Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11219
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.11219

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Contested Visions for Social Protection in Kenya: The Older Persons Cash Transfer and the Social Registry

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Submitted: 27 August 2025 **Accepted:** 18 November 2025 **Published:** 14 January 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "The Politics of Pro-Poor Policies in the Global South" edited by Andrew Fischer (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Wil Hout (Erasmus University Rotterdam), and Markus Kaltenborn (Ruhr University Bochum), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i465

Abstract

Since the beginning of the cash transfer era in Kenya, there have been efforts by some politicians, civil servants, and international actors to broaden, evenly allocate, and localise the provision of social protection. Simultaneously, there have been consistent efforts by international donors, particularly the World Bank, to narrow the provision of social protection to the poor and improve the efficiency of poverty-targeting through institutional reforms. The latest example of this is the development of a national social registry supported through a World Bank loan. A social registry is a large-scale data system that holds socio-economic data on households and is used to administer social policy provision. This article argues that, despite social registries being framed as a bureaucratic and neutral administrative practice, they are underpinned by residualist ideas about social policy provisioning. This means the development and institutionalisation of the national social registry touches on core contestations within the sector, regarding poverty-targeting, local registration processes, and the visibility of coverage expansion. This has exacerbated a longstanding tension between two competing visions of social protection in Kenya and their respective institutional supporters. Due to these implicit political tensions, the institutionalisation of the social registry has exacerbated contradictions and dysfunctions within social protection provisioning rather than resolved them.

Keywords

institutional change; politics of social protection; social registry; World Bank

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1. Introduction

A social registry is a large-scale database which holds socio-economic data of all potential beneficiaries for one or multiple social policy programmes. It typically covers only a subset of the population and hence, in this sense, is different from civil registries, and designed to determine eligibility for social assistance. Social registries are increasingly considered a key building block of developing an effective social protection system and central to improving coordination and efficiency (Karippacheril et al., 2024; Leite et al., 2017; Lindert et al., 2020). A growing number of countries are developing social registries through loans provided by the World Bank. For instance, the number of countries using a social registry to allocate assistance increased from 23 in 2013 to 60 by 2022 (Grosh et al., 2022; World Bank, 2014).

Two key ideas have underpinned the development of the social registry model: improving the efficiency of social assistance and reducing corruption. Leite et al. (2017) state in a footnote of the first publication outlining the social registry model:

> Interestingly, although the objective of Social Registries is to promote inclusion of intended populations, the driving force behind the development of some of these systems was actually the need to curb corruption or reduce inclusion errors and exclude those who should not be receiving benefits. (p. 5)

This relates to the role of social registries in poverty targeting, which has been a source of debate. Some consider social registries a way to institutionalise a proxy-means-test (PMT) approach to poverty-targeting (Kidd et al., 2021; Ramos, 2020). Others argue they can be used to administer schemes that use other targeting criteria or that are universal (Leite et al., 2017). Some authors similarly argue that social registries should be agnostic to the targeting approach used (Barca et al., 2023). However, the majority of countries that use a social registry have built it around a PMT survey for poverty targeting (Barca et al., 2023; Berner & van Hemelryck, 2020; Kidd et al., 2021). This is likely because the World Bank is the main promoter and funder of social registries (Barca et al., 2023), and it advocates that social registries should use a PMT survey, with the result that most countries adopt this approach. The use of non-PMT methods of targeting in social registries remains low (Barca et al., 2023).

Social registries are often framed as a relatively technical bureaucratic system, depicted in World Bank reports as a cog in a large eco delivery system (Karippacheril et al., 2024). Changing how people register for social protection and how eligibility is determined by combining the administration of multiple schemes are laced with political and institutional questions. The present article explores the process of building and institutionalising a social registry in Kenya, known as the Enhanced Single Registry (ESR). Kenya is a crucial case to explore the politics of building and institutionalising a social registry, because there was existing domestic political interest in social protection and institutional dynamics before the national social registry was initiated (Wanyama & McCord, 2017; Wanyama & Nyambedha, 2017). In many contexts, including in Pakistan, the Philippines, and Brazil, a social registry was first built as part of a donor-financed cash transfer scheme, and the same registry morphed into a national social registry (Barca & Chirchir, 2014). This could have been the case in Kenya, if the regional social registry of the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) had become the basis for the national social registry, the ESR. For various political and institutional reasons, this did not occur. Consequently, the ESR was developed from scratch in 2019, after the State was already funding and delivering four cash transfer schemes, with their own registration and targeting processes and evolving political dynamics. This means that the reforms to integrate the ESR into the social protection system had to interact with institutional and political legacies that had developed up until the ESR was developed.

This article argues that the introduction of the ESR exacerbates a longstanding tension between two competing visions for social protection in Kenya and their respective institutional requirements and supporters. One vision aims to improve the efficiency of social protection investments by improving poverty targeting, centralising the provisioning process, and directing investment toward poverty-targeted cash transfers. This vision is supported by the World Bank, other international donors, and some domestic civil servants. The second vision is for broad-based provisioning, distributed evenly across the country, and relying on local administrative processes. This vision is supported by MPs and some civil servants within the Directorate of Social Assistance (DSA), as well as staff from other development partner institutions.

The institutional reforms needed to develop and integrate the ESR conflicts with the broader vision for social protection in two important ways. Firstly, the ESR model is neither needed for nor compatible with the provisioning process of the largest and most politically supported cash transfer scheme, the Older Persons Cash Transfer (OPCT). But the aim of some is to make the ESR the administrative system for all social protection schemes, including the OPCT (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b). Secondly, the ESR model would reduce the role of communities, and enhance the weight of the PMT score in the targeting process. To demonstrate this argument, this article traces how MPs, the legislature, and civil servants have resisted reforms to narrow and centralise provisioning. They did this by introducing rules, institutions, and policies to broaden, evenly spread, and localise the provision of social protection before the introduction of the ESR (2008–2018). The second part of this article outlines how the ESR interacts with these attempts at resistance (2019–2024), demonstrating the way the ESR intensifies the tension between the differing visions for the social protection system.

This article takes an inductive approach to process tracing. This involved using primary and secondary data from 2004 to 2025. Before primary data collection, a detailed analysis of the historic evolution of the social protection sector and its relation to wider social policy was carried out. The documentary review included national social protection strategies, legislation, and bills; parliamentary audits and debates; newspaper articles; evaluations of donor-funded social protection projects; World Bank loan documents from 2009 to 2024; and policy papers produced by international organisations. In 2023 and 2024, 63 semi-structured key informant interviews (42 men and 21 women) were conducted with a wide range of social policy actors, primarily in-person in Kenya. Four interviews were held online. The interview guide included questions on the social protection landscape, the decision to develop the ESR, the roll-out and uses of the ESR, state capacity and institutional dynamics, and perceptions about the opportunities and challenges of the ESR model. Interviewees included civil servants from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP; 15), including five sub-county officials. Other interviewees included civil servants from other ministries and state agencies (14), civil society actors and trade unions (8), consultants and research institutes (11), international non-governmental organisations (6), and United Nations, World Bank, and bilateral donor staff (9). The interviewees were identified in a two-stage process. First, relevant institutions were identified through the documentary review process. Second, more stakeholders were identified through the first round of interviews and by attending several government events and hearings. Written consent was obtained from all interviewees, and where they consented, interviews were recorded and transcribed; otherwise, detailed notes were taken. Transcripts, interview notes, and a data collection diary were compiled, and open coding was performed to find common categories across the interview data. The interviews were anonymised and coded according to the sector of the interviewee and a random identification number. For example, civil servants from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (CSMLxx), civil servants from other ministries (CSxx), members of international donor organisations (IDxx), independent experts or consultants (Exx), and civil society actors (CSOxx). Combining the coding and the findings from the documents provided a detailed understanding of the ESR development process and the different ideas and motivations of the actors involved. This inductive approach is justified as social registries have not been widely studied. Therefore, research has not yet firmly established the causal mechanisms by which social registries lead to institutional change and interact with the politics of social policy.

This article contributes to the small but growing academic literature on social registries, yielding a deeper understanding of the processes involved in building, institutionalising, and using a social registry to administer social protection provision (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2021; Fischer, 2018; Hemsteede, 2023; McCarthy et al., 2023; Palacio Ludeña, 2021). It also adds to the literature on the nature of donor involvement in social protection, particularly in relation to how reform processes interact with domestic political and institutional dynamics in Kenya (Bender et al., 2021; Ouma & Adesina, 2019; Wanyama & Nyambedha, 2017).

The next section discusses the literature on social registry building that has framed this research. Section 3 describes the social assistance landscape in Kenya. Section 4 outlines three types of resistance to reforms to narrow and centralise social protection provision, before the ESR. Section 5 demonstrates how the ESR interacts with these contestations. Lastly, a discussion and conclusion are presented.

2. Social Registry Building: A Form of Institutional Change

Despite the growing significance of social registries within the social protection agenda, they have received very little academic attention. However, some research is emerging: Studies on the Philippines, Indonesia, Malawi, Lesotho, and Ecuador reveal some important common themes. The social registry in the Philippines, known as Listahanan 2, resulted in a stasis in the beneficiary base and the registry was not used by the government due to the outdated nature of the data (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2021). Ramos (2020) shows that Listahanan 2 in the Philippines was one of the tools used to embed targeting as an organising principle within the social policy system. The introduction of social registries in Lesotho and Malawi changed the state–society relations of the cash transfer programmes (Hemsteede, 2023). The registries reduced "the amount and substance of interaction between representatives of the state/donor and citizens" and the ability of citizens to shape the cash transfer programmes (Hemsteede, 2023, p. 11). Research from Indonesia illustrates the "messy processes that occur" when the registry was used to do targeting at the village level (McCarthy et al., 2023, p. 20). The authors contrast this with how this model is presented as clean and efficient in grey literature and policy discourse (McCarthy et al., 2023). Palacio Ludeña (2021) finds that the social registry in Ecuador led to an excessive focus on data-driven inclusion, resulting in a highly depoliticised understanding of precarity, especially given the fact that social registries are poorly adapted to the realities of informality. Both Barca et al. (2023) and Dadap-Cantal et al. (2021) demonstrate that a lack of political commitment to social registries by governments is often shown through slow or complete lack of updates to the registry's data.

The development and use of a social registry can be framed as a form of institutional reform, because it requires changing norms, rules, and processes of social policy administration. Although the World Bank stresses the different designs of social registries across countries (Leite et al., 2017), many have remarkably similar features (Barca, 2017; Barca et al., 2023; Berner & van Hemelryck, 2020; Kidd et al., 2021). This suggests that international organisations tend to use policy "blueprints" that in theory work across multiple diverse contexts (Weaver, 2008). Development actors' tendency to rely on institutional blueprints was a core critique of the good governance agenda (Evans, 2004; Levy, 2014; Mkandawire, 2009). The notion that both the form of institutions and how to achieve institutional change could be imposed or developed from the outside ignores the distribution of power that underpins current institutional arrangements (Evans, 2004). Institutional arrangements in social policy are inherently political. For example, the choice between targeting or universalism is a political economy problem involving "the choice of instruments for redistributing resources in society and for determining levels of social expenditure" (Mkandawire, 2005, p. 12). Given the political nature of social policy reform, it is plausible that the process of institutionalising a social registry would be contested and shaped by existing political economy dynamics.

Various theoretical traditions have been used to understand institutional reform processes in the social protection sector in Kenya. Wanyama and McCord (2017) use the political settlement approach to argue that successive Kenyan governments have resisted reforms promoted by international donors that threaten the use of social protection for patronage. They argue that patronage is central to the existing competitive clientelist political settlement (Wanyama & McCord, 2017). Ouma (2020) understands institutional reform through a policy transfer and power lens, and finds that, despite asymmetrical power relations, domestic actors resisted international agendas by restricting the actions of certain actors and imposing their own ideas. Other authors utilise a historical institutionalist approach; for example, Bender et al. (2021) argue that cash transfers have incrementally changed in Kenya, through a layering process. Bender et al. (2021) find that the relative infancy of the sector made reforms easier in the earlier years, but there is potential for more contested reform processes in future as mandates change and displacement occurs. Kpessa and Béland (2013) warn against an uncritical use of historical institutionalism to understand social policy development in Africa, due to its focus on formal institutions, but note that concepts such as bureaucratic capability and policy feedback are meaningful. The introduction of the ESR is not a standalone reform but attached to the long-term engagement of international donors with the social protection system in Kenya; as a result, a historical institutionalist perspective is necessary. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) conceptualise institutional change as how new rules are embedded and complied with by actors within institutions, and the extent to which they lead to a change in the logic of the institution. It is pertinent to understand the ESR as part of the wider reforms promoted by international donors, and whether the reforms are incrementally leading to institutional change and fundamentally reorienting social protection institutions. Or, alternatively, if persistent resistance may be maintaining the continuity of established institutional dynamics.

3. Kenyan Social Assistance Landscape

Social protection is a growing sector in Kenya. The first cash transfer focused on orphans and vulnerable children, the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT OVC), started in 2004. The initial pilot was funded by UNICEF, but, over time, the Government of Kenya started to fund the programme as it was incrementally scaled up to reach national coverage in 2014 (Bosworth et al., 2016). In 2006 and 2011, respectively, the Government of Kenya initiated two new cash transfer schemes focused on older people

(OPCT) and the Cash Transfer for People with Severe Disabilities (PwSD CT); Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2016). These two schemes were never directly funded by international donors. The benefit level of each of these cash transfers is 2,000 Ksh ($15.51) per month (World Bank, 2023). These schemes are delivered and managed by the State Department for Social Protection (SDSP) within the MLSP. The HSNP, first introduced in 2008, provides a cash transfer of 2,700 Ksh ($20.93) to households living in extreme poverty in eight counties in Northern Kenya and is delivered by the National Drought Management Agency (World Bank, 2023). The implementation and financing of the HSNP have been heavily shaped by international influences (Wanyama & McCord, 2017). Since 2019, all cash transfer payments are directly funded by the Government of Kenya (World Bank, 2023). However, international donor financing remains an integral aspect of the social protection budget, supporting investments in state capacity (UNICEF, 2025). Despite increasing budgets up until 2017, between 2018 and 2024 there was no increase in coverage of any regular cash transfers. Some temporary Covid-19 cash payments were made during this period (Binci et al., 2021). In 2023, President Ruto announced that coverage of three MLSP schemes would increase from 1.2 to 2.5 million beneficiaries (Muigai, 2023).

The 2010 Constitution changed the social policy landscape in Kenya; areas such as county health services, pre-primary education, and sanitation were devolved to county governments (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Social protection is not a devolved function. Some county governments developed their own social protection policies and schemes (MLSP, 2023). However, the key social protection institution is the SDSP within the national ministry (MLSP). The SDSP contains four units, which reflect the evolution of the different schemes. Figure 1 shows that only two units have staff and offices at the county and sub-county levels. These sub-national officers have a wide remit beyond social protection; therefore, capacity at the sub-national level tends to be low and variable (Interview CSML7.300124; Interview CSML9.070224; Porisky, 2021). The Social Protection Secretariat (SPS) was created in 2010 and moved to the MLSP in 2013. International donors heavily supported its establishment (Ouma, 2019). The DSA was established in 2016 to organise registration, targeting, and payment of all cash transfer schemes. Previously, the CT OVC was managed by the unit for children services and the OPCT by the social development unit.

A cornerstone of the World Bank's agenda in the social protection sector in Kenya is the consolidation of all the cash transfer programmes. This goal underpinned the two major loans issued since 2013: the National Safety Net Programme loan (World Bank, 2013) and the Kenya Economic and Social Inclusion (KSEIP) loan (World Bank, 2018). Before the consolidation, each scheme used a slightly different targeting approach. The three MLSP schemes used poverty status and categorical criteria to determine eligibility, but measured poverty and organised registration differently (Porisky, 2022; Rohregger et al., 2021). The HSNP scheme's eligibility criteria are purely based on poverty and previously combined community-based wealth ranking and a PMT. A change in 2016 means that it now relies purely on a PMT and community validation (Merttens et al., 2017; Silva-Leander & Merttens, 2016). Between 2015 and 2019, the SPS with various stakeholders developed the Harmonised Targeting Methodology for all cash transfers. This methodology aimed to standardise the poverty-targeting process, including community-based screening and a new PMT method, the Living Conditions Score (also known as the Harmonised Targeting Tool; World Bank, 2023, p. 52). During this harmonisation process, in 2017, the old-age transfer, OPCT, was reformed: Poverty was removed from the eligibility criteria, and the age threshold was increased to 70 years. As a result, those over 70 who do not receive another pension are theoretically eligible for the OPCT (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2017a).

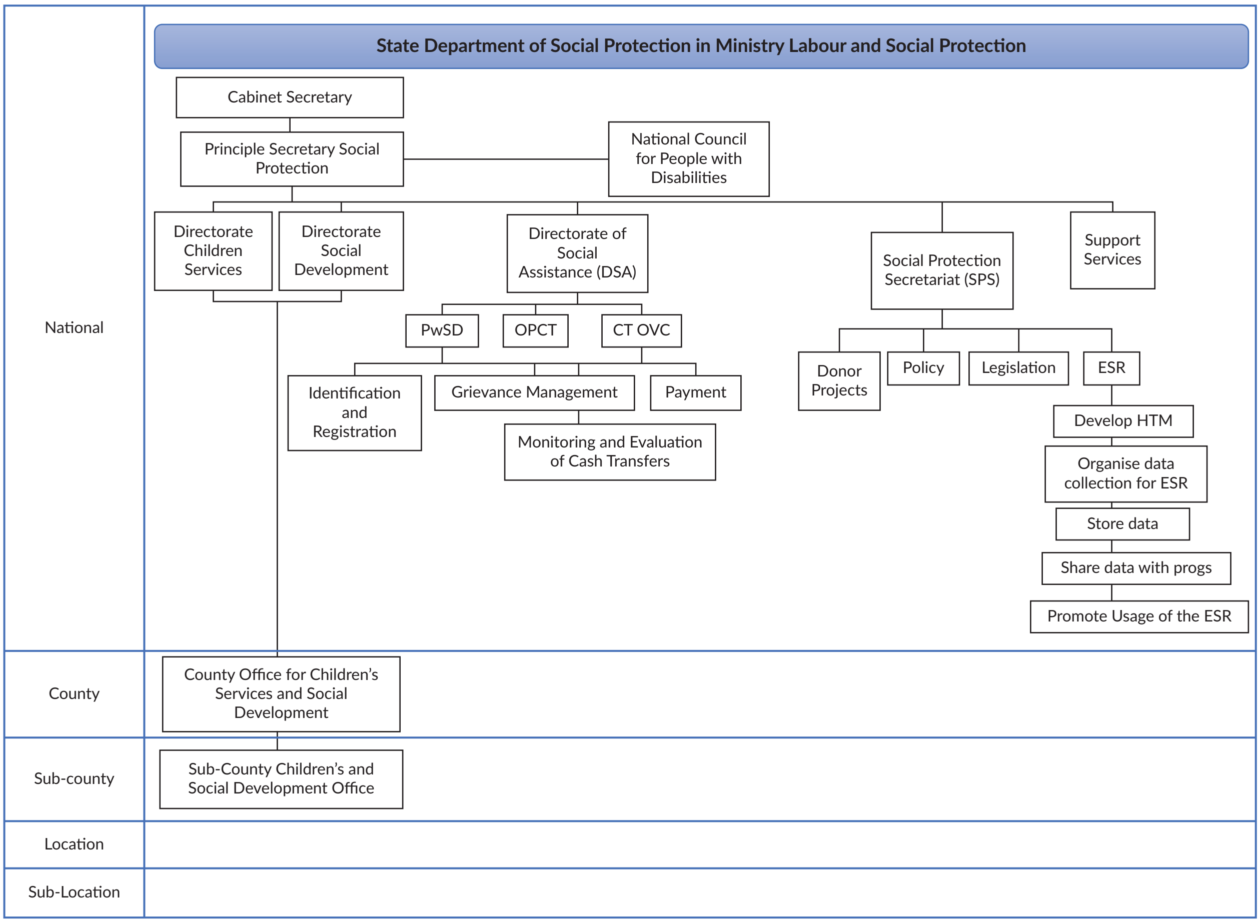

Figure 1. Organogram of the SDSP. Note: HTM = Harmonised Targeting Methodology. Source: Author's depiction based on Government of the Republic of Kenya (2017a); MLSP (2025).

Building a national social registry (the ESR) was the first disbursement-linked indicator of the KSEIP loan (World Bank, 2018). The aim is that all cash transfer programmes would use data from the ESR to expand coverage (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b). Within the loan agreement, the SPS was given the responsibility of developing and managing the ESR. The HSNP scheme had a regional social registry since 2012, covering the counties where the HSNP operates (Sandford et al., 2016). The design of the ESR was highly influenced by the HSNP registry (Interview CS3.161123; CSML8.060224). The National Drought Management Agency manages data collection in the eight Northern counties where HSNP operates. These data feed into the ESR. Development of the ESR started in 2019, and it took until December 2024 for data from all 47 counties to be collected (World Bank, 2025; Interview CS3.161123-2). The KSEIP loan closed in December 2024. Interview data from May 2025 suggest the ESR currently holds data of 4.9 million households, but not all of these data have been verified (Interview CS3.161123-2). The ESR strategy states the aim to include 5.7 million households in the database, which equates to roughly 50% of households (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b). The roll-out of data collection was hindered by a lack of resources. As a result, data collection was not as comprehensive or well-managed as initially intended (Interview CSML8.060224; Interview CSML10.080224; Interview CSML9.070224). The KSEIP loan required $1,010.40 million in co-financing from the Kenyan government, and a proportion of the funding from the World Bank would be disbursed once the disbursement-linked indicators were completed (World Bank, 2018). The release of funds from the National Treasury to develop the ESR was very slow, as confirmed by interviews with MLSP and World Bank staff, and audits (Interview CSML12.240224; ID2.131123; Auditor General, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). The interviewees suggested that the slow disbursement of funds was due to difficult economic conditions (Interview CSML8.060224) and that funding for the social protection sector prioritised DSA activities over those of the SPS (Interview CSML12.240224; Interview ID2.131123).

4. Contesting a Narrow Vision of Social Protection Before the ESR

Between 2014 and 2018, the Kenyan government significantly increased investment in social protection (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Ouma and Adesina (2019) argue that there were consistent attempts by international donors to depoliticise the social protection policy space during this time. But MPs and the legislature found ways to impose their policy preferences (Bender et al., 2021; Ouma, 2020; Wanyama & McCord, 2017). Since 2004, there have been three key examples of resistance by MPs, civil servants, and certain international actors to narrowing and centralising social protection provision. The first concerned the design of beneficiary quotas. Secondly, MPs insisted on the creation of Constituency Social Assistance Committees (CSACs). Lastly, the government prioritised policy development and investment into the cash transfer scheme for older people. Each of these is discussed below.

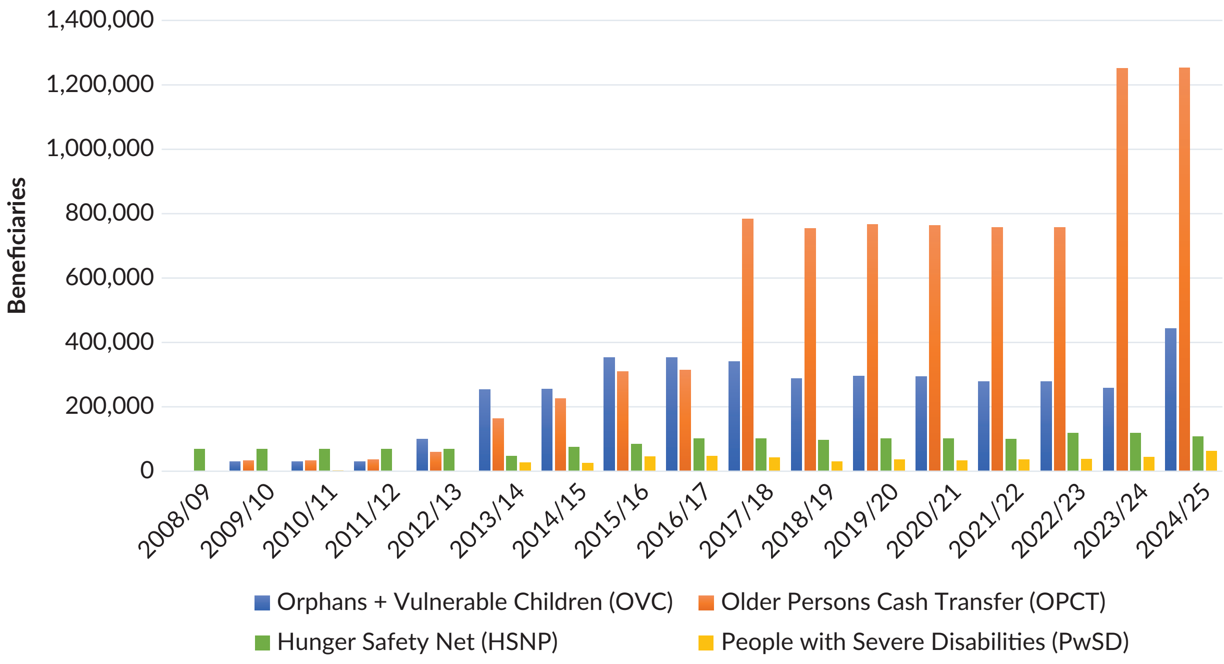

Figure 2. Beneficiaries of social assistance cash transfers 2008/2009–2024/2025. Sources: 2008–2012: Government of the Republic of Kenya (2017a); 2012–2024 Government of the Republic of Kenya (2015, 2017b, 2020a, 2021, 2023b, 2024).

4.1. Quotas to Achieve Even Geographic Spread of Social Protection Coverage

The Kenyan government and international donors use quotas to determine the distribution of social protection beneficiaries across the country. From the outset of the cash transfer era, MPs had a strong preference that each constituency should get an equal share of new beneficiaries to promote a sense of “collectiveness in the ethnically diverse country” (Ouma, 2019, p. 108). However, international donors believe that it is more

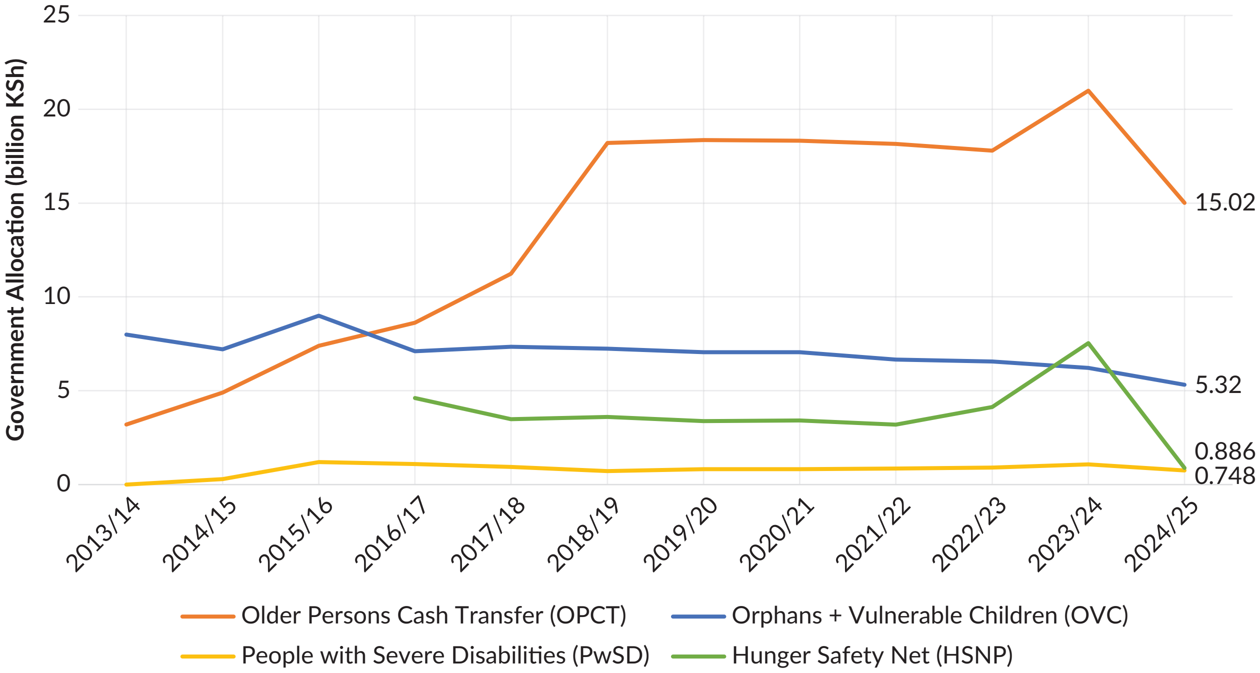

Figure 3. Allocated and disbursed budget to social assistance cash transfers 2013/2014–2024/2025. Notes: For the years 2013 to 2015, allocated expenditure is used because no statistics on disbursed expenditure are available; from 2015 onwards, disbursed figures are used. Sources: Kenya Bureau of Statistics (2020, 2025); The National Treasury and Economic Planning (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

effective and efficient for the areas of the country with the highest levels of poverty to be allocated more beneficiaries (Fitzgibbon, 2014; Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2016). A consultant who worked for the World Bank and extensively with the government on social protection noted that "the fact that so much of it [social protection] is financed by the government and therefore voted for in the annual budget by MPs, you had a political need for equal share" (Interview E3.050324). Indeed, this interviewee expressed surprise that "they [the donors] managed to get any poverty allocation because the MPs were obsessed with the equal share" (Interview E3.050324). International donors and MPs had opposing ideas about the design of quotas; this resulted in different approaches to setting quotas for each scheme.

The quota formula for the HSNP scheme was influenced by MPs' preferences. The quota formula purely based on poverty, proposed by the international consultant working on the HSNP scheme, was deemed unacceptable by county officials and politicians in the other Northern counties (Interview ID2.131123). Consequently, a different approach had to be found, which was a modified version of the Commission on Revenue Allocation model which included three variables: equal share, poverty, and population size. This formula resulted in a more even distribution of new beneficiaries across the HSNP counties (Fitzgibbon, 2014; Silva-Leander & Merttens, 2016, p. 14).

The quota for the CT OVC, OPCT, and PwSD schemes has gone through various iterations. The government ignored the quota in the 2014 Expansion Plan, which was purely based on poverty, and instead evenly distributed 207,500 new beneficiaries across all counties (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2016). A new revised quota was developed in the 2015 Expansion Plan (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2016). This became known as the 70–30 rule: 30% of the total caseload was to be allocated evenly across constituencies, and 70% allocated based on the constituency's share of the overall number of poor, based on small area poverty estimates (Interview CSML5.171123; Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2016; World Bank, 2023). This 70–30 rule was a compromise between MLSP officials and donors who favoured an approach based on poverty, and politicians who preferred equal expansion of new beneficiaries across the country (Porisky, 2022; Wanyama & Nyambedha, 2017). Since the 2017 OPCT reform, there is no OPCT quota (Interview CSML6.201123).

4.2. Visibility of MPs During Expansion of Social Protection Coverage

As the government increased investment in the social protection sector, MPs became more interested in social protection as a way to achieve electoral success. But this required local visibility. Consequently, in 2014, MPs' demands led the government to introduce CSACs (Wanyama & McCord, 2017). This was despite the World Bank's attempt to harmonise the targeting procedure across all cash transfers based on the model used in the HSNP, which was "less susceptible to political manipulation" (Wanyama & McCord, 2017, p. 17). CSACs were led by the local MP in each constituency, and its role was to support the identification of potential beneficiaries and oversee the administration process within their constituency (Wanyama & McCord, 2017). CSACs operated differently across constituencies—some provided information to citizens, whereas others directly shaped which households would be added to the schemes—but there is little evidence that MPs manipulated the targeting process for political advantage (Kramon, 2019; Porisky, 2021, 2022). Some expressed strong concerns that the creation of CSACs made the social protection administration system vulnerable to patronage politics (Wanyama & Nyambedha, 2017).

The role of CSACs was tightly interlinked with the design of quotas, discussed in the previous section. In the 2013/2014 expansion, new beneficiaries were evenly distributed across the country, and MPs and the CSACs played a significant role in selecting who would be considered for eligibility at the constituency level (Interview CSML5.171123). The 70–30 rule signalled the beginning of the reduced role of CSACs in the provisioning process because they only had oversight over the 30% portion of new beneficiaries; the remaining 70% was determined by poverty data (Interview CSML5.171123). The reform of the OPCT in 2017 further reduced the role of CSACs: The administration process changed because there was no poverty-based ranking process, and the expansion of the other schemes stalled.

The CSACs' role in social protection was most influential between 2014 and 2017. Two factors appear to have driven MP's interest in being involved in this process at this time. Between 2012 and 2016, there was a large increase in coverage under the Jubilee government, and a heavy focus on community-level processes to pick beneficiary households. MPs saw this as an opportunity for visibility (Mwasiaji, 2015). Including MPs in the administration of social protection may have been important in securing their political support for increased budget allocation to the sector (Wanyama & Nyambedha, 2017). Secondly, the wider political context of the time is important: From 2013, the devolution process was underway, and national MPs needed to maintain their relevance and visibility. There is an ongoing contestation about the terms of decentralisation and the mandates of governors and county governments vis-à-vis the national government (Cheeseman et al., 2016; D'Arcy, 2020).

As of now, the CSACs are not operational, no meetings are being held, and resources have not been allocated to them (Interview CSML5.171123; Government of Kenya, 2023b, p. 112; Porisky et al., 2023). An MLSP official noted that CSACs did not survive the government transition (Interview CSML6.201123). The Kenya Kwanza government elected in 2022 has not prioritised social protection (Chome & Willis, 2024). Instead, the government promoted a social policy agenda to lend money to small business owners and entrepreneurs, known as the Hustler Fund (Chome & Willis, 2024). The Hustler Fund has not been successful and has garnered strong criticism (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2025). Since 2023, the Kenya Kwanza government has been engaging more with the social protection agenda. This may be due to the strong donor support for the sector, combined with the poor economic conditions over recent years (Interview ID9.260124). This section shows that when coverage increases, MPs find a way to become visible in the process, and this is further discussed below.

4.3. Government's Social Protection Priority: The OPCT

Since the OPCT was introduced in 2006, it has been considered the most government-led, as opposed to donor-led, social protection programme (Ouma, 2019), and has always been wholly funded by the Kenyan government (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2017a). Ouma (2019) finds that donors resisted the adoption of the scheme because they wanted the government to focus on the HSNP and CT OVC programmes, but government officials wanted their own programme so that they could control decision-making. Over time, the State has prioritised investment in the expansion of this scheme over other programmes (Figure 3; see also Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2017a).

Following a 2016 benchmarking trip to Brazil funded by the World Food Programme, civil servants from the DSA unit and some representatives from international organisations prepared a proposal to reform the OPCT and make it a universal social pension (Interview CSML2.311023; E2.050224). There was an election in 2017, and the civil servants perceived that it was a good time to present this proposal (Interview CSML2.311023). On the 1st of June 2017, in the President's Madaraka Day speech, it was announced that the reformed OPCT would be introduced from January 2018 onwards (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2017c). The DSA organised the registration between 1st July 2017 and 31st July 2017. They introduced a listing process, which involved older citizens congregating at a central point in the constituency and registering with local officials for the scheme (Interview CSML12.240224). During this registration, "the visible expansion of social assistance benefits was prioritized over uniform implementation" (Porisky et al., 2023, p. 7). By the end of July 2017, the DSA had registered 600,000 older people (Interview CSML2.311023). Once the data were cleaned, 523,000 people were enrolled in the programme by January 2018 (Interview CSML2.311023; Chirchir & Tran, 2019).

The registration process for the reformed OPCT has been criticised for various reasons. Its proximity to the August 2017 election caused tension and fears in pro-opposition areas (Interview CSML2.311023; CSML1.231023; CSO5.150224). Porisky et al. (2023) found that exclusions and uneven registration were due to the tight deadlines for registration combined with low state capacity and reach by MLSP officials in certain areas. Civil society actors noted that the registration for the OPCT scheme was not fair because Chiefs often ensured that influential local people would be included on the list and others missed out (Interview CSO5.150224; RI3.230224). International consultants critiqued the reform because no system for continuous registration was ready to deliver the OPCT scheme (Interview E2.050224; Interview E3.050324). After the July 2017 registration, there was no new registration until September 2023. Therefore, anyone who became eligible between 2017 and 2023 could not register for the OPCT.

The World Bank was strongly opposed to the universalisation of the OPCT scheme and thought increasing coverage of the poverty-targeted schemes should be prioritised. A senior MLSP civil servant described his conversation with a World Bank official in the halls of the National Treasury:

> He said to me, "Don't you think that it is a misinformed decision?" I asked him, "Why?" "You'll be giving the money to the rich," he responded. Then I told him, "Why not? They are rich, but they are Kenyans. And we are going to pay them using the Kenyan money; it's not going to be money from the World Bank. And in any case, it's going to be a demand-driven programme." (Interview CSML2.311023)

The World Bank's opposition to the reformed OPCT has persisted. Under the KSEIP project, the recipients of the OPCT scheme would not count towards the completion of the disbursement-linked indicators related to expenditure on social protection, unless the MLSP could prove that the recipients are poor (World Bank, 2018). The OPCT reform caused tension within the donor community as well among different units within the MLSP, particularly between the DSA and the SPS (Interview CSML5.171123), who were consistently "at loggerheads" (Interview E2.050224). Despite this division, the OPCT has been and remains the most popular scheme from the perspective of the government, and has the "greatest social acceptance" compared to the other schemes (Interview E3.050324).

This section outlines how various attempts to layer reforms to narrow and centralise the social protection system in the years before the establishment of the ESR have been resisted or contested. The next section demonstrates how the development of the ESR is unfolding and interacts with the dynamics of this resistance.

5. The ESR Interacts With Core Contestations in the Social Protection Sector

5.1. OPCT Shaping the Administration of Social Protection Rather Than the ESR

Since the 2017 reform, registering for the OPCT only requires an ID card, verification that the person is aged 70 years or above, and information on a caregiver. As a result, the largest social protection scheme in the country in terms of beneficiaries and expenditure does not technically require the ESR to implement it because it does not need a poverty score to determine eligibility. As can be seen in Figure 2, coverage of the poverty-targeted cash transfer did not increase between 2016 and 2023. The Government of Kenya announced it would increase the coverage of all cash transfers in September 2023. This was the first increase in coverage of the poverty-targeted cash transfers since the OPCT reform (DSA, 2023). The government said it would register 500,000 new beneficiaries throughout September 2023 (DSA, 2023). The DSA were responsible for this registration process. The DSA did not use the ESR data to find new beneficiaries, although by this time the ESR had data available of poor households across 23 counties (Interview CSML4.161123; Interview CSML2.311023; ID9.260124). The DSA carried out its own separate listing process for the OPCT, the PwSD, and the CT OVC schemes throughout September 2023. This angered SPS staff and the World Bank (Interview CSML4.161123; Interview CSML2.311023; Interview ID9.260124). Interviewees provided various reasons why the ESR was not used, including the lack of nationwide coverage at this time. A DSA official said that the ESR data do not contain all the relevant information, such as the identity of caregivers (Interview CSML4.161123). He notes that it is a problem when the main social protection programme of the State can't use the data in the ESR and that "we need [to] go back to the drawing board" (Interview CSML4.161123). This demonstrates the sense among DSA officials that they were not adequately involved in the design process.

Other respondents suggested that it was political expediency which determined that the ESR was not used: The politicians wanted the listing done fast and visibly on the ground, and the ESR would not be able to accommodate these needs (Interview SA1.031123; CSML2.311023). Using the ESR data means generating a list from the database and would not require a visible registration. An interviewee working closely with the government on social protection explains why the ESR was not used in September 2023:

> But for this particular case, it was because of the political push, and that is the biggest reason. The government and the regime need to be seen to be on the ground. Because it came at a time when there was so much criticism that you're new and you're doing nothing. So, their reaction was, can the people [civil servants] go to the field [and] be seen to be doing something, [this] is the truth of the matter. You know how a regime can lose legitimacy? You can lose it based on an opinion or perception of the people. But to counter that, sometimes you have to show people you're doing something, even when so minimal. So, there was a lot of push and that's why you can go to the media. You'll see in some areas the Permanent Secretary supervising registration and it was not registration; it was listing. You'll see the Cabinet Secretary supervising and leading, you will see so many members of parliament, because they realise this is an opportunity for them, not only for the executive, even for them to cement their legitimacy, and say, "Hey, I'm here, I told you, I'll champion for your rights." (Interview ID9.260124)

This highlights that visibility plays an important role in the politics of social protection in Kenya and that the ESR interrupts the visibility of coverage expansion.

The DSA used the OPCT administration process to register households for the poverty-targeted schemes in September 2023 (DSA, 2023). This involved a listing, where citizens congregated at their location to provide their details to officials. This is the only step required for the OPCT. For the poverty-targeted schemes, the DSA needs a PMT score, so enumerators must administer a survey at the household level. Between May and August 2024, the DSA contracted enumerators to collect household data from the people who listed themselves for the CT OVC and PwSD (Interview CSML6.201123-2). Interviews with DSA officials revealed that there were instances where DSA enumerators and SPS enumerators turned up in the same county to collect data from households, but for different purposes, one for the ESR and one for the cash transfer targeting (Interview CSML6.201123-2). The DSA is committed to the OPCT scheme, and there is interest in it among MPs. Additionally, the DSA maintains control over eligibility assessment and payment of cash transfers. This means the OPCT registration processes are shaping the way the smaller poverty-targeted schemes are administered.

Government officials from the SPS argue that the fact that OPCT is not poverty-targeted and is the largest scheme does not undermine the utility of the ESR. They argue that it is very useful to have socio-economic data on all households, even if those data are not formally needed to determine eligibility for the OPCT, because they could be used for other interventions (Interview CSML12.240224; Interview ID9.260124). However, this may underestimate the extent of the tension between the OPCT and the ESR. A respondent who had a prominent position within the MLSP stated the following:

> I think that it is a big challenge because the older persons scheme should have everybody, so there's nothing to do with poverty. So, there's a big challenge and confusion in terms of how it [ESR] will be utilised, whether they [the Ministry] needed to have a separate registry that is standalone, the universal older person [scheme] needed to stand on its own, because it's not poverty that they [the Ministry] need, but the criteria for entry into the ESR is poverty. (Interview CSML10.080224)

This highlights the differing perspectives of officials within the SPS and the DSA on the implementation of the OPCT. Furthermore, there is increasing pressure from MPs to improve the implementation of the OPCT. In February 2023, a Motion by Hon. Thuddeus Nzambia, MP, was passed in the National Assembly, entitled "Continuous Registration of Beneficiaries to the Older Persons Cash Transfer Programme in the County" (National Assembly, 2023). Although a new round of registration took place in September 2023, no system for continuous registration or assessment has been established. In a recent meeting of the Committee on Implementation, MPs questioned the Permanent Secretary of the SDSP on why this has not been achieved (Kinyanjui, 2025a). The Permanent Secretary said there was a lack of funds, and that as soon as they were available, they would undertake the registration (Mutongoi TV, 2025). However, this would go against the ESR process, which has just completed the data collection across the 47 counties of Kenya and is said to be the primary way new beneficiaries will be added to the social protection schemes (The Parliament of Kenya, 2025). This shows that the OPCT scheme receives much greater attention from the political system and that the political support for this scheme may continue to drive its development outside the realms of the ESR.

5.2. ESR: Reduces Community-Level Processes and Increases the Weight of the PMT in the Targeting Process

The use of the ESR would further centralise the administration of social protection by reducing the role of sub-national and community-level processes in targeting. A key step when coverage of the three MLSP cash transfer schemes expanded has always been the community engagement process to decide on a "long list" of potential beneficiaries (Porisky, 2022, p. 156). The harmonised targeting approach recognised the importance of community engagement in identifying potential beneficiaries and included it as one of the steps, which were sensitisation, community-based screening, data collection to administer a PMT, and community validation (World Bank, 2023, p. 52). The use of the ESR would remove the community involvement in identification and reduce it to only sensitisation and validation. This follows the approach taken by the HSNP scheme. In 2016, community identification was removed, and the PMT survey was administered using a census-style approach (Silva-Leander & Merttens, 2016, p. 4). Theoretically, all households in a location should be registered, so the scheme could expand during drought, and thus there was no need for communities to identify eligible households (World Bank, 2023, p. 52). The justification for removing the community-based screening step in the ESR model is the same as for the HSNP. The ESR aims to hold data on the "overall poor," i.e., not only from households considered potentially eligible for cash transfer schemes but all those considered poor or vulnerable and who could be at risk of a shock (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b, p. 16).

As well as removing the community role in identification, the model would increase the weight of the PMT in determining eligibility for social protection. The Strategy for rolling out the ESR highlights that "the Harmonised Targeting Tool will be used for ESR data collection" (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b, p. 12) and that the "ESR is to rank all the registered households as a value-add service for client programs" (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2020b, p. 15). This means that the data collected from all households that are in the ESR are based on the PMT survey, the Household Living Conditions Survey. A World Bank official comments on how the ESR changes the way targeting is done:

> Now they will reach out to the poorest of the poor based on the categorical vulnerability that they are targeting, let's say the orphans and vulnerable children, so they will reach out to the poorest of the poor OVCs and then fill the quota for that particular location with the ESR data. (Interview ID2.131123)

Under the ESR model, the community's role is to validate the list of beneficiaries coming from the database. The list is meant to reflect the poorest households (determined by PMT scores) who fall into the categorical criteria (orphans and vulnerable children or people with severe disabilities). By removing the community role in identifying potential beneficiaries and only relying on the data from the registry, the ESR model would make the PMT the primary way of capturing socio-economic status and determining the poorest households.

Three issues arise from these aspects of the ESR model. Firstly, the coverage of the ESR has been lower than expected, and there is concern about widespread exclusions from the data due to time and financial constraints when collecting the data (Kenya Red Cross, 2023; Ndung'u & Pearson, 2024; Interview E1.141123; Interview CSML8.060224). This means solely relying on the ESR data for identification may exclude potentially eligible citizens. Secondly, there is evidence that over the years validation barazas (public meetings) tended to be poorly attended or never happened due to time and resources constraints (Porisky, 2022; Interview CSML9.070224). DSA officials said about the validation process that "in some instances the community does change the order of the ranked households on the list, but in most cases, they agree to the ranking provided by the poverty scores" (Interview CSML6.201123). A possible explanation for this relates to the quota system. There is a fixed number of new households that can be added to any scheme, and so the community changing the ranking means removing a household from the scheme, since there is no way to increase the number of places available (National Drought Management Agency, 2024, p. 38). This could create tensions and explain why the rankings often remain unchanged. Community-based targeting is complex and can often reinforce power imbalances. However, reducing the community role in the targeting process to mere validation distances citizens from targeting decisions, potentially shaping their ability to understand decisions and hold the system to account. Thirdly, reducing the amount and quality of local processes in social protection administration is contrary to the preferences of MPs, many officials within the MLSP, and other stakeholders to decentralise the administration process and give more responsibility to the county and sub-county level (Gardner et al., 2020). Reducing the local processes means less investment and focus on localised structures or increasing the mandate of sub-national staff or county government structures in the administration process.

The implication of centralisation outlined above, combined with the incompatibility of the ESR with the OPCT, are important factors explaining why the ESR has been sidelined, and usage been limited so far.

6. Discussion

The development of the ESR attempts to change the administration process of social protection and eventually other forms of social provision. As of yet, the ESR is not embedded in the administrative processes of the MLSP. The ESR touches on core contestations within the sector, regarding poverty-targeting, local registration processes, and the visibility of coverage expansion. These tensions, combined with the logistical and capacity challenges of building the ESR, mean that there are opportunities for noncompliance and discretion by the

DSA. The SPS lacks the power and leverage to enforce the usage of the ESR. This suggests that, as Mahoney and Thelen (2010) argue, features of the political context and characteristics of the institutions themselves condition different actors' opportunities for discretion and ability to enforce change. This would appear to align with Lavers' (2022) findings, that despite the strong donor influence on the social protection polices in African countries, the distribution of transfers is more influenced by state capacity and reach, and local political contestation. However, this may omit, or at least understate, the distorting impact of the institutional tussles over the distribution of donor resources across units within the state apparatus. As well, the implications of donor resources being channelled to enhance certain areas of state capacity over others, depending on the donors' vision. As Ouma and Adesina (2019) note, "prefabricated policy solutions are pushed at the expense of alternative policy options and to the exclusion of endogenous national democratic processes for policymaking" (p. 391). Counter policies and ideas can certainly emerge and prevail, but the consistent need to accommodate international donors can drain capacity and cause distortions.

The ESR seeks to reform the aspect of social protection which has been most mediated by domestic politics: the process of picking beneficiaries out of many potentially eligible poor households. The social protection policy space is a technocratic sector, with international donors and international non-governmental organisations dominating the policy space. Thus, the role for MPs, or other Kenyan civil society actors, in influencing the system has been relatively limited (Ouma, 2019; Interview CSO4.130224). Therefore, perhaps the most credible way politics can influence social protection is through shaping how visible they are when coverage is expanded, and the budget allocation (Porisky, 2021). The ESR provisioning model conflicts with features of the broader vision for social protection. For example, the designers of the ESR seemed to have ignored the potential problem that the ESR is not, in fact, needed to deliver the OPCT. They also have ignored the way this scheme is shaping the DSA's approach to social protection registration and targeting more generally, for example by making the administrative process local and visible. A consultant who worked with the World Bank explains:

> One of the things that I can get frustrated with about the World Bank is the one-size-fits-all approach. We [the World Bank] might push, prod, cajole, and even occasionally threaten governments to make decisions. But why I like working with the World Bank is that the government is the client. But in some ways, never more so than in Kenya, where we're a very small minority funder, the government can survive without us. They can't survive without the MPs. And it produces a less technically pure programme. But is social protection in any of our countries technically pure? I don't think so. (Interview E3.050324)

The ESR model attempts to further distance the wider political vision for social protection from its provision, which may explain the reluctance to use and invest in the ESR. Opalo (2022) suggests that working with features of the politics of distribution, rather than against them, is essential to making the allocation of public goods more rules-based and programmatic. By not recognising the political direction of social protection, and by focusing on reforms and state capacity building in a technocratic direction, rather than building capacity aligned to political deployment of state capacity, the ESR development process has been defined by incoherence and resistance.

7. Conclusion

This article shows the way the ESR conflicts with a vision of social protection that is more localised and universal. The findings here align with some previous research on targeting more generally, and specifically on the development of social registries in the Philippines, Malawi, Lesotho, Ecuador, and Indonesia (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2021; Hemsteede, 2023; McCarthy et al., 2023; Palacio Ludeña, 2021). Some of the key reasons why social registries are dysfunctional and can cause political tensions relate to the challenges of performing poverty-targeting in contexts where need outstrips the allocation of resources, and structural factors mean clientelist distribution of public goods persists. Mkandawire (2005), in his seminal work on targeting in social policy, outlines the administrative and political challenges of targeting, particularly in middle- and low-income countries. Ambiguities, inaccuracies, and power are inherent in the process of poverty measurement, but particularly when not easily understandable or contestable measures are used, such as a PMT (Fischer, 2018). The social registry model exacerbates these challenges, because it relies on further centralising the administration process by reducing the level of community engagement and separating registration from coverage expansion.

The ESR touches on core contestations within the social protection sector around poverty-targeting and centralisation. This, combined with the logistical challenges of building and managing the ESR, means it is not widely or deeply embedded in the overall social protection system. The ESR model has not yet changed the rules, norms, and processes of social protection provisioning. However, the institutional backing of the World Bank holds strong sway, and it continues to emphasise and promote ESR development. For example, it has included the use of the ESR as a condition in the latest Development Policy Operation loan (World Bank, 2024). Taking a longer view of the evolution of social protection, it is pertinent to ask to what extent this persistent tussle between the two visions for the future of social protection is slowly shaping the system. The OPCT reform demonstrates this tussle, where there is support for the scheme from MPs and some civil servants, but international donors and other civil servants have been critical of it. The reform of the OPCT has not been transformative for the social protection sector. This is partly due to its low benefit level, and high age threshold, but most importantly, it is still administered through a static and top-down registration process. Yet, the OPCT reform did mark a distinct turn away from an approach to social protection based on poverty-targeting, and certainty conflicted with many international donors' ideas. But the key opportunities from this reform have not been grasped. No progress has been made on building a bottom-up continuous claims-making process to enable older people to apply at the sub-county or constituency level as they meet the age threshold. The DSA has made limited progress on linking the social protection data system to the civil registry to remove deceased beneficiaries and cross-reference the age of beneficiaries (Kinyanjui, 2025b). And instead, state capacity building and donor financing over recent years focused upon building a national social registry, which was not needed for the most domestically important scheme. The persistent tussle between accommodating these two distinct visions for social protection results in the maintenance of a top-down model of provisioning, and a lack of investment in local administrative structures. This shapes how citizens interact with and understand the system with regards to access and eligibility assessment, which in turn influences their ability to contest or hold the system accountable.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the reviewers for their thoughtful and useful comments as well as the editors of the thematic issue, Professor Wil Hout, Professor Andrew Fischer, and Professor Marcus Kaltenborn, for their support and helpful feedback. Considerable thanks to all the people who spoke to me throughout my time in Kenya and who gave me such powerful insights.

Funding

This research has been supported by funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 956909. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Erasmus University Rotterdam and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the need to maintain anonymity of the interview sources, interview data cannot be shared, but a summary of interviews could be released upon discussion with the corresponding author.

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Kate O'Donnell is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies. Her thesis focuses on the political economy of social registries, analysing how the idea of social registries emerged and evolved globally, as well as the political and institutional implications of the social registry in Kenya.