, to insecurity, food and nutrition, disasters and acute insurgency, which are often reflective of the low resilient capacity levels exhibited by African countries that usually increase their susceptibility to these shocks, crises and disasters. Social protection embodies all measures of support and help rendered to people (vulnerable individuals, households and communities- including children, people with disabilities, the unemployed, internally displaced, migrants, women, smallholder farmers etc.) in managing

risks and shocks with the sole intention of reducing poverty and vulnerability. And with the aggravated poverty conditions in the continent -imparted recently by the COVID-19 - the relevance of social protection in Africa has been re-established.

Social protection has evolved from being mere assistance of ensuring access to basic goods and services to prevention and protection against risks and in recent time to incorporate the development of potentials and promotion of opportunities. Thus making social protection to encompass direct welfare programmes (cash transfers, school feeding, food aid), productivity enhancing programmes (work/empowerment programmes, subsidies, incentives/credits) market intervention (price control mechanisms) and policy changes that are deployed in differing conditions and happenstances to improve the living standards of vulnerable groups. It also embodies a wide range of social assistance, social insurance, labour market interventions and community-based social protection strategies.

The implementation and adoption of social protection mechanisms and approaches in several African countries are usually characterized with distinctiveness of purpose, which serve as the bedrock and determinant for deployed tools and instruments, including cash transfers, input transfers, food aid, health insurance and several other safety nets. This is significantly anticipated bearing in mind the existing disparities in national contexts as seen in their institutional capacities, revenues, levels of fragility and poverty- all of which continues to play significant roles in shaping and defining a country's approach to social protection. COVID-19 containment protocols, including lockdown of economic activities and social interactions have resulted in high socioeconomic cost with the manifestation of health and food vulnerabilities. The ripple effects and impacts of the pandemic proclaimed the relevance of social protection beyond reasonable doubt while equally ensuring that there is probably no better period in history than now for countries to organize, revitalize and/or revive their social protection schemes.

Imperatives of Social Protection in Post-COVID-19 Era

The intrinsic essence and value of social protection is targeted at vulnerable groups (individuals, households, communities) with the primary intent of improving or maintaining their living standards, which also seeks to reduce poverty, socioeconomic shocks and their possible impacts. Core to the significance

of social protection is the priority for human lives as it brings to fore the humane dignity of existence. And with the most fragile and weak economies congregated in Africa, social protection should not only be on the priority list of concern but a major policy driver in the development of the continent, especially in the post COVID-19 era. Its relevance proves beyond the happenstance that surrounds the pandemic, as Africa (major parts of sub Saharan Africa precisely) prior to the emergence and outbreak of COVID-19, has unsettled high incidence of poverty conditions that is often aggravated by the lack of access to basic social services, credits and incentives. Implementing a social protection strategy and policy equally helps in the achievement of the global goals as seen in the Figure 1:



Figure 1: Social Protection can help realise the SDGs OECD 2019

Social protection constraints in Africa

Universalism, inclusiveness and cohesion are core to the ideals of social protection. Whether it is about hunger, poverty, job or productivity related safety nets, the matter of inclusion remains a puzzle often less addressed in the equation. And particularly in Africa, this is further strengthened by insufficient and poor database systems, where it is hardly

difficult to accurately trace, identify or acknowledge all citizens. Also, wrong motive of setting up social protection programmes and projects to advance political interest and agenda, which often hinder the sustainability of such initiatives and at such defiles the purpose of social protection. Another backdrop to social protection campaign in Africa has been the idea that it continues to promote a dependency culture and mentality, as well as misuse but there is dearth of research evidence that supports these myths. However, despite research proving otherwise, this cultural thinking and perspective continues to posit a great hurdle. Overall, data availability, selfishness and sustainability of social protection strategies and mechanisms in Africa ranks high amidst other structural and systemic framework that must be adequately addressed to ensure the shared dividend of safety nets for all stakeholders.

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In its purest essence, social protection is driven by the motive to meet needs that seeks to foster social inclusion and cohesion, which are the foundation for a secure and stable society. It is also a veritable tool for social progress, a needful platform to advance from survival to sustenance and a gospel of hope for vulnerable groups. The future of social protection is crystal clear and relevantly promising in Africa, especially as there is now a significant increase in the number of vulnerable groups in the continent that is aggravated by violence and insecurity

resulting from terrorism, food insecurity imparted by climate change, unequal resource distribution and endowment amidst deterrent resourcefulness of countries, socioeconomic shocks and disasters imparted by pandemics, gender inequality shaped by cultural beliefs, increasing population and the widening inequalities within and among African countries. Social protection is not an option but an expedient component of deplorable strategies as it thrives on the common global campaign of leaving no one behind.

Further, social protection in Africa if properly managed, deployed and innovatively structured has the capacity to foster robust and inclusive safety-net measures that could force the creation of a reliable database system, bridge inequality and increase the continent's resilience to socioeconomic costs. Cues for redesigning social protection can be taken from transformative social protection framework, which integrates risk management and life cycle approach in advancing its implementation and actualisation through three stages involving protective, preventive and promotive measures.

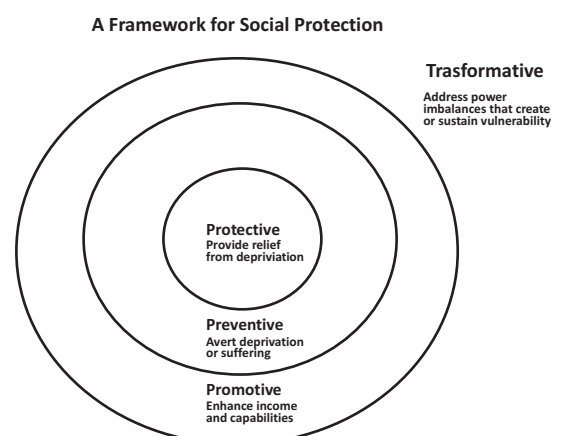


Figure 2: Blank and Handa: 2008 Transformative Social Protection framework.

Conclusion

African countries need to strengthen the reliability of their database systems while guaranteeing data protection, strengthen necessary structural and institutional social protection systems to ensure adequate social protection and more importantly, implemented programmes and initiatives must be innovatively context-specific and not just copied hook-line and sinker. The severity trajectory of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in Africa with fragile and volatile economies remain largely uncertain as a drastic change has become eminent. The adoption of several containment measures by countries, specifically the temporary lockdowns of economic and social activities have proven to be significantly costly and relevantly aggravated the vulnerability of the poorest of the poor in Africa.

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