

The local politics of social protection

Programmatic versus non-programmatic distributive politics in Kenya's cash transfer programmes



In brief

- A feature of many social protection programmes in Africa and elsewhere around the world is the delegation of significant responsibility to leaders and organisations at the local level.
- This brief looks at the extent to which social programmes are implemented programmatically—that is, according to the formal rules—or non-programmatically—that is, in a manner subject to political influence.
- To address this question, the author analyses the local implementation of social programmes in Kenya, with a focus on the country's expanding cash transfer programmes.
- To generate local constituency level indicators of programmatic and non-programmatic implementation, the study involved an original survey and interviews with local-level bureaucrats in 112 of Kenya's 290 constituencies.
- The author finds that Kenya's main cash transfer programmes are implemented programmatically in a large share of constituencies despite Kenya's reputation to the contrary.
- The evidence suggests that programme design and formal rules guiding the beneficiary selection process play a central role in discouraging local politicians from attempting to influence the cash transfer programmes.

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Introduction

Social protection programmes are on the rise in Africa and elsewhere around the world (Cirillo and Tebaldi, 2016; Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2012). The number of non-contributory social assistance programmes in Africa — which includes, for example, cash for work programmes, conditional and unconditional cash transfers, free health insurance, and skills training— tripled in the 15-year period between 2000 and 2015 (Cirillo and Tebaldi, 2016).

In principle, social programmes are designed to alleviate poverty, and there is evidence that programmatic social programmes — where the distribution of benefits is guided by transparent and formal rules and access is not contingent on political behaviour or related to political considerations (Stokes et al., 2013) — can have positive welfare effects (e.g. Fernald, Gertler, and Neufeld, 2008). Yet social programmes can also be subject to intense political manipulation, which can undermine their welfare impact and threaten the political autonomy of the poor (Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez, and Magaloni, 2016; Stokes, 2005). Indeed social protection programmes can provide resources to fuel non-programmatic distributive politics (De La O, 2015; Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez, and Magaloni, 2016). When non-programmatic distributive politics guides the allocation of resources, political elites influence the programmes for political advantage and, in some cases, make access to benefits contingent on the political behaviour of potential beneficiaries (Hicken, 2011; Stokes, 2007). Under what conditions will social programmes be implemented programmatically versus non-programmatically?

To address this question, this project focuses on local level programme implementation. This focus is important because a feature of many social programmes in Africa and elsewhere around the world is the delegation of significant responsibility, including a role in beneficiary selection, to leaders and organisations at the local level. Although this can create opportunities for political manipulation, there is often significant within-country local variation in the extent to which the same social programme is implemented in a programmatic versus non-programmatic way (Weitz-Shapiro, 2012, 2014).

This study analyses the local implementation of social programmes in Kenya, with a focus on the country's expanding cash transfer programmes. Although these are national programmes, local committees, including the Constituency Social Assistance Committee that includes the Member of Parliament, are involved in various aspects of programme implementation, including beneficiary selection. This structure creates scope for political elites to attempt to influence the programmes in a non-programmatic manner (Wanyama and McCord, 2017). Kenya is also a context where the conventional narrative suggests that non-programmatic distributive politics is highly prevalent.

To generate local constituency-level indicators of programmatic and non-programmatic implementation, the study involved an original survey and interviews with over 300 local-level bureaucrats in 112 of Kenya's 290 constituencies. The target subjects for the survey were sub-county officers, who in Kenya are in charge of the day-to-day implementation of the programmes. The survey data is supplemented with in-depth qualitative interviews with these bureaucrats in a subset of constituencies. In total, over 300 bureaucrats and committee members were surveyed across constituencies.

This policy brief summarises the first set of results from this research.

Findings

The first main result is that, despite Kenya's reputation for being a setting where non-programmatic distributive politics — including clientelism and the politicisation of public service provision — is endemic, Kenya's main cash transfer programmes are largely implemented programmatically in a large share of constituencies. Even when local political actors do involve themselves in programme implementation it is often (though not always) through a form of programmatic constituency service. For example, helping to raise awareness of the programme among constituents; identifying qualified and needy constituents; and helping constituents with requests to help navigate the system in order to access benefits. This finding suggests that pockets of programmatic politics can emerge and solidify even in contexts where non-programmatic distributive politics is prevalent.

The second set of analyses focus on explaining the relative prevalence of programmatic distribution and, relatedly, variation in programmatic versus non-programmatic distribution across constituencies. The analysis of the qualitative interviews and the surveys generates several conclusions.

Programme design and the formal rules guiding beneficiary selection play an important role. The evidence shows that features of the programme design both discourage local politicians from attempting to influence the cash transfer programmes and shield the programmes from the impact of political manipulation efforts. This evidence suggests that formal rules can be consequential and binding, even in local environments where the conventional wisdom would predict informal norms and relationships to dominate.

Citizen access to accurate information about the programmes also plays an important role in facilitating programmatic implementation. Where bureaucrats and other actors are successful in educating constituents about the programmes — who is responsible for the resources and the process through which one qualifies for benefits — local politicians have a difficult time manipulating the programmes for their own benefit. The qualitative evidence also suggests that bureaucrat linkages to local community and religious groups can play a key role in facilitating the spread of this information.

Social norms and bottom-up pressures can play a key role in driving non-programmatic distribution: indicators of non-programmatic implementation are far more likely to be uncovered in constituencies where political representatives face frequent pressure from constituents to help them gain access to social programme benefits. This latter result should not necessarily be taken as evidence that it is constituents who are ultimately responsible for non-programmatic distribution. If citizens in some constituencies believe that pressuring the MP is required in order to gain programme benefits, and that others in the constituency are likely to do so, then it makes sense for them to do so, even if in principle they would prefer that the programmes be implemented programmatically. If they do not, they will not benefit from the programme while others will. Thus, this result may reflect a non-programmatic equilibrium in some constituencies, which the measure of pressure on the MP is capturing.

Policy implications

These findings generate a several of policy implications:

- First, the research demonstrates how certain features of programme design have been consequential in shielding the programmes from political influence. For example, one important design feature is that, while local bureaucrats and groups guide the process of identifying potential programme beneficiaries, the actual selection takes place at the national office. This type of design has been influential in other contexts as well (Sugiyama and Hunter, 2013). Policymakers should continue to strengthen these aspects of the programme designs and use these lessons in the design of future programmes.
- Second, the research highlights that citizen knowledge can play an important role. The Kenyan Government and governments elsewhere around the world can therefore improve programme implementation by maintaining and expanding efforts to educate citizens about social programmes. These efforts would also address the role of social expectations and bottom-up pressures in driving non-programmatic implementation. For example, increased civic education about the programmes could shift expectations about how programme benefits are allocated, thus reducing citizen incentive to pressure local politicians for help getting access.
- Third, an interesting finding is that some local politicians may elect not to interfere with social protection programmes because they have access to other resources that are easier for them to influence in a discretionary manner (for example, MPs have their own Constituency Development Funds). A policy implication is that the existence and maintenance of potentially non-programmatic service provision programmes can help protect emerging social protection programmes from political interference. Another implication of this finding is for reformers who are aiming for more programmatic service provision: they may benefit from gradually introducing and expanding programmatic programmes over time, rather than seeking immediate wholesale changes to distributive politics in all spheres.