

Thinking about the politics of social protection in Africa: towards a conceptual and theoretical approach

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Abstract

This paper examines how particular forms and types of politics shape policy responses on social protection in Africa, and also the political impacts and implications of adopting social protection policies. Despite the methodological problems associated with this new field of enquiry, the relationships between politics and social protection emerge as significant, multi-dimensional and complex, with causal flows in each direction. The paper critically engages with existing approaches to understanding these inter-relationships, and finds that a more holistic conceptual framework for understanding these relationships is required. This framework encompasses forms of politics that are: (i) systemic (e.g. political institutions); (ii) societal (e.g. public attitudes) but also (iii) institutional (e.g. historically embedded 'rules of the game'). There is a global politics to social protection that cuts across these inter-related dimensions, within which donors and related international policy discourses are particularly relevant. More specifically, the paper then argues that the notion of a 'political contract' can explain the ways in which political factors from these dimensions combine in ways that shape the extent to which the poorest groups benefit from social protection. The notion of a contract offers a normative as well as an analytical framework for thinking about and promoting social protection. These (and other) findings are used to tentatively propose a series of policy recommendations and issues for further research.

1. Introduction

Until relatively recently, politics has not been accorded a significant role in thinking and policy-making around social protection in international development. In particular, welfare economics has tended to focus on how social protection can correct market failures and play a redistributive role, and overlook important aspects of political economy (Casamatta et al 2000: 342) and domestic politics (Niles 1999: 3). Work on social protection in Africa has followed suit, arguing that the key problem for social protection here is simply a lack of financial and administrative capacity. Even where institutional issues are taken seriously (e.g. Mathauer 2004), the role of national politics is seen as purely contextual, to be examined “for the sake of completeness” (*ibid*: 16), rather than accorded an explanatory role. However, and in general terms, there “...is no economic law that prevents societies from deciding to allocate more resources to old-age security and less to some other expenditure” (Beattie and McGillivray 1995: 68, cited in Devereux 2001: 22), and it could be argued that the greater the fiscal constraints, the greater the implications of political attitudes concerning who deserves support, and in what form (Graham 2002: 25). For example, even where adequate financial resources and administrative capacity are in place, as in the case of Botswana, social protection measures failed to reach the poorest groups due to a lack of political commitment that has its origins in Botswana’s political economy and related political institutional arrangements (Good 1999, de Waal 1997).

However, if it has become increasingly clear that ‘politics matters’ to the conception, implementation, success and sustainability of social protection – and issues of development more broadly (e.g. Houtzager and Moore 2003) – there is less clarity concerning the specific ways in which politics shapes social protection, or what forms of political analysis are required to understand these relationships. This is particularly the case with Africa,² not least because of its relative paucity of sustained programmes of social protection.³ The most thorough attempt to understand the politics of social protection in developing countries describes such efforts as “initial work in a new area” (Graham 2002: 1), and notes that we know little about what kinds of social assistance systems are feasible or sustainable in contexts of high levels of poverty or inequality (*ibid*: 27). Most work on social protection in Africa makes little mention of political concerns. Work that does tends to consider only a limited range of variables (e.g. political discourse only) or make fairly general references to ‘political commitment’ or ‘political support’, without analysing the basis of this, or examining how it emerged and might be sustained. Examining the politics of development is also associated with a broader set of methodological problems concerns of relevance here. For example, “It is not possible to observe the underlying motivations for a public policy” (Niles 1999: 20), leaving researchers to approximate this by measuring the geographic distribution of policies as against poverty levels and areas of political discontent, to determine economic efficiency and political expediency. ‘Political factors’ tend to be highly contextualised within particular

² Most work on the politics of social protection draws on non-African regions, particularly European, post-Communist and Latin American states. Such research offers useful conceptual guidelines and comparative data, but it is often difficult to directly extrapolate from such studies as they often contain implicit judgements that are of less relevance to Africa (e.g. the presumptions on class allegiance that to some extent underpin discussions of the political support required for social protection). Many are based on the assumption that spending on social protection derives entirely from domestic revenues.

³ For example, the only universal social pensions are found in Botswana, Mauritius and Namibia – South Africa and Senegal have means-tested versions. Over the 1980s, only Gabon and Seychelles introduced social protection systems in any serious way (Gruat 1990). Bendokat Tovo (1999) note that the state in Togo has offered a limited level of social assistance to vulnerable groups such as widows, orphans and the handicapped.

politics, and efforts to abstract general patterns from this risk losing the sense of history and context that shapes the politics of the possible.

Given these constraints, any findings and conclusions concerning the politics of social protection in Africa are necessarily contingent on further theoretical elaboration and empirical testing. The following section (Section 2) examines the broad debates concerning the links between politics and social protection in Africa, in recent historical perspective, and sets out the framework of analysis to be pursued here. Section Three fills out this framework, revealing and to some extent evaluating the role that different forms of politics may play in shaping social protection. Section Four discusses the types of political impact that social protection programmes are associated with, before Section Five makes the case for thinking about the politics of social protection in terms of 'political contracts'. Sections Five and Six briefly map out tentative policy recommendations and future research themes that emerge from this analysis.

2. The Politics of Social Protection in Africa: general issues

"Often, in the past, governments viewed programs designed to address the social costs of adjustment as 'sweeteners' to maintain the support of key public sector interest groups rather than as genuine attempts to protect the poor and vulnerable, who had little stake in the existing system and a correspondingly weak political voice" (Marc et al 1995: 3).

There is general disquiet concerning the forms of politics that have tended to be associated with social protection in Africa. Social protection measures during structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s were not only motivated by instrumental political concerns rather than reaching the poorest, but also tended to use parallel structures rather than become embedded within local governance (de Haan et al 2002; Parker and Serrano 2000); and introduce forms of delivery and targeting that were prone to procedural irregularities, and linked to stigmatising discourses of labelling. Such responses were unlikely to form part of a general social contract in the way that nationally-driven programmes such as social pensions in Namibia and South Africa have arguably achieved. This situation resulted from donor policies and modalities – including a general lack of co-ordination and drive concerning safety nets during the 1990s (Mosley and Booth 2003) – but also genuine fears concerning the character of governance in many African countries, and the need to establish alternative mechanisms.

However, the national and global politics of social protection appear, ostensibly at least, to have altered in significant ways over the past five years. On the one hand has been the continued institutionalisation of democratisation within African countries, which some observers are increasingly able to link to improved norms of governance in terms of lower corruption and improved bureaucratic performance regarding service delivery (e.g. Alence 2004). On the other hand are the new modalities of international development policy, particularly concerning the more holistic and politically-attuned PRSP approach, with its integrated focus on growth, good governance, poverty reduction and safety nets. Here, the economic crisis in East Asia revealed the danger of relying on unregulated markets and unfettered growth, and catalysed an 'impulse' for social protection amongst donor agencies. Nonetheless, suggestions that both the national and the global politics surrounding social protection have shifted in positive ways must be tempered. Politics within Africa has not been fully transformed by the widespread uptake of elections (van de Walle 2003, Chabal and Daloz 1999), and conditions of political instability and conflict remain over-riding obstacles to social protection (Gbossa and Gauthé 2003). For Porter and Craig (2003), the Polanyian 'double movement' within international

development policy remains unpersuasive, as evidenced by the lowly status of social protection on donor agendas.⁴

Politics and social protection: making the links

Identifying the relationships between politics and social protection

The linkages between politics and social protection are multi-dimensional and multi-directional. The simplest relationship, whereby politics shapes social protection, is complicated by the fact that different forms of politics shape different dimensions of social protection programmes, particularly their size, type, implementation and sustainability. According to Casamatta et al (2000), most analyses have focused on how political factors affect the size (overall financial inputs) rather than the type of the system (especially regarding the degree of redistribution). Whereas the former is determined in relation to budgetary debates where interest groups and veto actors may have an input, the latter tends to be more embedded in underlying political traditions of particular countries. Politics may shape the actual implementation of social protection policies, as in cases where funds are re-directed on the basis of political support rather than the need of recipients.

Second, social protection itself has political impacts, with the cited political impacts of social protection range from increased levels of social solidarity and political stability, to the maintenance of the status quo in terms of political domination and social inequalities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, social protection itself shapes the politics of social protection. For example, the type of social protection – e.g. whether it is universal or targeted – strongly shapes the level of political support for it.⁵ Each of these relationships is examined below in relation to certain type of political influence.

In search of a general framework of analysis

There are two broad approaches to enquiry concerning the politics of social protection in Africa. The first approach asks, in the broadest sense, whether or not countries in Africa have reached the 'political impulse' for social protection, and seeks to define the broad characteristics of politics associated with social protection. The second, and narrower approach, seeks to identify the more immediate and specific forms of politics associated with social protection programmes and, in some cases, develop a conceptual framework from these.

The 'impulse for social protection' derives from the work of Karl Polanyi's on how social protection emerged within industrialised countries, and can be paraphrased as follows:

"As economic liberalism sought to establish the dominance of the self-regulating market, pressures emerged from all sectors of society (including capital) based on 'a principle of social protection' that drove the public authority to use its coercive power to conserve man and nature and productive organisation" (Putzel 2002: 3, paraphrasing Polanyi 1944).

In line with this historicized approach, Feng and Gizelis use an international dataset that includes many African countries to argue that the onset of social security can be

⁴ This 'double movement' refers to the moment analysed by Karl Polanyi, whereby a recognition of the problems of unregulated market forces creates an impulse for social protection.

⁵ It is on this point that Gelbach and Pritchett (1997) have famously argued that 'more targeting may mean less for the poor', in that it will be difficult to gain the political support required to sustain expenditure on programmes that are narrowly targeted, a position returned to below.

closely identified with four key societal developments: demographic changes; the decline of rural populations (urbanization) because of industrialization; bureaucratization; and the expansion of political and social rights (2002: 219). This approach appears to gain support from analyses of the longest-standing state sponsored social security scheme in Africa – the social pension in South Africa – where the driving forces have been identified as ‘urbanisation, inequality, state power and rampant technocracy’ (Iliffe 1987: 142, in Devereux 2001: 3).⁶ Such approaches are insightful to the extent that they encourage us to take the long-view of how nationally-driven social protection initiatives are likely to emerge in Africa. However, they also lack specificity in terms of particular country contexts; tend towards a kind of ‘path dependence’ that overlooks the scope for political action to alter such trajectories; and offer little guidance to those seeking to work towards a political impulse for social protection in the short term.

The second approach has been to develop frameworks of analysis aimed at capturing the influence of politics on social protection within particular country contexts (e.g. Graham 2002, Pritchett 2005, Rothstein 2002), the most promising of which have adopted a ‘political economy’ approach.⁷ The best example in relation to the developing world is Carol Graham’s (2002) study, which draws largely on Latin American evidence. Graham focuses predominantly on public attitudes, with a subsidiary focus on the public institutional framework; the structure and balance of power of political institutions; and fiscal constraints. Although insightful, Graham’s framework tends to underplay issues of elite political discourse compared to public attitudes, to ignore key aspects of political institutions; and also overlooks two important dimensions, namely the ‘internal’ politics of policy-making and the global politics of social protection.

The influential work of Gelbach and Pritchett (1997) is also worth mentioning here. Their ‘finding’ that support for the overall budget for transfers depends on the way in which it is targeted leads to their now famous maxim that ‘more (targeted transfers) for the poor might mean less for the poor’, as such programmes will lack political support. This has become a very popular maxim within the social protection literature, and is echoed frequently (e.g. Devereux 2001: 25, Moene and Wallerstein 2001).⁸ However, there are at least five problems with their approach, the first three of which have also been noted by Moore (2003). First, this approach to modelling political support for welfare spending relies on the assumption that the level of support for social protection is endogenously determined through democratic elections with self-interested voters. It is not clear that either of these perspectives holds true in many African countries, where external actors wield significant influence, and democratisation is underway but often far from being fully institutionalised. Second, the influence of public attitudes on political decision-making is portrayed as direct and somehow unproblematic, largely ignoring the institutional arenas and forms through which such attitudes are mediated – a failing common to work on public attitudes. Third, the ‘self-interested voter’ model that underlies this approach is unconvincing given the range of studies that have found that voters do

⁶ With reference to Latin America, Graham (2002: 28) argues that centralised systems of social protection are associated with political cultures that emphasise social solidarity and collective responsibility, are fairly homogenous in terms of race, and geographically small.

⁷ Political economy is defined here as, “the aggregate of institutions, practices and discourses which embody given values and norms on what are the most appropriate roles of the state and of other economic actors in regulating the economic system, including the delivery of economic security” (Bonoli 2000: 444).

⁸ A typical example of this is the statement that: social pensions are less likely to be subject to erosion compared to means-tested programmes, which command less political support (HelpAge 2004: 39). Although intuitively persuasive, it is not clear what evidence this is based on.

not simply act out of rational self-interest (Bratton and Mattes 2003, Rothstein 2002).⁹ Fourth, the model is partial in its coverage, drawing attention to issues of electoral politics and politics within organisations, but overlooking the role of political institutions or of politics within national policy-making processes. Perhaps most seriously, though, it is very rare that any concrete evidence is given in support of this allegedly ‘iron law’ of the politics of social protection. Finally, this position tends to lead towards an essentially pessimistic view of the role of politics in securing pro-poor development.

A third, and counter approach to the specific politics of social protection is to argue that virtually any form of politics can be associated with social protection, such that,

“The essential point here is that the impulse for social protection experienced so deeply within society can be mobilised by any number of political tendencies or would-be aspirants to social and political power. This could be a political party of any stripe, a religious movement, a charismatic populist appealing to ethnic or caste identity, a warlord or a fascist” (Putzel 2002: 3).

Without denying the salience of this remark in terms of the diverse range of regime types that have adopted social protection measures, this stance tells us little of about the broader range of relationships between politics and social protection identified here, nor examines the important extent to which such political forces are closely mediated by other forms of politics, in terms of institutional and systemic characteristics in particular.

Overall, then, the general frameworks of analysis forwarded to date have tended to offer either partial and/or problematic readings of the forms of politics that might shape social protection, and have not been derived from experiences in Africa. Moreover, these approaches have rarely been operationalised (Haddad and Zeller 1997: 134), leaving them somewhat tentative and less refined than they might be. Here, an effort is made to bring together the most significant insights from this literature into a single framework. This research thus proceeds by (a) examining particular examples of social protection in Africa, and identifying the forms of politics associated with their uptake, forms and sustainability; (b) comparative analysis through critically reading the insights on how the politics of social protection works elsewhere against the literature on politics and development in Africa.¹⁰ Importantly, the focus is on national policies and programmes rather than donor projects of localised, informal arrangements. Finally, politics is conceived here as an enabling as well as a constraining factor (Graham 2002: 3), following Moore’s (2003) point that while some studies of social protection are obsessed with the negative side of politics concerning self-interested ‘veto’ actors, what remains remarkable and to be explained is the presence rather than the absence of pro-poor policies.

⁹ Others have tried other models, such as ‘dual utility’, and altruistic voters – see Moene and Wallerstein (2001) fn.2. However, Gelbach and Pritchett’s model, as explained in Pritchett (2005), assumes that voters (divided into three groups, the poor, middle and rich) have an (equal) influence on the size of the budget allocated towards (targeted) social protection. This approach is then fed through an implausible model of politics and society that takes no account of key mediating factors, including the party system, electoral rules, prevailing ideology, politics within policy-making at the centre, and policy legacies. The state is considered to be an impersonal arbiter of competing demands, despite strong evidence that this form of governance does not prevail in Africa, or elsewhere in many respects.

¹⁰ An alternative approach would be to argue for a particularly normative political approach to social protection, such as a ‘rights-based’ approach (Piron 2004). However, this is a problematic approach, being largely normative and not fully grounded in an analysis of how social protection works in Africa. One way forward here might be to adopt a sociological rather than universalist approach to rights was adopted – for example, Turner’s (1993) social theory of rights is derived not from abstract universalism but an ontological position that starts with the universality of human vulnerability and frailty. This approach has a real resonance with social protection.

Conceptualising the politics of social protection in Africa: towards a holistic approach

The framework adopted here derives from a broad political sociology perspective, and identifies three key dimensions to the politics of social protection in Africa: societal; systemic and institutional.

Box 1: How politics shapes social protection in Africa: institutional, systemic and societal factors

Institutional features

Political and policy history: colonial legacy; terms of independence; policy legacies
Forms of political rule

Systemic factors

Political institutions: elections and the party system
Level of decentralisation
Political elites: attitudes, discourse, intra-elite conflict and leadership
Politics and power within policy processes: actors, spaces and knowledge
Administrative capacity and an institutional home

Societal factors

Public attitudes: causes of poverty; substantive justice; the role of the state; procedural justice
Civil society pressure
Social fragmentation and inequality
Urban-rural issues: citizens versus subjects?

The global politics of social protection

Policy discourse: level of priority given to social protection by donors; conceptualisation of social protection; wider welfarist/social policy discourse
Donor co-ordination

‘Societal factors’ include public attitudes, levels of citizen voice, levels of urbanization, economic inequality, and levels and form of social fragmentation.¹¹ ‘Systemic factors’ include state capacity (including bureaucratic integrity, fiscal resources and administrative capacity), political elites, and political institutions (e.g. elections and political party system). The ‘institutional features’ constitute the historically embedded ‘rules of the game’, and range from political and policy legacies, prevailing ideologies, and the means by which public resources are distributed (e.g. patronage). Importantly, there are strong inter-relationships between these three dimensions (for example, institutional characteristics such as the types of welfare institutions in place and the prevailing forms of politics influence both bureaucratic integrity and public attitudes to social protection). Moreover, although these three dimensions or sets of characteristics are operationalised at the level of national politics, there is an important global dimension that is cross-cutting and influences each of them, involving international actors and discourses around development policy issues. The following section discusses how the key variables within each of these dimensions influence the uptake, forms and sustainability of social protection programmes in Africa. Later, in Section 5, it is argued that the notion of ‘political contracts’ offers a fuller explanation for how the different elements of this

¹¹ Although these societal factors are not intrinsically political, the point here, as argued below, is that they have gained a high degree of political salience in relation to social protection.

framework become aligned in ways that lead to particular outcomes for social protection.

3. How politics shapes social protection in Africa: institutional, systemic and societal factors

Institutional features

Political and policy history

Key moments and processes with Africa's political history – particularly the forms of political rule that have characterised colonial and then post-colonial regimes, the nature and timing of transitions between these forms, and the broad policy approaches adopted by such regimes – can be directly and indirectly related to the form and extent of social protection in particular African countries.¹²

The colonial legacy has been mixed. On the one hand, there is virtually no history of social protection measures in Africa, with colonial efforts beyond South Africa limited to the occasional scheme such as the Overseas Territories Labour Code in Francophone West and Equatorial Africa (Gruat 1990).¹³ However, where such policies did exist, they appear to have been influential on contemporary forms. This legacy might help in some way to explain why social pensions were pursued in Namibia and South Africa (Devereux 2001). Case and Deaton (1998: 1334) note that the social pension in South Africa was not driven by demands from its beneficiary constituency, and that other potential forms of social protection were overlooked in favour of pursuing this existing policy channel, which had been in place (in a highly discriminatory form) since 1926. This is not to suggest some sort of benevolent force emanating from the colonial era; it is clear that, "In South Africa and Namibia, the history of the social pension is a story of struggle and slow progress towards justice and equality, from an initial position of institutionalised discrimination and exclusion" (Devereux 2001: 49). However, the fact that social pensions were selected by these regimes as a material and symbolic means of re-dressing past inequalities between state treatment of citizens re-enforces the argument that the trajectory of colonial and post-colonial rule can play a defining role in relation to contemporary forms of social protection in Africa.

A broader set of linkages further support this position. For example, the legacies of broader policy approaches to social welfare may also shape the form that social protection takes. Maclean's (2002) study of safety nets in West Africa suggests that the different approaches to social welfare adopted in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire derive from their colonial legacy, with the former choosing to build on informal social welfare systems of extended families and communities through a decentralised approach, whereas the latter has tried to replace these with the centralised arm of the bureaucracy. In southern Africa, political attitudes towards the role of the state in development are closely shaped by particular patterns of colonial rule, with black citizens advocating a stronger role for the state than the newly converted free market-eers amongst the white population in settler countries (Bratton and Mattes 2003).

Pre-colonial influences may also be of relevance here. Iliffe (1987, in Good 1999: 199) noted an historical lack of concern towards the poor among Tswana elites,

¹² Political histories and policy legacies relate closely to the notion of a 'contract' for social protection, a theme developed further below.

¹³ In the context of Latin America, Graham (2002) notes the importance of whether countries were at the centre or periphery of the colonial enterprise.

dating back to the nineteenth century. Today, Botswana remains a polity that can tolerate a high degree of inequality, and which has failed to provide social protection to its most destitute citizens despite being one of the few African states with the financial and administrative capacity to do so (de Waal 1997, Good 1999). The pension scheme, introduced in 1996, is far less generous than the Namibian scheme, with the most destitute unable to claim it due to a lack of identification papers (Good 1999: 199-200).

This is not to suggest some form of path-dependence, whereby the propensity for social protection and the form it takes is historically-determined. For example, in the mid-1970s Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia proved that social protection can emerge from a 'standing start' (de Waal 1997: 34). Such legacies are made and re-made over time. In the post-colonial era, party policy regimes create different types of expectations, as in southern Africa where with the greater expectation of self-reliance in Malawi contrasted to Zimbabwe, where the ruling party sought to gain political legitimacy and security by extending itself deeply into rural areas through service provision, thus creating higher expectations of and legitimacy for state action (Bratton and Mattes 2003).

Underlying forms of politics: neopatrimonial politics and the developmental state¹⁴

Specific policies need to be seen within the context of the broader rules of the political game, concerning forms of political rule, norms governing the management and distribution of public resources, and the politics of representation. Although there has been a range of competing theories concerning the character of the state and politics in post-colonial Africa, what is striking is the consensus concerning the actual character of political rule that has been employed, with few analyses dispensing with the concept of 'neopatrimonialism' as the basis upon which political power, legitimacy and accountability have been forged in post-colonial Africa (e.g. Chabal and Daloz 1999, Mamdani 1996). This form of politics is not confined to Africa, and, as studies of politics in the United States have shown (e.g. Skopcol 1992), and should be seen as historically contingent rather than reified.¹⁵

Nonetheless, patrimonial politics can currently be seen to play a multi-dimensional role concerning social protection in Africa. In the broadest sense, the tendency to distribute public resources according to private interests means that public funds are rarely used for the general good (e.g. Berman 2004). Patronage politics is necessarily factional, leaving public institutions charged with delivering development shot through with debilitating struggles over resources and political authority more broadly (Bayart 2003). Particular problems emerge where the factional politics of patronage takes on an ethnic or regional character. It has been argued that it is this commitment to 'ethnic' rather than 'national' norms of citizenship that fatally undermines efforts to create the civic public sphere through which norms of national solidarity could be built (e.g. Ekeh 1975, 1990). Against this, Lonsdale (1992) and others have shown how ethnic interests do not necessarily conflict with national solidarity. An example here might be Mauritius, which has been described as an 'ethnically-driven pluralist democracy' (Srebniak 2000), and which has one of the few universal social pension schemes in Africa.

More specifically, patrimonial and associated forms of patron-client politics can shape the design and targeting of social protection programmes during the planning and implementation phases. Where there are strong concerns that funds will be diverted

¹⁴ This dimension of the institutional context closely shapes issues of bureaucratic integrity discussed below.

¹⁵ Again, the colonial legacy played a part in establishing this form of politics (Allen 1995, Szeftel 2000).

into patronage networks, systems and incentives may be put in place to avoid this, including the establishment of parallel structures; setting up specific project offices within ministries; using technocrats and also incentives/sticks to ensure that funds reach their intended goal (e.g. offer operational/monitoring funds that can be misused; publicise offences).¹⁶ Importantly, there are potential costs to this approach, both financially and in terms of by-passing and potentially undermining the mainstream machinery of government. At another level, the coverage of programmes might be extended to include areas favoured by associated patrons, as with the recent social action fund for Northern Uganda.¹⁷ Once the resources are at the local level, the implementing agencies may be able to divert resources towards particular interest groups other than the poorest.¹⁸

As noted above, this is not to make an argument against all forms of patronage, some of which may clearly offer important forms of security to the poorest groups (Wood 2003, also Hickey and Bracking 2005). And while efforts to by-pass such forms of politics tend to undermine mainline ministries and local government, they have advantages too. For example, the tendency for social funds to fall under direct executive control has some strengths (issues of personal reputation, the use for political gain may coincide with gains for the poor), and studies of the links between social funds and politics on Peru, suggests that: "Ironically, it is precisely those features which enabled FONCODES to reach the poor, such as the high degree of flexibility in the allocation, timing, and composition of expenditures, which made it vulnerable to political interference" (Schady 2000: 26).

However it is also clear that there is no substitute for a developmental state, not only in terms of their greater propensity and capacity to develop social protection in the first place, but also in more instrumental terms. Attitudinal surveys in southern Africa have found that citizens "...are more likely to countenance economic reforms if an effective developmental state provides a safety net against the failure of markets" (Bratton and Mattes 2003: 318). This requires a state with significant involvement in economic as well as social activities.

Systemic factors

The key features of the political system that appear to shape social protection in Africa are the types of political institution (political parties, and the electoral system); levels of decentralisation; the character of political elites; the internal politics of policy processes; and issues of bureaucratic capacity and suitability.

Political institutions: elections and the party system

"Even limited electoral competition during periods of austerity will create incentives for politicians to broaden their support base, but politicians will only try to take advantage of this opportunity if the party structure helps to reduce the information costs and credibility problems which normally prevent the extension of social programs to the poor" (Niles 1999: 11).

¹⁶ Governments may wish to do this as a means of winning other battles, such as the decision in Mexico to avoid the mainline ministries that were stacked with patronage appointments associated with the traditional wing of the party that the then leader was in dispute with (ref#).

¹⁷ Here, the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund was extended to include the 'home' districts of the responsible Minister (Brock et al 2002: 14-15). The result – a US\$100m spread across eighteen of Uganda's poorest districts over a limited five-year project which bypasses local government structures – does not represent the sort of 'targeting' required to challenge long-term poverty in a region where two-thirds of the population are below the poverty line and institutional decay is endemic.

¹⁸ Importantly, such funds may represent one of the only remaining sources of patronage open to political elites, particularly where structural adjustment (through reduced subsidies and tariffs, the liberalisation of markets and privatisation of para-statal), has removed many of the tools by which constituencies could be enlisted.

One of the few direct studies of the relationship between social safety nets and political institutions (Niles 1999), argues that the ‘incentives’ and ‘capacity’ to implement social safety net programmes are politically determined. Here, the incentives are elections, while the capacity is determined by the party system and the room for manoeuvre that this allows. This constitutes an argument for thinking about the politics of social protection in terms of ‘political institutions’ rather than regime types (e.g. ‘authoritarian’, ‘semi-democratic’ or ‘democratic’). In particular, although the mere fact of elections does seem to influence issues related to social protection in Africa, these effects are mediated through particular institutional arrangements. For example, none of the main countries to introduce food security measures in the 1970s were liberal democracies (Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia), but all were committed to a notion of social welfare, to be mobilised through technocratic zeal, and driven by political parties with revolutionary fervour in the latter two countries (de Waal 1997: 35).

Several studies note the importance of elections in determining public expenditure (e.g. Block 2002), and particularly in relation to social policies (Niles 1999, Schady 2000, Stasavage 2003).¹⁹ Block (2002) reveals a strong tendency for African governments to both raise public expenditures (by an average of 4.5%) and reduce interest rates (by an average of 1-1.5%) in election years as a means of appealing to different constituencies. However, the tendency for these public expenditures to be in the form of pay rises to public sector workers – along with the focus on interest rates, which would predominantly benefit those in the waged economy with investments – tends to suggest that it is not the poorest who are being targeted here. In more general terms, Feng and Gizelis argue that, “welfare programmes do not necessarily target the most needy segments of the population but, rather, the ones critical for the regime’s political survival” (2002: 220). In Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi distributed food aid selectively in order to secure his regime in power, while denying it to some of the most vulnerable groups and areas (de Waal 1997).

The example of Uganda does suggest the relevance of such ‘business cycles’ to social sector spending, with the introduction of both targeted (e.g. credit for women and youths either side of 1996 elections) and universal forms of social provision (universal primary education in 1996, the abolishment of user fees for health in 2001) marking time with the electoral calendar.²⁰ In Botswana, food aid through the Drought Relief Programme was particularly generous in the election years of 1974 and 1979 (de Waal 1997). The political use of welfare transfers is arguably more likely within authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes that characterised many African states over the 1980s, where the checks on such (ab)uses of power – strong legislature, opposition parties, constitutions – are not well institutionalised (Feng and Gizelis 2002: 227-8).²¹

¹⁹ Gelbach and Pritchett (1997) and Pritchett (2005) also state the importance of electoral politics for social protection, although (as discussed above) their modelling of electoral politics is highly problematic.

²⁰ Ruling politicians in Uganda were convinced that the introduction of universal primary education UPE had influenced their favourable election outcome (Schady 2000). Both the size and distribution of social safety net expenditures in Peru were significantly affected by elections (Schady 2000). The amount of money distributed was boosted significantly during election years, and funds were targeted at regions where the political returns were expected to be large.

²¹ Feng and Gizelis (2002: 228) note that “autocratic and semidemocratic governments have much better leverage than their democratic counterparts in using (welfare) transfers to retain office”. Block (2002) also argues that African countries are particularly prone to ‘electoral business cycles’, given the extent to which executives maintain control over the key instruments of economic and fiscal policy instruments (e.g. little independence for central banks), and also the limited controls placed on executives by legislative and civil checks. However, these findings may not hold as strongly here, given

The capacity to take such measures relates closely to the types of party political systems in place. Niles (1999) distinguishes four types of party system (see Box 2), each of which will tend to have particular implications for whether or not social safety nets are adopted, and argues that democracies with stable party systems and elected authoritarian systems are most likely to be associated with social protection policies, while those least likely to be associated with social protection policies, are democracies with fragmented party systems and non-elected systems.

Box 2: Political institutions and social protection

Democracies with a stable party system: The underlying electoral rules include a majoritarian formula, single-member constituencies, high barriers to new parties and high costs to party switching. The party system revolves around a small-number of programmatic parties with high levels of party discipline. The effects of these are that politicians can work with longer time horizons and lower information costs; they also need to appeal to broad constituencies in order to remain in power. Governments in such systems tend to have a stronger record in the social arena; more effective in meeting the needs of the poor; politicians were seeking a broader electoral alliance and encouraged cooperative links between the poor, NGOs and government.

Democracies with a fluid and fragmented party system: The underlying electoral rules include low costs to new parties and (often) proportional representation, while the party system is characterised by a high number of often personalistic parties, with low party discipline. This results in shorter time horizons and higher information costs; parties and leaders can remain in power by appealing to a narrow constituency. Here, the underlying electoral rules create weak, undisciplined parties that cater for narrow interests. The electoral system shortens politician's time horizons and discourages the provision of public goods; even if a reform politician/party wanted to initiate social sector reform, the capacity to do so over opposition party or coalition partner objections would be low (i.e. the presence of too many veto players, e.g. Orenstein #).

Elected authoritarian regimes: Electoral rules include regular elections with low numbers of opposition parties, while the ruling party always wins the presidency and a majority of seats in the legislative assembly. This leads to longer time horizons and lower information costs, with popular appeals more likely than force. Such governments tended to rely on temporary, targeted safety nets as the basis of social policy during adjustment; these were implemented in a top-down manner that discouraged co-operative links between the poor, NGOs and government. Politicians were trying to maintain political legitimacy and ensure social control.

Non-electoral regimes: these governments were the least likely to protect the poor. With irregular elections and non-acknowledgement of electoral defeats, there is little incentive to cultivate electoral support, with force more likely than electoral appeals.

From Niles (1999)

This approach is convincing to a large extent. In political terms, it seeks to go beyond approaches that simply stress the importance of elections, and considers more enduring political forms. Moreover, it does appear to have a degree of explanatory power concerning the politics of social protection beyond the three cases that Niles discusses (namely Ghana, Indonesia and Mexico). Although Uganda cannot strictly

that social protection policies are open to greater legislative and civil society oversight compared to the economic reforms that he predominantly refers to.

be defined as an 'elected authoritarian regime',²² the pattern of spending outlined above fits the model of a populist leader reaching over urban intelligentsia to appeal directly to rural voters on development issues.

However, this approach does need to be both qualified and extended. For example, this analysis does not suggest that 'elected authoritarian systems' are inherently more pro-poor than multiparty systems. Indeed, initiatives carried out by such regimes tend to be short-term electoral strategies that are not sustained and which have little effect in terms of poverty reduction (Niles 1999: 36). Simply having the capacity to initiate programmes despite opposition from urban voters and opposition parties, does not necessarily overcome the other institutional and systemic issues discussed here.²³ Moreover, other factors need to be accounted for when considering the pro-poor potential of political parties, such as the ideological range across the political party system (Mainwaring 1999), and the particular ideologies of individual parties.²⁴ The political sociology of parties, regarding where they draw their support base, is also important. For example, by the mid-1980s, Botswana's Drought Relief Programme was increasingly serving the demands of the rural elite who form the key constituency for the ruling party, with benefits skewed towards large-land holders with tractors and large herds (de Waal 1997: 45-6). More broadly, Stasavage (2003) argues that where voting is driven almost exclusively by regional alliances, there is little scope for nationally beneficial policies to become central to campaigns and manifestos. This is also important in terms of the distribution of social security schemes, as with the ruling Botswana Democratic Party, which has systematically favoured its main constituency, not only in terms of the overall economic direction of the country, but also the distribution of rural development and social protection schemes.

Level of decentralisation

Some advocates of social protection argue that the centralised nature of the state in Africa has historically made it difficult to implement social protection. For example, Graham (2002) notes that contentious policy proposals may have a greater chance of success where they can be devolved to the regions, thus avoiding controversial political debates at the national level.²⁵ For Mathauer (2004), decentralised forms of governance are an essential requirement for the targeting component of many safety nets. For Pritchett (2005), locally controlled social protection programmes may be subject to elite capture and 'spreading', but this is not necessarily a bad thing – the idea of targeting may clash with local norms concerning fairness and solidarity, which may be more important in the long-run for reducing chronic poverty. However, such debates overlook the extent to which successful decentralisation reforms tend to be associated with states that have successfully accumulated power (resources, authority and capacity) at the centre first (Manor 1999, Tendler 1997, and also the recent literature concerning the very specific and limited circumstances under which decentralisation has pro-poor outcomes (e.g. Crook and Sverrisson 2001).

22 Carbone's (2003) concept of a 'hegemonic party system' is more accurate, in the short-term at least. See Bratton and Lambricht (2001) concerning the social basis of the NRM in Uganda.

23 Second, and as Niles notes, this approach is also limited to the national level, whereby party politics in federal systems (Mexico, India, Brazil, Nigeria, Ethiopia) may reveal different characteristics (e.g. see Harriss 2000 on India, also the mixed results of participatory budgeting in Brazil). Third, the categories are not mutually exclusive, and a degree of nuance would be required when applying them in context – for example, some polities in Africa resemble a mixture of the second and third types discussed here.

²⁴ For example, where conservative or right-wing ideologies prevail, then the only social assistance policies likely to be supported are those which include a self-help or work requirement.

²⁵ This seems to have been the case in Mexico, where funds for targeted social programmes were decentralised in a bid to circumvent veto actors at the centre (Niles 1999: 25).

Political elites: attitudes, discourse, intra-elite conflict and leadership ²⁶

The recent focus on how the attitudes of political elites shape poverty reduction (Hossain and Moore 2001) has also been advanced to exploring issues of chronic poverty (Hossain 2005, Hickey 2005). For some, what is striking is the extent to which political elites tend to distinguish between the poor – particularly in terms of a bias towards the productive or economically active poor, who are therefore ‘deserving’ – in ways that are likely to leave some of the chronic poor groups bereft of state-support and in need of other forms of provision (Hossain 2005, Hickey 2005).²⁷ Similarly, the official policy in Botswana is that “rewards should go to those who make the biggest contribution to Botswana’s growth economy” (Good 1999: 199). This is a classic statement of a model of economic citizenship rather than social citizenship, with people only fully permitted citizenship status to the extent that they can fully attend to their own economic needs, a very similar view to that which prevails in the United States (Fraser and Gordon 1994), and which is taken up in the later debate on ‘contracts’. There is some evidence that local elites are likely to be more sympathetic to the needs of the poorest as a result of their proximity and increased level of accountability through local elections (Hossain 2005).

It is debatable as to whether ‘political leadership’ should be considered as a separate issue here, not least because the charismatic-leader model of political analysis is problematic in general terms. However, some authors stress the role of leaders in creating political constituencies for reform and overcoming both global and national opposition, either by using the political capital of executive power or by stealth (Moore 1999, 2003). Others stress the importance of having a leader whose legitimacy depends on ‘development’ (Niles 1999: 12). However, even where this is the case, the social protection agenda may be interpreted by such leaders as offering a more limited vision of development than the general model of growth-led modernisation that many subscribe to (Bryceson and Bank 2001, Hickey 2005). Here, it is important to make the case that social protection has positive linkages with the growth agenda.

Once in place, social protection measures themselves become the subject of political discourse. In South Africa, struggles to extend the social pension to Black South Africans were played out through the same form of public discourse over several decades, with criticisms of the system’s ‘inadequacy and discrimination’ ranged against arguments that extending the system would create ‘dependency’ (Devereux 2001: 6). Social protection itself is often criticised by politicians for creating dependency, fuelling wasteful expenditures such as on alcohol, and helping only those who choose to loaf off the recipients (Devereux 2001: 27), despite evidence of the productive usages to which such money is put (Devereux 2002, 2004). This suggests the need for more engagement with political elites by donors, and for linking pro-poor policies to progressive elements of elite political discourse.²⁸

The level of conflict between elites at the political centre has emerged as significant regarding pro-poor policy making (Houtzager 2003, Houtzager with Pattenden 2003).

²⁶

²⁷ It is likely that there is a gendered dimension to political discourse around social protection, and given that women form a large proportion of the chronically poor, political attitudes towards them are important. See Sabates-Wheeler and Kabeer (2003) on social protection and gender. More broadly, it is also worth noting that the poor and their representatives draw on mainstream representations of poverty as one of their few assets (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster 2002).

²⁸ For example, the finding that elites in Bangladesh do not appear to see their fate as being directly connected to the poor in the way that the British elites did in the nineteenth century, in ways that led them to lobby for health provision, means that other routes need to be sought, possibly through tapping into the sense of national pride amongst this elite (Hossain and Moore 2001).

Here, the optimum level of intra-elite conflict for the poor involves medium-high levels of institutionalised conflict, as this pushes elite groups into forging alliances with new social forces. Low levels of conflict will tend to allow elites groups to ignore the claims of such groups, while high levels of less or un-institutionalised conflict will tends to produce forms of instability that are inimical to sustained coalition-building. As discussed in Section 4, social protection programmes themselves be used as a means of promoting political stability for particular regimes.

Politics and power within policy processes: actors, spaces and knowledge

The issue of intra-elite conflict has a more specific connotation with regards the forms of politics that are imminent within specific policy processes. As noted earlier, there is a need to overcome the 'black-box' perspective regarding how political factors work themselves through the actual policy-making process, and the growing literature on the politics of policy processes offers some useful ways forward here, of which three are pursued here, in terms of actors, spaces and knowledge (Brock et al 2001).

The first concerns Ravi Kanbur's (2001) concept of how policy actors tend to be loosely grouped within different policy tendencies – the Finance Ministry and Civil Society tendency – which tend to hold different views on issues related to poverty policy, as a result of underlying ontological and epistemological differences. Importantly, these differences are usually matched by differences in capacity, whereby advocates of social protection may have relatively weaker levels of political capital. Mathauer (2004: 12) also notes the marginality of social sector ministries, and stresses that these ministries suffer from a “lack of appropriate staff who would be able to make the case for safety net interventions from an economic point of view”.²⁹

The second comes from Cornwall's work on 'policy spaces', a notion that helps locate particular decisions over policy in a spatial sense, thus directing analysis towards (a) which are the most relevant policy spaces within which social protection will be discussed?; (b) how are the chronic poor represented therein? Those seeking to influence social protection debates need to identify and gain both access to and influence within such spaces.

The third follows insights into the role of epistemic communities within policy processes (Keeley and Scoones 1999). Understanding what forms of knowledge have 'power' within which policy spaces (Brock et al 2001) will be important here. In addition to having forms of data that can disaggregate the poor according to severity and duration, successful examples of social protection or even of targeting more generally would help offer a demonstration effect. These 'formal' forms of data can be converted into stories to be told, re-told and circulated within policy circles, in order to increase the 'political persuasiveness' of social protection.³⁰

Administrative capacity and an institutional home

A number of studies have drawn direct links between low levels of institutional capacity and bureaucratic integrity, and problems that states have concerning social protection (e.g. Besley et al 2003, Mathauer 2004, de Neubourg 2002). Indeed, some observers argue that argue that in states where bureaucratic integrity cannot be guaranteed, and where the poor are not well represented, it may be better to NOT implement social safety nets (Besley et al 2003, Iglesias and Palacios 2000).

²⁹ See Hickey (2005) for how this approach helps to explain pro-poor policy struggles in Uganda.

³⁰ A related issue here is to find informal ways of policy engagement. For example, the brown-bag lunches organised by one international consultant in Uganda helped to spread internal debate on and acceptance of the notion of social protection within key policy circles in Uganda.

However, as argued at the outset with reference to Botswana, the mere presence of financial and administrative capacity does not determine the success of social protection in Africa, a finding that further underlines the importance of taking the broader forms of politics discussed here seriously.³¹

Given evidence that the location of social protection programmes is often a key determinant of their success (Pritchett 2005), it is also important to think through the organisational politics of the agencies charged with implementing social protection programmes. For some social sector ministries/agencies, their inherent universalism may clash with a targeted approach that requires them to take a more punitive, disciplinary line. The involvement of public works ministries in employment generation schemes, when their *raison d'être* is to 'build stuff' rather than work with people, may be problematic, and suggests that agencies that have a mission to work with the most vulnerable (e.g. community development, Ministries of Social Development etc) are better-placed here.³² However, beyond a concern for overall 'fit' (i.e. with mission and capacity), there are few rules to guide policy-makers here (Pritchett 2005).

Societal factors

From a political sociology perspective, it is important to understand the social bases of institutional and political power, and '...to relate socio-economic conditions to political constitutions and institutional arrangements, and to relate these structural considerations to policy propensities' (Almond 1990: 24). Within work on social protection, the key dimensions of political sociology that have been considered are public attitudes; social fragmentation and inequality; and urban-rural differences.

Public attitudes

To some extent, the key question here concerns the extent of collective responsibility to provide for those unable to provide for themselves in a given society.³³ Although the particular influence of public attitudes in this respect is generally stressed more than it is explained in the literature, there is something of a consensus concerning the types of issues around which it is important to assess public attitudes when considering the depth and extent of political support for social protection. These are public attitudes on: the causes of poverty and broader issues of substantive justice; the role of the state; and procedural justice.

In terms of how people perceive poverty to be caused, the key issue seems to be whether the causes of poverty are linked to a perceived 'lack of effort' by the poor or 'wider forces' (Gelbach and Pritchett 1997, Pritchett 2005). Where it is the former, support is likely to be lower than in the latter (compare Tanaka (2004) on Thailand, with Webster (2002) on West Bengal, where poverty is blamed on the poor in the former, and largely on wider forces in the latter). This relates, again, to debates around the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. As argued by Green and Hulme (2005), poverty can only persist over time if wider social norms (which then become institutionalised) permit certain categories of people to remain poor. Although this issue is increasingly well-understood at the level of political elite attitudes (see below), there is less evidence on more popular attitudes regarding these categories.

³¹ See Mathauer (2004) for a comprehensive review of the key institutional and administrative capacities required to implement social protection programmes.

³² Also see Grindle (1997) for a more in-depth discussion of how organisational culture helps define the success of public agencies in developing countries.

³³ This chimes with the recent focus on 'solidarity' within research and policy-work regarding chronic poverty (CPRC 2004). However, and as noted above, it is difficult to relate the notion of solidarity to states in Africa – the Durkheimian notions of social cohesion that underpin the notion can be applied only selectively even in the European context.

However, it is important to note that this debate is itself shaped by the form of welfare institutions that are in place. As noted by Bonoli (2000: 447), “citizens living in polities where given discourses on social protection prevail in the public sphere, are likely to have their normative views influenced by the values that underpin such discussions”. The key issue here seems to be whether the system is universal or targeted (Gelbach and Pritchett 1997, Rothstein 2002). Given that the whole point of a universal welfare policy is not to discriminate amongst citizens, Rothstein (2002) notes that there is little point in trying to separate the poorest from the general public, and so little scope for discussions of who deserves or does not deserve help. However, where the selective principle over-rides the principal of universality, the issue is not one of what is generally fair or just, but “a question of what the well-adjusted majority should do about ‘the others’...public debate comes to turn not on what is generally fair but rather what is specifically necessary for ‘the others’” (Rothstein 2002: 910). It is possible that rights-based approaches offer a middle route through this potential impasse, whereby the right to a minimum standard of well-being justifies selective responses, while grounding them in a universal approach. Kabeer (2002) makes a related argument for targeting through a ‘rights-based’ approach in India to avoid problems of stigma.

The extent to which people demand or acknowledge the need for social protection may also relate to the extent to which they are optimistic regarding their future, or that of their children; for Graham (2002), the way in which people conceptualise issues of development – in terms of how both intergenerational mobility and stasis (underdevelopment) – occurs is central here. What is interesting from data on public attitudes southern Africa on this issue is that people are able to distinguish between their own progress and the overall direction and management of the economy. Although a majority of those questioned in most of the countries were generally pessimistic concerning their own trajectories, they were more hopeful for the next generation, and did not necessarily blame wider economic management for their condition. According to Bratton and Mattes (2003: 310), “...popular assessment of economic conditions are not simply reflections of personal circumstances”. First, this offers further grounds for rejecting the rational actor view of politics that underpins some work on (e.g. Gelbrach and Pritchett 1997, Pritchett 2005).³⁴ Second, and more important, “this disconnection between personal circumstances, national trends, and approval of government performance provides political elites with a measure of leeway, since it moderates political demands” (Bratton and Mattes 2003: 310).

The final dimension of social justice considered here concerns the extent to which citizens regard the goods to be distributed in relation to poverty to be valuable. Here, there seems to be a distinction between broad-based support for services such as education and health (also see Bratton and Mattes 2003) and assistance to those unable to provide for themselves, especially those who are able-bodied, which are more controversial (Graham 2002: 23).

However, it is also apparent that many citizens in Africa do see a wider role for the state to provide against vulnerability. In southern Africa, “...people remain committed to substantial role for the state and express skepticism about free markets” (Bratton and Mattes 2003: 312). Clear majorities of southern Africans approve of the state playing a strong role in terms of education, health, water and electricity (*ibid*: 309). Strong support remains for the state to play support roles in seasonal agricultural

³⁴ Bonoli (2000: 449) also notes that ‘there is little evidence that survey responses are determined by self-interest’.

credit, marketing of the main export commodity and job creation (but not housing).³⁵ The general support for user fees in southern Africa (*ibid*: 315) may make exemptions difficult to implement – perhaps suggesting that conditional cash transfers are a better way forward in this context – although the survey question from which this result is derived did include the explicit assumption that there would be a decline in quality if fees were abolished.

The need for sensitivity towards public attitudes on issues of procedural justice concerns the extent to which citizens trust the administrative system to work fairly and effectively, and deliver the goods in an impartial way. Where social protection programmes are associated with elite capture and clientelistic patterns of distribution (Graham 2002: 15), they may lose support in failing to prove the capacity to uphold norms of ‘procedural justice’ (Rothstein 2002: 911-2). According to Pritchett (2005), the key points are: is there a mechanism of appeal beyond the local administration of the project? And, do the criteria for access change dynamically over time? The effectiveness criterion refers mainly to the ‘demonstration effect’ of programmes.

Overall, and although public attitudes are clearly important, it might not be useful to view them as an independent variable concerning the politics of social protection, but rather as being closely inter-related to other parts of the framework discussed here.³⁶ Public attitudes may turn out to be contingent on more underlying and potentially more influential factors, such as institutional features (e.g. the type of system in place; colonial legacies; trust in a ‘developmental’ state); systemic factors (e.g. political leadership, whereby political leaders are able to shift public priorities) and also other societal issues (e.g. inequality). Moreover, public attitudes are fed through various elements of the political system (e.g. political parties, policy processes) before they achieve their ‘own’ influence. Even here, they form only one of a broader set of influences on policy-makers, making their difficult to evaluate. Bonoli (2000: 449) notes that survey responses “...can be best understood with reference to the mores and values that have traditionally dominated national practices and discourses”, perhaps suggesting that what is required is cultural and socio-historical research into these within each country context, rather than attitudinal surveys *per se*.³⁷

Civil society pressure

Few studies have accorded a significant role for civil society in pressuring governments to take up social protection programmes,³⁸ and de Waal (1997) notes that the lack of a political contract for famine relief in Africa reflects the lack of popular mobilization on such issues (see below). Case and Deaton (1998: 1334) note that the social pension in South Africa was not driven by demands from its beneficiary constituency. In more general terms, the poor do not constitute a political

³⁵ A greater degree of difference between nations emerges in terms of job creation (with a government role recommended by publics in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Lesotho, but less so in Mozambique and Namibia), reinforcing the argument that understandings of human security need to go beyond the role of the ‘welfare’ state and extend to issues of employment and labour relations (Bonoli 2000).

³⁶ This is to counter the somewhat voluntaristic tendency to view public attitudes as separate from more underlying structures/causes of these attitudes, such as Graham (2002: 6), who refers to research that reveals the way in which shifts in public attitudes preceded government policy changes.

³⁷ There are a set of methodological problems concerning attitudinal surveys more broadly, particularly those that seek to make cross-national comparisons. For example, data is aggregated beyond the level that makes it meaningful (i.e. the particular political communities); there is often an ideological bias within survey construction (e.g. the bias towards neoliberal economic and liberal democratic outcomes that is notable within the Afrobarometer surveys), and also the tendency of respondents to offer more public-minded answers than may necessarily be the case.

³⁸ An exception here is Kwon (2003), who argues that advocacy coalitions managed to ensure the uptake of the Minimum Living Standard Guarantee in Korea.

constituency, and the poorest are likely to be the least well-organised and furthest from centres of political activity (Hulme and Shepherd 2003, Hickey and Bracking 2005). A differentiated approach is required here, recognising the differing levels of political capability amongst different categories of poor and vulnerable people; for example, pensioners may have a louder voice and more time to use for campaigning than parents of poor children. However, it may be that constituencies for social protection will emerge as and when such programmes are implemented as part of national policy commitments.

Social fragmentation and inequality³⁹

The political sociology of 'democratic' politics is likely to be an influential factor concerning social protection, although there are two opposing views on how this might work. Research in Latin America tends to suggest that wide gaps between the middle strata and the poor, both in terms of income gap and social proximity (employment, residence), may reduce the scope for introducing social (Graham 2002). Nelson (2003) also argues that social protection policies require the support of the 'middle-poor', which is itself contingent on there being a large 'range of vulnerability'. Here, the middle/middle-poor strata move in and out of poverty on a regular basis, and feel the need for protective measures to be in place.⁴⁰ One implication from this approach would be that as the gap between poor and wealthy blacks in South Africa grows (Bratton and Mattes 2003), political support for social protection there may decline.

However, an alternative possibility here is that extreme economic inequality may actually be a driving force behind social protection policies in Africa. One observer notes that such inequalities are a "pre-condition" for the social pension system in South Africa and Namibia, both in terms of creating the need, and also making it much more feasible in terms of avoiding leakage to the non-poor (Devereux 2001: 22). The fact that Botswana – another of sub-Saharan Africa's unusually unequal societies – is one of the few other countries to have introduced a pension system adds further weight to this argument, and may suggest that many African countries have simply not reached the point of economic development and inequality whereby the impulse for social protection becomes pervasive.⁴¹

This issue may hinge on the particular forms of inequalities that gain political salience in particular contexts. In Southern Africa, there is a tendency to undertake intra-group comparisons rather than in relation to the whole population (Bratton and Mattes 2003), suggesting a focus on horizontal rather than vertical inequalities.⁴² The issue of relative deprivation is stressed here as a key determinate of political behaviour. What counts here are popular perceptions of how 'people like them' will fare under a given programme. Where the boundaries of these types of 'in-group' identification overlap closely with poverty rankings, then the potential for clashes over social

³⁹ Although some would argue that such factors become politically realised through public attitudes, and therefore do not constitute distinct variables, the evidence cited above on the extent to which people distinguish between their own condition and their view of society as a whole suggests otherwise.

⁴⁰ For Rothstein (2002), a shared sense of vulnerability is what explains public support for certain forms of social assistance in Sweden. While those forms of social assistance that are targeted at poorer groups receive little support, other selective benefits (e.g. unemployment benefit) that might be one day of use to "the crucial middle segment of the population" and which are seen to conform to the rules of procedural justice, maintain support (Rothstein 2002: 914).

⁴¹ Analyses of social protection in Indonesia seems to support this, whereby greater public pressure for social reforms were catalysed by growing realisations of inequality (Niles 1999: 26). However, it might not be wise to take 'inequality' as the key variable here. Botswana is a different case to Namibia and South Africa, not least because the ruling elite there do not appear to consider the poor to be part of their constituency.

⁴² Also see Frances Stewart (#) on horizontal inequality.

protection are clear. Where poverty is associated with a particular group, then this may prove to be more intractable, especially where such groups are notably different to either elites or (more importantly) the middle strata (on whom elites rely). A related issue here concerns the heterogeneity of the population. Support for social protection in US states is lower where heterogeneity is higher (Graham 2002: 12), suggesting that people will support programmes if they perceive that their racial group is likely to benefit. This finding appears to hold true (at least to some extent) in Southern Africa, where views on the role of the state are sharply divided in terms of racial background, although it is not clear how this works in relation to issue of ethnic rather than racial heterogeneity. However, if higher levels of ethnic fragmentation are associated with declines in welfare spending (Graham 2002: 12) then hopes are not high.

These issues stress that issues of social as well as economic difference play a role in determining the politics of social protection, and suggest the need for an analytical blend of political economy and political sociology approaches that are sensitive to the ways in which economic difference is mediated by other dimensions of difference, notably race and ethnicity.

Level of urbanisation

The final element of societal difference that appears to shape the politics of social protection concerns the level of urbanization. Although this is closely related to overall levels of development and industrialization in particular, there also appear to be a set of more specific political relationships that are worth highlighting. For some, the fact that urbanization tends to have a positive effect on welfare transfers “reveals that the welfare system serves the urban areas more than the countryside...rural residents tend to fall outside welfare transfers in poor countries”, not least because urban dwellers are considered more politically valuable by governments (Feng and Gizelis 2002: 228). It is notable that many of the efforts to mitigate the social costs of adjustment were focused on urban areas, such as the GAPVU project in Mozambique (Datt et al 1997). So, while rural voters are more willing to accept a role for the state in development matters than urbanites (Bratton and Mattes 2003), urbanites are cited as disengaged from rural poverty issues, and unwilling to extend their social rights to rural areas (de Waal 1997: 35). Importantly, urban-rural differences gain great political salience in the African context because of the particular way in which they relate to processes of state formation, and the extension of citizenship in colonial and post-colonial periods (Mamdani 196), a significant issue that is taken up in more depth below in relation to ‘political contracts’ for social protection.

The global politics of social protection

The global politics of social protection cuts across and closely informs the ways in which these forms of politics shape social protection. This global politics includes donor discourses, funding and policies on social protection and development more broadly; interrelationships between donors and states; relations between donors themselves; and also the broader global social policy context. Donors need to be considered as key political players within national-level development policy-making, particularly in what Harrison (2001) terms post-conditionality states, wherein donors have become closely integrated within national policy processes.

The first global impulse for social protection – realised in programmes aimed at reducing the social impacts of adjustment – was strangled both by the piecemeal and half-hearted efforts of donors, and their concurrent dedication to rolling back of the state, the only institution capable of delivering widespread forms of social protection in Africa (Putzel 2002: 3). The failure of donors to argue for a developmental state

within the prevailing policy agenda (Gore 2000) is central here. More broadly, the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state in Europe and beyond has arguably created a less conducive policy environment for social protection. Whereas the social pension system in South Africa was transplanted from European debates over the welfare state in the 1920s, such strong support for state-led programmes of social protection no longer exists. Rather, welfare debates have shifted from being conceptualised as the final phase in the historical process of extending the (social) rights of citizenship, to being seen as part of the crisis of modern citizenship, concerning how to exclude non-citizens from access (Turner 2001).

The priority of social protection on the international development agenda is significant, and observers note its location as the last and lowliest arrival to an already crowded poverty policy agenda. This 'last among equals' status reflects the wider sequencing of reforms within the global PRSP process currently being rolled out across developing and transitional countries (Conway and Norton 2002, Marcus and Wilkinson 2002), and which is directly reflected within recipient country contexts (Hickey 2003). To the extent that donors shape the politics of what is possible through their funding levels and agenda-setting powers, this does not augur well.

The specific conceptualisation of social protection is also significant here in terms of shaping both the likely impact of donor policies on social protection and their political persuasiveness at national levels. To the extent that the global discourse on social protection is conceptualised in terms of 'risk management' (e.g. Holzmann and Jørgensen 2000), and becomes increasingly associated with 'ropes' rather than 'nets' (or trampolines), the relevance for the destitute and chronic poor is likely to remain minimal (Barrientos et al 2004, McKinnon 2004). Here, a more expansive agenda is arguably required (e.g. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004), particularly in terms of making the agenda politically persuasive to political leaders.

Finally, Smith and Subbarao (2003) also draw attention to the importance of donor co-ordination on this policy issue. As Dijkstra (2002) has argued, an important criteria for successful donor policies relates to the extent to which donors sing from the same hymn-sheets. A recent World Bank (2004) review of the forthcoming Ethiopia Productive Safety Nets Project refers explicitly to the fact that it has seven donors harmonized around it, suggesting an awareness of this.

4. What are the political implications of social protection programmes?

"A safety-net programme is more than a transfer of resources from 'haves' to 'have-nots'; it is a relationship of power that has an impact, often in multiple and unforeseen ways, on the society in which it operates" (Devereux 2002: 673).

The political implications and impacts of social protection programmes are more open to conjecture than persuasive evidence. Nonetheless, a number of possibilities are explored in the literature, concerning the broadly progressive political impact in terms of increased solidarity, social cohesion, political stability, citizenship and rights. Against this can be cited the tendency for social protection programmes to maintain the status quo, including patrimonial forms of politics and high levels of social inequality.⁴³

⁴³ There is a wide range of possible and as yet unexplored implications that may arise if a state were to institutionalise social protection programmes. These would depend on the form of the social protection programmes put in place, but could include shifting political discourse towards greater recognition of the needs of the poorest, the creation of stronger constituencies for social protection, and the incremental development of greater administrative capacity.

With particular reference to pensions, HelpAge claim that, “Even small cash transfers can create feelings of solidarity” (2004: 38). Relatedly, Sagner and Mtati (1999) argue that the practice of pension sharing in South Africa offers “a political model that conceptualises duty as the inner bond of the social world”, suggesting that social protection can develop obligations as well as fulfil the rights of citizenship. Here, the pension has provided older people with a means by which they can be re-integrated into the household, linking to wider calls for cohesion. However, this should not obscure the extent to which pensions have led to increased inter-generational exploitation and tension (*ibid.*). Samson (2002) claims that introducing a basic income grant in South Africa would result in increased levels of social capital and cohesion, but this is largely speculative. A further political spin-off follows the general rule that social policies create constituencies. Here, “Once governments have made a commitment to pension provision, it is difficult to stop” (HelpAge 2004: 38). This points a way forward in terms of creating virtuous circles between politics and social protection.

Such benefits might be particularly closely associated with rights-based forms of social protection (Piron 2004). The model here would be the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS), which reveals the potential of interventions that use a rights-based approach to form a contract around social protection that can be actively claimed and negotiated by people as citizens rather than as clients (Joshi and Moore 2000). However, not only has MEGS often failed to reach the poorest groups, very few social protection schemes in Africa have been established as a ‘right’ of participants (de Waal 1997), and, as discussed below social protection has tended to reflect and re-enforce the boundaries of citizenship in Africa, particularly between rural subjects and urban citizens (Mamdani 1996).

For some observers, targeted or selective forms of social protection inevitably create political problems, “because they must allow local administrators a wide field for discretionary action” (Rothstein 2002: 912). Such systems – often based on means-testing – inevitably creates suspicions in state-citizen relations, with each side suspected of attempting to misuse the system, either through rent-seeking behaviour or fraud. Moreover, the dividing of citizens into different categories may be seen as negating the integrative function of citizenship, marking some as inferior and thus further reducing their self-respect (Walzer 1983). The discretionary aspect of many targeted social protection programmes has led them to be closely associated with corruption and elite capture.⁴⁴ However, work on PROGRESA shows how patron-client structures can be avoided through the use of strict, centralised criteria for household eligibility.

In terms of political inclusion and related issues of political stability, social protection is likely to be used to shore up support for a ruling regime, than in a wider sense of ‘empowerment’ (Niles 1999, Feng and Gizelis 2002).⁴⁵ Particularly during periods of structural adjustment, social safety nets were used as a means of placating oppositional forces.⁴⁶ Feng and Gizelis (2002) strongly suggest that welfare spending is used by regimes to stay in power, and can be associated with reduced political instability in this sense. Furthermore, increased welfare spending can reduce the

⁴⁴ Safety net programmes are possibly overly associated with charges of corruption, because of the more exacting standards that they are held up to, in terms of fairness, process and effectiveness (Pritchett 2005: 24).

⁴⁵ Here, programmes are undertaken in a top-down manner, with little scope for partnerships to be built between the poor, NGOs and government (Niles 1999).

⁴⁶ In Uganda, it is arguable that attempts to deal with high levels of chronic poverty in the North through a piecemeal social action fund may serve to further underline the exclusion of a region and further exacerbate tensions (Hickey 2003).

likelihood of irregular government change, increasing the chance of the same party remaining in office (*ibid*: 229). Social protection programmes may then be more closely associated with the conservative maintenance of the political status quo, rather than potentially more progressive forms of political change.

There are similar concerns that social protection schemes generally fail to engage with the structural conditions that deny people rights and leave them vulnerable in the first place. For example, the Drought Relief Programme in Botswana ignored the fact that the poorest people, the destitutes and Sans, are those without any formal land rights (Good 1999: 197). The programme became part of a particular style of benevolent patrimonialism, designed to pacify the popular vote while serving elite interests. This appears to be a problem for excluded groups more broadly, with Sabates-Wheeler and Kabeer (2003) arguing that more fundamental legislative changes are required to ensure that women gain adequate social protection.

5. From analysis to explanations: a political contract for social protection?

“The establishment of permanent social assistance ultimately requires the development of a politically sustainable contract...” (Graham 2002: 1).

This paper has so far explored a range of political factors that seem to shape social protection in Africa, to suggest the ways and extent to which this has happened to date, and to refer also to the inter-relationships between the factors. This section suggests that the alignment of these factors in ways that directly shape particular forms of social protection can be understood through the notion of a ‘political contract’. This section introduced the notion of a political contract, before examining both its analytical and normative contributions to the study and promotion of social protection in Africa.

Conceptual issues

The notion of ‘contract’ referred to here draws on 17th- and 18th-century notions of ‘social contract’ rather than 19th-century conceptions of the ‘classical law of contract’, and has more recently been associated with the work of John Rawls on social justice. This notion is far from uncontroversial in political theory, with some critics noting, for example, that such contracts tend to produce ‘free riders’ rather than active citizens (Jasay 1990). Within development studies, Nussbaum (2003) has argued that Sen’s ‘capabilities’ approach provides a clearer route to social justice than notions of a social contract. However, it is argued here that the notion of a social contract can be coherently tied to a project of social justice, whereby the strengthening of contracts within certain political communities leads certain kinds of long-term poverty and inequality to be viewed as unacceptable.

The notion of a ‘social contract’ has entered development debates through arguably the most contested debate within politics and poverty reduction, that regarding the links between democracy and development. Starting from a specific focus on anti-famine policies, Alex de Waal (1996, 2000) has argued, contra Sen, that democracy alone is not enough to counter famine. In seeking to explain why civic and political rights have not been enough to protect people’s social and economic rights in terms of poverty and chronic malnutrition in India, yet have succeeded in preventing famine, de Waal finds that the answer lies not so much in the trappings of liberal democracy (e.g. free press, parliament), but in a ‘social contract’ between state and citizenry. In India, this emerged on the basis of mass mobilisation, whereby the nationalist leaders of Congress struck a deal with the ‘masses’ on the issue of famine (1999: 14). Preventing famine thus formed a key plank within the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and thus of the postcolonial political settlement. This contract

has been maintained through the institutionalisation of early warning systems, a high level of technical understanding concerning the analysis of famines and policy responses across sectors, and an educated public concerning their rights on this issue.

Such contracts can be ruptured by either economic or political crisis, and tend to be formed around particularly intense periods of political activity, involving some degree of re-drawing political relations between state and citizenry. The movement towards independence (both in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the more recent wave in the early 1990s), to which we can add both the more recent moves to independence (e.g. Namibia, South Africa), and countries such as Uganda where periods of conflict in recent decades have resulted in a new social contract begin formed. Finally, elections arguably constitute a 'weaker' form of political moment around which such contracts might be re-drawn, withdrawn or consolidated.

Political contracts and social protection in Africa: an analytical approach

A series of social protection policies and programmes in Africa are clearly illuminated when read through this lens of a contract between state and citizens. The social pensions in both South Africa and Namibia – established for White South Africans and 'Coloureds' in 1926, and extended to Blacks and Indians at a lower rate in 1944 – were discriminatory towards certain non-citizens and then second-class citizens. The 'uniform' payments that were introduced in 1965 maintained a roughly 11:4:1 ratio between Whites:Coloureds:Blacks/Indians, and were designed to reinforce this form of adverse incorporation, primarily along urban-rural lines (Devereux 2001: 4). Here, the social pension was aligned closely with the policy of separate development; differential payments were designed to keep Blacks out of urban areas. Interestingly, this approach appeared to continue into the post-colonial era in Namibia at least (Devereux 2001: 19). Moreover, these policies changed as the terms of the broader social contract altered. The erosion of apartheid, including the homelands policy, brought more citizens within the contract, a process accelerated and institutionalised through the instalment of the ANC. In Namibia, the SWAPO government pledged their commitment to this policy and tried to increase its coverage. A means of reversing discrimination, one of the few direct efforts of redistribution from whites to blacks.

Elsewhere in Africa, it is the lack of a political contract for social protection between states and citizens around issues of social protection that constitutes arguably the largest barrier. In the absence of a binding contract, social protection policies are liable to become instigated for other reasons (e.g. political risk assessment) and ultimately distorted by other prevailing forms of politics (such as patrimonialism, more powerful political interests). An example here is the Drought Relief Programme in Botswana, which, driven by a sense of administrative rather than political duty, became increasingly diverted towards the interests of those rural elites who sustained the ruling party through political patronage (de Waal 1997, Good 1999). "The duty to prevent famine was closer to an administrative ethic than a directive. Above all, there was never an intention to nurture a corresponding right to relief" (de Waal 1997: 30). In Uganda, the absence of a contract between the National Resistance Movement and northerners arguably informs the tendency to deal with the high levels of chronic poverty in that region through piecemeal social funds that are further diluted by the politics of patronage.

Other dimensions of inclusion and exclusion regarding these contracts are apparent in terms of employment and location. Before the 1990s, and with few exceptions, social security schemes in Africa were limited to wage earners, and often only civil servants (Gruat 1990: 409). Certain forms of labour have nearly always been

excluded, particularly seasonal or casual labour. This again suggests that certain categories of people are seen as citizens as opposed to others. De Waal notes that government employees and townspeople were generally the only ones in Africa to be targeted for food relief during the colonial era (1997: 29). The strongest political contract to emerge was around the right of urbanites to food (de Waal 1997: 31), reflecting the wider finding that “the welfare system serves the urban areas more than the countryside...rural residents tend to fall outside welfare transfers in poor countries”, (Feng and Gizelis 2002: 228). This was the explicit aim of pensions policy in South Africa, where ‘tradition’ was held up as the means by which ‘natives’ would save themselves, and which state-led support would only undermine (Devereux 2001). This is understandable in terms of the fact that social protection was first and foremost an attempt to mitigate the effects of structural adjustment, which were felt most clearly in urban areas, and also in public services. However, it has deeper roots in processes of state formation and the politics of citizenship in Africa. Those who formed part of the racialised sphere of urban ‘civil society’ gained access to public goods, while rural people remained subject to the decentralised despotism of traditional authority.

A key problem here is that food contracts were never politicised in Africa at these key points, especially the late colonial era (de Waal 1997: 31). This is also the case across the range of potential issues and constituencies related to social protection (e.g. pensions). In terms of disability, certain forms may be recognised (e.g. those injured fighting for the regime) as opposed to others. This in turn suggests that different types of contracts will be required for each sector, rather than searching for a general political contract for social protection. The politics of food will differ from that of disability and pensions. However, a common feature is that contracts have not tended to come about in Africa via ‘bottom-up’ forms of popular mobilisation, aside from food riots at various points over the 20th Century. Rather, the challenge seems to be how ensure that top-down interventions, often implemented through the politics of patronage, can be transformed into policy legacies that citizens are able to hold regimes to account for.⁴⁷

Relocating social protection within a political contracts approach

Within current social policy debates, there is an increasing focus on ‘contractualism’ as a conceptual means of establishing the state’s long-term rationale for challenging inequality and injustice (Jayausuriya 2002), including social protection (Ramia 2002). This has increasingly been reflected in international development debates concerning social protection. As such, and in addition to offering an analytical tool for understanding the links between politics and poverty reduction, the notion of a social contract can also offer a normative approach to public policy that has particular relevance to the chronically poor. Here, it is argued that the notion of a social contract can relocate social protection within a project of redistributive justice (Ramia 2002) that is arguably required to underpin a long-term challenge to chronic poverty (Hickey and Bracking 2005). In particular, undertaking social protection within the broader remit of social contractualism offers a means of avoiding the tendency for social protection to be interpreted and delivered as a form of ‘patrimonialism’ (Ramia 2002: 49). As originally understood by Rousseau, the very basis of contractualism is citizenship rather than the patronage associated with clientelist forms of political relationship. It is along these lines that Jayusiraya (2002: 316) argues that contractualism “must be conceived as a political relationship that places a premium on the political capacity of the individual to bargain within an adequate range of available choices and options”. In framing the recipient as an actor rather than a passive recipient, the empowering potential of social protection remains in tact and

⁴⁷ Accountability rather than participation is the key here (Brett 2004).

transcends the 'hand-out' culture with which it is currently associated in many countries in Africa.

6. Towards some policy implications

****VERY TENTATIVE****

Overall, it is argued here that donors may be best advised to focus on the systemic forms of politics that shape social protection in Africa, supporting them in ways that strengthens both the institutional and societal support for social protection over the long term. The over-arching aim is to strengthen and extend political contracts for social protection where they exist, and to work towards their establishment where they do not, in part through a policy of 'doing no harm'. This means avoiding the temptation to regulate activities where institutional arrangements exist, but rather add material support and political advocacy (de Waal 1997: 219). A key challenge is to support 'politically progressive constituencies' that are ready to act from a sense of solidarity, and that might begin to provide the forms of popular mobilisation required to secure political contracts around key issues (*ibid.*). However, donors are arguably better placed to work towards a global contract for social protection. This will involve increased donor co-ordination; increased donor support for a holistic conception of social protection; increased financial commitments; and a stronger prioritisation of social protection within the poverty agenda, one that is more fully 'joined-up' with issues of economic growth and governance.

At the institutional level, the clearest finding is that developmental (rather than downsized, neoliberal) states are essential to effective forms of social protection. This needs to be reflected in policies towards the role of the state in development (Gore 2000). Popular support for social protection is somewhat reliant/boosted by positive readings of how the state can cope with such a role.

In terms of systemic factors, support for the institutionalisation of political party systems (rather than electoral procedures per se) is important, and if difficult, there should at least be a 'do no harm' policy here (Putzel 2004). Work on issues of administrative capacity and institutional location should recognise the importance of organisational culture and 'fit' as much as the technical aspects of capacity-building. There are a range of strengths and weaknesses regarding whether or not to pursue social protection policies through mainstream bureaucratic structures or to establish parallel channels. Evidence that the latter approach is unlikely to either reach the poorest or attain the forms of politics required to underpin a commitment to this (e.g. contract, strong forms of decentralised governance), needs to be played off against evidence that suggests that the flexibility and accountability that such mechanisms can offer may have real benefits in terms of reaching the poor.

Donors need to frame their policy engagements in relation to the prevailing political discourse of each country. This means relating social protection to development (not just poverty reduction), and economic growth in particular (e.g. Farrington et al 2004).⁴⁸ Identifying areas of social policy that have strong domestic political support, and think through how social protection might work through/within these – as with food for the poorest through schools – is another promising approach. A more ambitious approach would involve promoting analyses of poverty that stresses the relational as well as the residual causes of poverty: policies that favour the poorest

⁴⁸ Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) link social protection to the empowerment agenda, but it is not clear that this is persuasive at the national level, where concerns with productivity predominate.

groups are more likely when it is accepted that poverty results more from wider forces than individual 'laziness'.

Donors are closely implicated in the politics of policy processes. Capacity-building measures for advocates of social protection (e.g. economics training for social sector ministries) would help even up the current imbalances within such debates. In order to ensure that social protection can target the chronic poor, and that political discourse can be informed more precisely regarding levels and types of chronic poverty, there is an urgent need for more and better data on chronic and severe forms of poverty. This requires better and more panel datasets, qualitative (often PPA) data on the lived experience of poverty dynamics, and also data on inequality. This extends to the need for policy monitoring systems that disaggregate findings by these groups.

At the level of societal factors, donors can engage in capacity-building efforts with those civic organisations – particularly membership groups – representing the poorest. In terms of public attitudes, and in addition to funding research work that looks at public attitudes on issues related to social protection, the design of programmes needs to account for the impact that this will have on public perceptions. Targeting, even if more politically acceptable, may tend to miss the poorest, who are unable to voice their demands (Graham 2002: 18). This supports the general argument that 'more targeting may be less for the poor', on the grounds of political supportability.

The case for donors to make greater use of political analysis in their policy work on social protection is stated most boldly by Gelbach and Pritchett (1997), who argue that the most technically optimal policy response (e.g. targeting) may benefit the poor less than a 'political equilibrium' approach. This means that a concern with politics cannot be 'added-on' after the usual technical analysis, but is a 'first order' question. There is a range of potential benefits of taking political analysis more seriously, in terms of the timing and pace of reforms; the institutional location for particular programmes; the receptiveness in terms of elite and public attitudes and so on. Importantly, an analysis politics of social protection in a particular country may reveal that the political costs of promoting social protection may be too high – there may be other elements of the reform agenda that need political capital to be expended on them (Grindle 2002).

7. Future research and final thoughts

The research presented here remains work in progress within an under-developed field. There is a need for more theoretical refinement and methodological testing of the holistic framework of analysis suggested here, and also greater empirical testing of the contract approach within specific country contexts. More broadly, there is a need for more comparative analysis concerning the politics of social protection in Latin America and South Asia, in order to arrive at a synthesised approach. Primary case-study research is required to uncover the particular forms of politics that have underpinned specific programmes and reforms. This could be differentiated by 'sector' or type of social protection (e.g. food, pensions, income, labour), and also examine whether or not 'nets' or 'ropes' are characterised by different forms of politics. Specific research could usefully focus on how to promote and design social protection interventions in ways that help develop broad-based political constituencies for social protection; the scaling-up of social protection projects into programmes; and the forms of progressive political discourse that social protection initiatives can be constructively related to.

Overall, the nexus of politics and social protection in Africa appears to be entering an important transitional phase. For those national forms of social protection embedded within the political trajectory of particular countries – such as the social pension schemes in Namibia and South Africa – the challenge is one of sustaining the political contract that seems to have developed for continued (or expanded) spending and provision in this area. In countries where more imperfect but still nationally-driven efforts to protect people against vulnerability (e.g. Botswana, Uganda), the issue is one of extending this contract to include the poorest people. Arguably the greater challenge faces those countries social protection programmes are more closely associated with donor-related efforts to mitigate the social costs of structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s. Here, the problem for both states and donors is one of breaking free from a largely negative set of relationships between politics and social protection. A key challenge is for donors is not only to avoid damaging such contracts where they exist, but to find ways of working that support the development of such contracts, particularly through a stronger focus on ‘developmental’ states.

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