

Building leadership for social protection in Uganda

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1. Introduction

Social protection is globally recognised as a critical tool for reducing poverty and inequality; enhancing income security and the resilience to shocks; enhancing human capital and productivity and fostering social cohesion, political stability and inclusive growth. In many countries, the social protection system is a key pillar of social service delivery alongside health and education. However, in Uganda, less than 5 percent of Uganda's population is covered by any social protection scheme.

To address this challenge, in June 2010, Uganda's cabinet approved the Expanding Social Protection (ESP) Programme with a purpose to "*embed a national social protection system that benefits the poorest as a core element of Uganda's national policy, planning and budgeting processes*". The programme is implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) with financial support from the Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid. Over the last 10 years, DFID and Irish Aid have provided financial support worth £50 million and £87 million towards phase I (2010-2015) and phase II (2016-2021) respectively.

The programme aimed to achieve its objectives through successful implementation of four outputs:

- 1) building government leadership and capacity for social protection policy and delivery
- 2) formulating a national social protection policy and fiscal framework
- 3) Implementation of a Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE) pilot to test the administrative feasibility and generate local evidence of the impact of social transfers
- 4) To build awareness, public support and commitment to social protection

2. What makes ESP a politically smart programme?

Commitment to a clear and shared long-term vision

The ESP programme was designed with a clear vision and purpose: to embed a national social protection system over the long-term. Following a thorough considering of the development context, political economy and risks to the sustainability of the investment, the programme designers articulated a clear strategy for evolving the system over time. ESP management identified six dimensions of embedding around which the programme aimed to achieve positive change during its lifetime:

- 1) increased social protection coverage
- 2) the adoption of social protection in the political discourse
- 3) more positive attitudes to social protection
- 4) consensus on the scope of the social protection sub-sector
- 5) social protection policy mainstreaming
- 6) means to deliver social protection

With a clear focus established, adequate resources were allocated to cover the programme's operational requirements, and to deliver technical assistance for capacity

enhancement, policy development and coordination, monitoring and evaluation, research and learning, communications advocacy and influencing.

Balancing focus on technical leadership and political economy

By design, the programme aimed to balance investments in technical leadership and delivery capacity while nurturing the political commitment necessary for sustaining a national social protection system. The programme outputs and implementation approaches were premised on a comprehensive assessment of the social, economic, institutional and political context; and supported by a robust planning, resourcing, monitoring and evaluation and risk management framework.

Accordingly, the first three outputs focus on the typical technocratic process of policy formulation, coordination and enhancement of delivery capabilities. Technical leadership would be enhanced through government-wide social protection training, research and analysis, knowledge management, as well as establishment of delivery systems and policy coordination structures. The fourth output aimed to address the dearth of knowledge and support for social protection among key policy makers.

Therefore, ESP was conceived from the start as an influencing programme requiring a unique combination of capacity building, communication, advocacy and influencing strategies over time. Indeed, one of the key design features of ESP-its flagship SAGE pilot-was intended to achieve multiple objectives namely:

- i. directly tackling poverty through provision of regular, predictable social transfers to poor and vulnerable households
- ii. testing a range of implementation modalities for efficient, cost effective and scalable social transfer schemes.
- iii. contributing to national policy-making processes by generating evidence on the social, economic, political and institutional impacts of social transfers; and more importantly,
- iv. providing a point of reference for policymakers, the media, civil society and the private sector to build acceptance of and commitment to social protection.

Commitment to sustainable systems development

In order to address the capacity needs and risks identified in the institutional appraisal, a Programme Management Unit (PMU) headed by a senior government staff and fully staffed by international, regional and national staff was established. District offices were set up within local government structures and MoUs signed to foster collaboration for effective implementation of the SAGE programme. This was critical for alignment with government systems for long term sustainability.

A management agent/ fund manager was appointed to oversee development partner funds and manage fiduciary risks while ensuring delivery of high-quality technical assistance. This afforded the programme the flexibility to navigate slow bureaucratic processes and to build strategic advocacy partnerships that would have been otherwise impossible in a purely government set up.

The programme also supported establishment and management of national level coordination committees comprising of key stakeholders-government, donors and civil society. The committees provide an important platform for enhancing technical leadership, policy dialogue and mutual accountability in the social protection sub-sector.

Evidence based advocacy and influencing

One of the striking features of the ESP programme is its advocacy and influencing strategy designed to build high-level government commitment to social protection. The strategy outlines a systematic process and strategies ((see box 1) to influence policy makers to support the establishment of a national social protection system.

Box 1: ESP advocacy and influencing objectives and strategies

Objective 1: To build tangible support for the national scale up of the Senior Citizens Grant (SCG) amongst key decision makers and those who directly influence them

- i. Build awareness and understanding on the impact and feasibility of direct income support in general and the SCG amongst political leaders, MoFPED, targeted sections of civil society, the media and development partners
- ii. Build awareness and understanding of the SCG roll out plans and annual financing requirements;
- iii. Motivate and equip champions with the knowledge, information, materials, financial resources & strategies to advocate for a Government financed extension of the SCG to their peers.

Objective 2: To build knowledge and support for a national social protection system among key policy makers and influencers

- i. Generate evidence of the rationale for, impact as well as administrative and financial viability of a government led national social protection system
- ii. Expose target audiences to relevant impact & feasibility evidence; scale up & financing plans, involving relevant stakeholders in generation of evidence where feasible

Objective 3: To build capacity for advocacy and influencing within the ESP-II-PMU and strategic partners

- i. Ensure quality and appropriate advocacy capacity building support for the PMU
- ii. Strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of advocacy partners

Source: Expanding Social Protection - Advocacy and Influencing strategy, June 2017

The programme invested in the strategic generation and use of evidence to demonstrate administrative feasibility as well as the social, economic and political impacts of social protection. Independent impact evaluation studies, programme monitoring reports, study tours, field visits and other analytical were complimented with international evidence to enhance social protection knowledge, change perceptions and build support for social protection among key policy makers and the general public.

Strategic partnerships and engagements

The programme actively sought strategic partnerships and engagements with a diverse range of stakeholders including academia, researchers, policy think-tanks and civil society. These engagements aimed to leverage existing partner capabilities while providing support and exposure to deepen social protection knowledge and programming capacity.

For example, the PMU worked with Economic Policy Research Centre in Uganda (EPRC) to provide analytical support for programme design and policy development; taking advantage of their credibility and knowledge management capabilities to jointly host public dialogue events. In addition, joint analytical work and social protection training engagement with key departments in the Ministry of Finance and the National Planning Authority were used to address concerns on fiscal sustainability and demonstrate economy-wide impacts of social protection.

As a programme embedded in a government department, it would have been difficult to effectively execute grassroots and political advocacy initiatives. Therefore, funding and technical backstopping was provided to support selected civil society partners. These partnerships have been critical to building stronger government commitment and an accountable social protection system. The Uganda Social Protection Platform (USPP) played a key role in building awareness and grassroots demand for social protection in Uganda. Through their district networks, USPP played an important role in strengthening social accountability, awareness building and advocating for increased government commitment to social protection. Within Parliament, the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Social Protection (UPFSP) has been critical to mobilising cross-party support necessary for appropriating resources towards national roll-out of the SAGE pilot.

Long-term support and commitment from Development Partners

Over the last decade, Development Partners have demonstrated strong commitment to Uganda's social protection. Their support has enhanced Uganda's exposure to the international social protection discourse and helped to build a strong case for investing in a national social protection system. Beyond the financial contributions and in-kind technical assistance, development partners have been actively engaged in supporting high-level advocacy including participation in exchange visits, policy dialogue meetings and direct lobbying for support. Due to a shared focus on the long-term, development partners allowed programme managers the flexibility to adapt to a dynamic programme environment. Where necessary, programme output indicators and milestone targets have been revised based on thoughtful review of context and progress.

A Development Partner Social Protection Working Group comprising of agencies involved in the sub-sector-World Bank, WFP, UNICEF, SIDA, the European Union, USAID and the UNHCR was established to provide a platform to building synergy and aligning support and messaging to Government plans.

3. Key highlights of progress towards an inclusive national social protection system

Government commitment to financing social protection

Building on the effective delivery systems developed, evidence of impact and strong public support, the Senior Citizens Grant (SCG) component of SAGE has been gradually expanded from 15 pilot districts in 2015 to 135 districts nationwide. Notably, government has assumed a significant share of funding as donor contributions reduce in line with the rollout plan. From providing staff and other in-kind support in phase 1, government allocation to the programme increased from UGX 9 billion (£1.9m) in 2015/16 to UGX 62.88 billion (£13.4 m) in 2019/20; and will increase to UGX 107.5 billion (£22.9 m) in 2020/21.

Political support

The SAGE scheme enjoys strong political support in both cabinet and parliament; which has been critical to securing significant funding for its rollout. This is a direct outcome of: a) the work of social protection champions nurtured through the ESP influencing initiatives; b) grassroots advocacy by the Uganda Social Protection Platform; and c) national level political and budget advocacy initiatives led by the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Social Protection.

Long term vision and strategy for social protection

Government has formulated a National Social Protection Policy and enhanced its institutional systems and capabilities- laying a strong foundation for enhancing social protection coverage. From 10 years ago where any discussion of social protection was characterised by scepticism, misconceptions and outright opposition, social protection has gained significant prominence within the media and the development policy discourse in Uganda. Positive reports and discussions on social protection financing are frequently featured in national and local media channels; and presently, social protection is being discussed as part of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government has initiated a high-level dialogue to agree a long-term vision and strategy to finance an inclusive national social protection as key part of the national development strategy. The emerging vision makes concrete proposals for a multi-tiered system of comprising a combination of direct income support and social insurance programmes to address life cycle risks from early childhood and school age, youth, working age and old age. These proposals will be key to addressing the coverage gap particularly especially among workers in the informal economy. The vision will guide development of robust programme plans within the National Development Planning Framework and future advocacy guide for key sector reforms and social protection financing.

4. Conclusion

The Expanding Social Protection Programme is turning a corner in its quest to embed a national social protection system in Uganda. Strong foundations capabilities have been built for policy development, coordination and programme delivery; while the strategic dissemination of evidence has helped to make a case for increasing public investment in social protection. But much of this achievement is attributed to the heavy technical assistance provided by development partners. This support has been critical to extending global social protection influences to Uganda and nurturing a committed team of champions to promote it locally. The true test of Uganda's success towards embedding the system will be how in much the investment in social protection will be financed locally. A draft social security vision has set a target to increase public spending on direct income support from 0.7 percent to 1.5 percent of GDP by 2030.

As development partner funding (and influence) gradually reduces, and government assumes a more prominent role in financing social protection, stronger leadership will be required to consolidate the progress achieved to date. The emerging coalition of Uganda's social protection champions (government technocrats, politicians and civil society) will need to double the advocacy effort if transformative change in financing and coverage is to be realised.