cogitatio

ARTICLE

Citizens' Claims-Making and Navigating the Politics of Accountability in Social Cash Transfers in Uganda

Ahmed El Assal

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Ahmed El Assal (elassal@iss.nl)

Abstract

This article examines the politics of citizens' claims-making in social cash transfers through a case study of the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment programme in Uganda. Social accountability mechanisms have become embedded in the design and implementation of social cash transfer programmes in the Global South. Various institutional mechanisms with different objectives are implemented to strengthen citizens' rights claims and hold the state and service providers accountable when things go wrong. However, the impact of these initiatives is contested, and some of these mechanisms, such as grievance redress mechanisms, may do little to help those seeking to register or redress their complaints and grievances. This article argues that the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in cash transfer programmes can be undermined by several factors. First, the nature of citizens' complaints, particularly those resulting from the incoherence of targeting mechanisms, stresses the need for a universal approach and an improved civil registry system to address the exclusionary outcome of current targeting mechanisms. Second, the state's capacity to respond to citizens' demands for greater programme coverage and sufficient grant amounts is hampered by austerity measures and a dysfunctional administrative capacity that prevents the effective national implementation and institutionalisation of the programme. Third, social accountability efforts in social cash transfers that aim to enhance state–citizen relations are crippled by clientelist politics and the handout logic of these programmes. However, anecdotal evidence indicates a more nuanced understanding of citizenship, where individuals navigate a complex landscape of both fear and empowerment.

Keywords

accountability; claims-making; social cash transfers; social justice; social protection; Uganda

---

1. Introduction

This article is inspired by field visits to numerous payment points in four different districts in northern Uganda during the disbursement of the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) programme. Older people desperately wait in the shade of a mango tree for the arrival of programme staff and mobile payment cars to distribute the presumably monthly grants. However, since its inception, the programme's payments have been irregular, often taking up to six or nine months to be distributed. Therefore, older people and their families are very eager when the payments are finally announced. Under the mango tree stands a desk, where the district programme staff and sub-county development officer sit to receive and discuss citizens' complaints and grievances about the programme. Often, this desk is surrounded by older people and their families attempting to file a formal complaint, informally discuss their grievances with the programme staff, or include their names in the programme registry list. Older people are informed about their payday primarily through local radio stations, religious leaders, or village chairpersons, telling them to gather in a central location in the village to collect their payments. Nevertheless, many citizens leave the payment point frustrated and despairing, as they cannot enrol in the programme because they lack a national ID or cannot collect their payment because something went wrong with the bank.

Social cash transfers (SCTs) have increasingly become part of mainstream development policy in the Global South and the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; Beegle et al., 2018; Garcia & Moore, 2012; Hickey et al., 2019). In the early 2000s, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) boosted development organisations' and donors' agendas of promoting SCTs for the "deserving poor" to help governments in the Global South build their social protection (SP) systems (Barrientos et al., 2005; Hickey et al., 2019; Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2016). SCTs are often distributed as part of a broader SP system by making conditional or unconditional direct, regular, and predictable payments to poor and vulnerable individuals or households to reduce poverty and improve human wellbeing (Barrientos & Hulme, 2009).

Scholars have pointed to the importance of examining SCTs' transformative potential to enhance the prospects of beneficiaries moving out of poverty (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Molyneux et al., 2018). Contrary to the conventional thinking about SP, which uses a risk-management approach, the transformative agenda on SP is driven by human rights and social justice principles (Devereux & McGregor, 2014; Devereux et al., 2011) and aims to establish a new and just social contract between states and citizens (Hickey, 2011; Hickey & King, 2018). This transformative SP agenda prioritises rights, responsibilities, democracy, and advocacy in discussions about SP (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). As a result, recipients in SP programmes can exercise their agency to hold service providers accountable, viewing SP as a right rather than a handout (Hickey & King, 2018). However, as Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004) argue, it is essential to understand citizens' capacity to demand accountability from different implementing actors and to empower marginalised groups to claim their rights (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2007), particularly when these programmes are promoted as reducing vulnerabilities and advancing a pro-poor policy agenda.

As part of this transformative agenda, several accountability mechanisms have been introduced to enhance the delivery of SP interventions and enhance social contract dynamics (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). However, in SP programmes, citizens' claims have primarily been treated as a programme effectiveness issue and scantily researched as an accountability mechanism. To contribute to filling this gap, this article examines the transformative potential of SCTs through the lens of social accountability (SA). It primarily focuses on how citizens demand their entitlements and navigate social and political hierarchies to make claims on the

state. The SAGE programme in Uganda is a significant case study because it was initially a donor-established SCT programme that became institutionalised. Often referred to as the flagship programme of Uganda's SP strategy, SAGE has gained significant popularity since its nationwide rollout in 2021, largely due to its politicised nature, the exit of its primary donors, and its perceived institutionalisation.

Using a qualitative case study approach, this article investigates two main research questions: How do recipients of SCTs navigate the complex social and political structures to make claims on the state? And to what extent are these efforts successful (or not) in addressing citizens' demands for improved governance of SCTs? This article argues that several factors undermine the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in SCT programmes. First, the nature of citizens' complaints, particularly those resulting from the (in)coherence of targeting mechanisms, stresses the need for a universal approach and an improved civil registry system to address the exclusionary outcome of current targeting mechanisms. Second, the state's capacity to respond to citizens' accountability demands for greater programme coverage and sufficient grant amounts is hampered by austerity measures on social spending and a dysfunctional administrative capacity that hinders the effective national implementation and institutionalisation of the programme. Third, SA efforts in SCTs that aim to enhance state–citizen relations are crippled by clientelist politics and the handout logic of these programmes. However, anecdotal evidence indicates a more nuanced understanding of citizenship, where individuals navigate a complex landscape of both fear and empowerment.

The article is structured as follows. The following section presents a brief literature review on SA in SCTs. Section 3 presents the methodology and data collection approach, and Section 4 introduces the case study and a timeline for the implementation of SAGE. Finally, Section 5 discusses and analyses the findings, followed by concluding remarks.

2. Accountability Mechanisms and SCTs

The mutually reinforcing role of SP and SA has been the subject of scholarly debates. Development organisations commonly argue that SP can play a role in the broader SA realm by skewing unbalanced social relationships between state and citizens, given that both interventions target vulnerable groups (Hickey & King, 2018). Hence, marginalised groups can be more empowered through their participation in programme governance by building new horizontal relationships with other community members and vertical relationships with the programme administration and authorities (Samuels et al., 2013). Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2020) argue that for SP to contribute to building a just social contract, the application of SA in SCTs must consider the establishment of interfaces between the state and citizens. The authors predict that expanding SP interventions from pilot and small-scale programmes into larger schemes may enable beneficiaries to shift from mere recipients into shapers of these programmes.

In their literature review on the relationship between SP and state–citizen relations, Ulriksen and Plagerson (2023) find that there are mixed findings on the common assumption that SP programmes will inevitably enhance state–citizen relations and empower citizens to make claims on the state and expect an even share of rights and obligations. The authors emphasise:

> Even inclusive SP programmes that emphasise equal citizen rights struggle to consistently overcome deeply held assumptions of uneven rights and responsibilities that in subtle ways maintain unequal

relations between citizens benefiting from SP on the one side and state as well as powerful citizens on the other. (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2023, p. 842)

Existing literature on SA has pointed to the role of SA mechanisms as a central component in the design and implementation of SCTs (Ayliffe et al., 2017; Bergh, 2019). A range of institutional mechanisms has been implemented to increase the efficiency and transparency of SCTs, minimise the misuse of funds, and prevent fraud (Ayliffe et al., 2017; Barca, 2016; Barca et al., 2012). It is noted that integrating SA mechanisms into programmes' design and implementation can foster the flow of information between the state and citizens and promote accountability principles in the broader SP domain (Barca, 2016; Bassett et al., 2012; Bergh, 2019). Concurrently, implementing SA mechanisms has gained traction among donors and international organisations as a way to promote the transformative potential of SCTs (Ayliffe et al., 2017; Bergh, 2019; Seekings, 2024). In this view, SA is portrayed as a tool to strengthen citizens' entitlement to their citizenship rights and hold authorities accountable when things go wrong (Bergh, 2019; Hickey & King, 2018).

The type and efficacy of these mechanisms have diverged. As discussed in the literature, several SA mechanisms have been previously incorporated into SP programmes, including but not limited to grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs), social audits, scorecards, complaints hotlines, spot checks, performance-based incentives, informal feedback, and local-level politics (Browne, 2014). Nevertheless, the efficacy of each of these tools differs, and assessing their impact on increasing the accountability of programmes is challenging. As previously argued by Joshi and Houtzager (2012), these mechanisms are often implemented as widgets, following a tendency to adopt a technocratic solution to foster citizens' participation. Therefore, they often fall short of achieving SCTs' desired goals of citizen empowerment and establishing new social contract dynamics between the state and citizens (Hickey & King, 2018; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020).

The study of SA mechanisms in SP is nascent and still has some weaknesses. In addition to the scholarly literature on the topic, donor organisations and consulting agencies arguably publish most of the literature on SA initiatives in SCT programmes. Most of these reports and case studies focus on programme evaluations, best practices, lessons learned, policy documents, and accountability practices (Browne, 2014; Seferis & Harvey, 2022). The impact of implementing SA mechanisms in SCTs is opaque: There is a lack of systematic evidence on these mechanisms' effectiveness in improving the delivery of social assistance interventions, at least in their current design and implementation. For example, Seferis and Harvey (2022) argue that such mechanisms generally struggle to prove a concrete connection between feedback and improving programming. Additionally, Ulriksen and Plagerson (2023) note that the short accountability route of improving social assistance through connecting recipients to frontline workers and decision-makers may lack evidence of effectiveness in practice. Notably, this argument goes beyond the SP domain, as other accountability scholars have also discussed the persistent challenge of agreeing on how to measure the impact of accountability initiatives or define their success (Fischer-Mackey & Fox, 2023; Gaventa & McGee, 2013).

In their critique of SA mechanisms as a feedback tool, scholars have shed light on the importance for such mechanisms to provide two-way communication channels between service providers and citizens, rather than one-way communication from service providers to citizens, through feedback and complaints mechanisms (Barca et al., 2012, 2021; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). Previous studies examining GRMs in SP programmes have highlighted the weaknesses and limitations of GRMs from both the demand (citizen action) and supply (state action) side of accountability. Citizens may experience challenges that hinder their

effective and inclusive participation in GRMs, such as a lack of information about the programme and its possibilities, limited knowledge about how it works, feeling ungrateful or embarrassed about complaining, scepticism about the state's response, and a reluctance to challenge authority and decision-makers (Barca, 2016). Similarly, state institutions can also face challenges in ensuring the effectiveness of GRMs, such as the absence of standardised processes to collect complaints and provide feedback, a lack of communication among different levels of the programme implementation team, inadequate staff, and a lack of information for citizens on how the GRM functions (Barca, 2016). GRMs are often criticised for not empowering citizens who benefit from SP programmes. They are perceived as a formal mechanism that is isolated from the needs of beneficiaries on the grassroots level and lack a focus on entitlements and rights.

Scholars have pointed to several factors that hinder citizens' participation in SA in SP programmes. While legislative and policy frameworks can help ground SP in rights-based institutions, citizens must be aware of their rights and become part of the design of these frameworks in order for new modalities of citizenship to emerge (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). Ulriksen and Plagerson (2014) list the challenges for citizens benefiting from SP in holding the state accountable as rights holders, especially when recipients are often the most marginalised and vulnerable in society. Their capacity to hold government officials and service providers accountable is low due to the power imbalances between them and state representatives (Hickey, 2011; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). Besides, in societies that have long experienced fragility, conflict, and authoritarian governance, citizens' accountability demands are also hindered by subtle social norms arising from historical traditions of authoritarian control (Joshi, 2023) and legacies of fear rooted in authoritarian and military historical experiences (Anderson, 2023). In such contexts, citizens may avoid having the state solve their problems due to "cultural norms of not being seen to cause trouble or low expectations of state response" (Gaventa et al., 2023, p. 8). These informal institutions impact people's self-perceptions of their agency and their feelings of not being able to act against authority or speak truth to power. This is especially relevant because, as Kpessa and Béland (2013) argue, most theories that examine social policy development in Africa have their roots in Western theorisation. Thus, it is essential that the adoption of these theories in the African context be re-evaluated and interpreted in light of the continent's historical experiences and previous social policy trajectories.

The effectiveness of SA mechanisms in SCTs can be hampered for several other reasons as well. For instance, SP systems' fragmentation can contribute to the fragmentation of accountability structures. This is particularly relevant in contexts where multiple agencies and actors deliver SP services, with each organisation bringing its definitions and mechanisms of accountability (Seferis & Harvey, 2022). In his critical scholarship, Mkandawire (2010) argues that the notion of accountability in aid-dependent countries should be understood in the context of risky donor–recipient relationships, which are very much shaped by asymmetrical power relations. As pointed out by Ouma and Adésínà (2019), many SCTs in Africa are primarily funded and implemented by donors and international organisations, which often ignore or do not consider local political and economic dynamics. Often, donors' policy interventions are framed in a depoliticised way, labelling the process as technical rather than political (Laruffa, 2018). Ouma and Adésínà (2019, p. 383) emphasise that such framing "limits the role of citizens in holding governments to account and contradicts donor rhetoric of participation, thereby entrenching top-down processes that lack transparency."

The above literature discussion reveals that while SA mechanisms have become institutionalised as part of the design and implementation of SCTs, the effectiveness of these mechanisms in empowering citizens to

demand their rights in SCTs is complex and contested. The literature seems to agree that citizens' ability to make claims on the state is shaped by social and political institutions and contextual factors that govern the relationship between the state, citizens, and service providers. Particularly, citizens who mostly benefit from SCTs tend to be from the most vulnerable sections of the population, which puts them in a weak position to negotiate their rights with authorities. However, this scholarly discussion on the effectiveness of SA in SCTs is still nascent, and existing studies have not adequately examined the complex bottom-up political dynamics that shape accountability relations between the different actors involved in these programmes.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

This article adopts a case study approach, examining accountability relations in the SAGE programme in Uganda. Primary data were gathered through fieldwork observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) with several stakeholders. Data collection and fieldwork activities took place in two different stages, April–June 2023 and October–November 2023, in Kampala and the Nebbi, Yumbe, Gulu, and Nwoya districts.

Although the programme was rolled out to all districts in Uganda, the districts visited for data collection were enrolled at different stages of the program lifecycle. Overall, I conducted 26 KIIs in Kampala and the four districts, whose respondents were selected via snowballing and key informant techniques. All KII participants were directly involved in the programme. Additionally, 14 FGDs were conducted with older people, of which 12 with recipients of SAGE or delegated family members of recipients. However, a few non-recipients—those yet to qualify for enrolment in the programme—attended some FGDs. Two FGDs were conducted with community monitoring groups supported by HelpAge International as part of an ongoing SA project to disseminate information about the project among local communities. Participants in the FGDs were selected randomly from those who were present during SCTs' distribution at the pay points. Moreover, I accompanied SAGE programme staff during the payment process at 19 pay points in 19 sub-counties across the four districts. Field observations were undertaken during these visits and documented. While KIIs were conducted in English, FGDs with citizens were partially conducted in English and partially in participants' local languages (Alure in Nebbi, Aringa in Yumbe, and Luo in Gulu and Nwoya).

The article uses a qualitative data analysis approach as the main analytical framework. All recordings of KIIs and FGDs were transcribed in English before being entered into ATLAS.ti for coding and content analysis. Inspired by the grounded theory approach, constant comparison and line-by-line coding were used to code key informants' discourses and citizens' complaints and grievances during their encounters with the programme.

4. The Case of the SAGE Programme

The Expanding Social Protection programme was launched in 2010 to address chronic poverty in Uganda with support from the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid. Initially, the programme aimed to develop an SP system to benefit the poor and most vulnerable in the country and ensure that SP would become a core component of national planning and budgetary processes. As part of the Expanding Social Protection programme, a five-year pilot project was launched—SAGE—to provide regular unconditional cash transfers to different vulnerable groups. The SAGE programme had two main components: the Senior Citizens Grant for elderly people and the Vulnerable Families Grant for

vulnerable community groups. However, the Vulnerable Families Grant was dropped by the government in 2016 due to communities' and beneficiaries' dissatisfaction with its community-based targeting mechanism (UNICEF, 2024). The Senior Citizens Grant became a major component of the SAGE programme as a monthly unconditional cash transfer of UGX (Ugandan shillings) 25,000 (equivalent to USD 8.7) for citizens aged 65 and above.

The pilot phase of SAGE targeted four regions and included 14 districts. An additional district, Yumbe, was included later by the president, funded through a government contribution and not by donors. During the pilot phase, the enrolment of beneficiaries totalled 123,000 (0.003% of the total population) and was mostly done through an automated national civil registry. However, in sub-counties where the automated register did not exist, a community-based local government registration system was followed. Monthly transfers to participants were paid by the Mobile Telephone Network through a mobile money account created for each project beneficiary. Participants were able to withdraw their money at Mobile Telephone Network mobile money service points (Bukuluki & Watson, 2012).

In 2016, the government decided to partner with DFID and Irish Aid to support a second phase of the programme, expanding the project to 40 new districts, in addition to the previous 15 pilot districts. By 2017, according to programme reports, donors were responsible for funding 10 districts, while the government was responsible for 30. By then, the number of beneficiaries had reached 153,649. Following administrative changes in the creation of districts, 11 new districts were added to the programme, bringing the total number to 66 by the FY 2018/2019. A new Programme Management Unit (PMU) was established in Kampala to oversee the overall coordination of the programme, in addition to other SP interventions. At the regional level, seven Regional Technical Support Units (RTSUs) were established to provide technical support to the districts; as a result, district teams took over full management of programme implementation. These changes were supposedly introduced to increase the accountability and efficiency of the implementation. During the second phase of the programme, donors and the government agreed to tender for a new payment service provider, selecting Post Bank. This change resulted in significant delays during the process, as all beneficiaries were migrated from one provider to another.

The rationale and justification for the expansion of the programme were contested, particularly since the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED) opposed the programme from the outset on the grounds that the country's current priorities are geared towards economic growth through infrastructure projects and other productive sectors of the economy, rather than redistributive practices (Angucia & Katusiimeh, 2017; Hickey & Bukenya, 2021). The timing of the expansion raised concerns about the regime's real intentions in rolling out the programme to new districts, given that this coincided with the 2016 elections. It also elevated political tensions between the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and opposition parties, especially when the opposition raised concerns about the politicisation of the programme and the political rewards it provided to the NRM (Angucia & Katusiimeh, 2017).

In 2020, the government decided to roll out SAGE nationally to all remaining 74 districts. The number of beneficiaries reached approximately 320,000 by 2023. The number of RTSUs was increased to 10, covering all regions of Uganda, while the local government structure remained responsible for programme delivery. Although the government took full responsibility for funding the national rollout, donors continued to be represented in the programme's national steering committee. During this phase, the payment service

provider was changed again, this time to Centenary Bank. In the FY 2022/2023, SAGE encountered significant challenges in allocating an adequate budget for financing the transfers, which caused considerable payment delays that lasted up to nine months. However, several donors and civil society organisations pressured the government to continue to finance the programme, despite internal objections from MoFPED (personal communication, April 2023). Moreover, as in the following year, 2023/2024, all other SP programmes received significant cuts to their allocated budgets, amounting to almost 80%, with a total expenditure of UGX 172.7 billion (about USD 47 million) for the entire SP portfolio, as shown in Table 1. The overall budget allocation for the SP sector remained the same in 2024/2025 and, as in the previous year, the SAGE programme budget allocation was not changed. Donors have continued to influence the government to ensure that the SAGE budget remains intact due to their interest in the continuation of the programme and their legacy in its institutionalisation.

Table 1. Budget allocation for SP programmes FY 2023/2024.

Institution/Programme	2022/2023 Approved Budget (billion UGX)	2023/2024 Draft Estimates (billion UGX)	Change (%)
SAGE	120.94	121.22	0.2
Enterprise Fund for Older Persons	5.00	1.00	−80.0
Special Grant for Persons with Disabilities	16.60	3.30	−80.0
Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Program	12.29	2.46	−80.0
Youth Livelihood Program	18.44	3.87	−79.0
Support to Street Children Interventions	0.13	0.02	−81.0
National Council for Older Persons	2.41	0.44	−81.7

Source: Institute of Social and Economic Rights (2023).

The stagnation in the government's SAGE budget is reflected in the grant amounts distributed to beneficiaries. The grant amount, UGX 25,000 per month (approximately USD 8.7), has remained almost unchanged since the programme's launch, despite price inflation, as shown in Figure 1. Technically, the real value of the transfer today would be equivalent to UGX 13,400 in 2011 shillings (approximately USD 3.85)
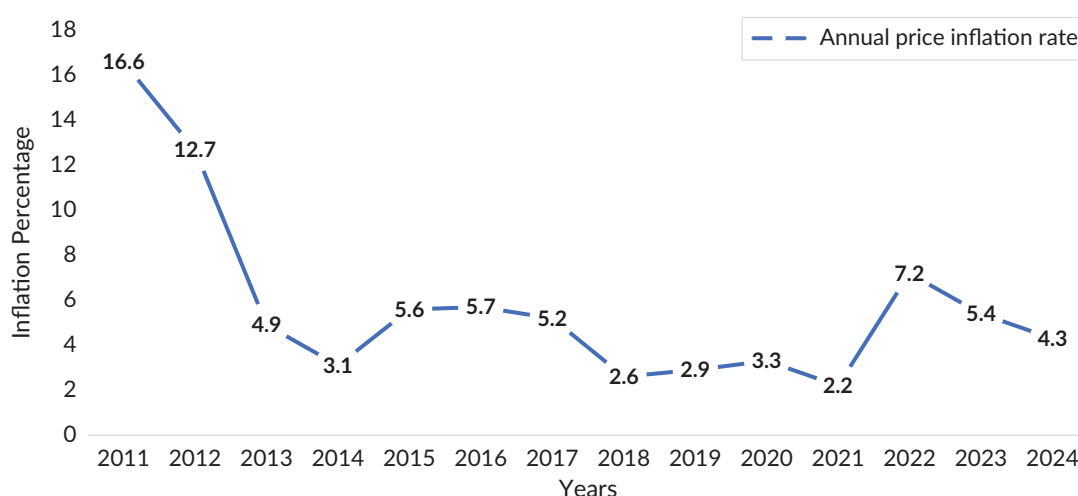

Figure 1. Uganda's annual rate of consumer price inflation, 2011–2024. Source: Own elaboration based on consumer price inflation data retrieved from World Bank Statistics.

based on an 86% compounded consumer price inflation rate between 2011 and 2024. Notably, austerity measures and budget cuts for social policy spending were conditions of a three-year agreement between the government and the International Monetary Fund, which affected not only SP spendings but also other social policy domains, such as health, education, and infrastructure (Institute of Social and Economic Rights, 2024).

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Complaints and Grievances: Targeting, Identification, and Inflation

During several FGDs, citizens stated various grievances they encounter in the programme, either as beneficiaries already enrolled and eligible to receive the grant or as non-recipients who reached the eligibility age but were still excluded from the programme. Complaints often revolved around the targeting mechanisms adopted by the government, the grant amount, the ability to enrol in the programme, payment-related challenges, and fraud committed by recipients' family members. Formal complaints and grievances handling mechanisms, as well as community meetings, are put in place at pay points to generate feedback and collect complaints. Nevertheless, there have been significant challenges in the complaints-handling process, including delays in responses, a fear of retaliation for freely expressing one's opinions, and a lack of responsiveness from local officials, including local council chairpersons, parish chiefs, and sub-county representatives. Moreover, the complaints and grievances mechanisms mainly capture the problems encountered by recipients, not by those eligible but excluded from the programme—these problems are collected informally by the administrative staff but not systematically investigated. These findings are in line with observations by Hossain et al. (2024) in a recent literature review on the politics of complaints in the Global South, which emphasise that unresolved complaints are often associated with the weakness of GRMs as a feedback mechanism, which lack the "teeth" aspect of accountability.

A first category of complaints was related to the targeting strategies to select beneficiaries. The FGDs and KIIs with citizens and stakeholders showed that SAGE's targeting mechanism has generated continuous complaints. The government adopted several targeting strategies, which led to confusion, hindered the dissemination of adequate information among communities, and presented administrative challenges for SAGE staff. During the programme pilot phase, community registration for citizens over 65 was the primary targeting strategy. One of the project staff stated that during the pilot phase, beneficiaries were asked how old they were and then used a calendar of events to determine their age (KII, 16 May 2023). However, the targeting strategy changed during the programme's second phase and its expansion to an additional 45 districts, selecting the 100 oldest persons in each district. This new targeting mechanism did not affect the pilot district beneficiaries. However, there were age discrepancies between districts. As a result, this targeting mechanism led to several grievances and complaints to the programme administration, as stated by a regional coordinator in Nebbi:

> We had a lot of pressure because we found that in some districts, we would find people with very advanced ages, like 90 years old, and then in other districts, you [programme staff] would find the oldest is 70 years old, and this caused a bit of confusion. (KII, 15 May 2023)

During this period, the Equal Opportunities Commission criticised the programme and questioned whether its targeting mechanism was fair. For instance, in some communities, people aged 80 could not join, while in

other districts, people aged 70 qualified. In response to these concerns, the government changed its targeting strategy for the third time. As the programme expanded nationally, the government decided to introduce two new conditions. First, it set the minimum age at 80 years, although existing participants remained enrolled even if they were younger. Second, beneficiaries now needed a national ID to register and receive their instalments.

The second category of complaints was related to the civil registry or to the requirement to have a national ID to join the programme. The government's reliance on the national ID (*Ndaga Muntu*) as a main strategy for identifying and enrolling SAGE beneficiaries has been widely criticised by civil society organisations and human rights groups. Moreover, many beneficiaries have complained about the use of the ID as the main identification strategy, given that the issuance of the ID was riddled with errors (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice et al., 2021). For example, the Uganda Social Protection Forum (2024) estimates that about 54,000 citizens (equivalent to about 17% of enrolled beneficiaries) are entitled to be enrolled in SAGE but were excluded due to lacking an ID or administrative errors in issuing it by the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA). In addition, eligible citizens have encountered several problems with registering their ID, such as a wrong age or their names having been dropped, changed, or misspelt. A participant in an FGD in Yumbe explained:

> The first time we took the ID, we found that some people were reduced in age; by the time they registered the names for people to come and pick up the money, they faced many challenges. Even though their age had reached eligibility, the people enrolling followed the national ID information. So, most people who had reached the age of eligibility but whose ID information did not match up to that age were sent back home. (FGD, 13 October 2023)

Low state capacity and the securitisation approach followed for the issuance of the ID negatively affected the inclusiveness of the ID registration process. During this process, citizens were not informed that these IDs would be connected to services provided by the government. Overall, estimates show that more than 17 million Ugandans, or between 23 and 33% of the population, are currently not registered in the national identification register (NIRA, 2023). Civil society organisations have argued that the government has mostly introduced the ID as a tool for national security, implemented mainly by powerful military leaders (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice et al., 2021). This contributed to the mass exclusion of women, older people, and other vulnerable groups from realising their social rights. This critique is often left out in debates on linking digital identification forms, such as ID cards, with the delivery of development interventions, such as social assistance programmes (Masiero & Bailur, 2021; Nyst et al., 2016).

During KIIs, SAGE staff highlighted citizens' challenges encountered during the NIRA ID process, especially by those needing to prove their age to join the programme. For instance, to change their ID, citizens must undergo a legal process, which requires a payment of UGX 50,000 (approximately USD 14) as renewal fees and choosing a lawyer to represent them through the legal process. Most citizens eager to receive the grants are severely vulnerable groups, for whom embarking on such a process might be difficult or impossible due to the high expenses, the extended timeframe, the need for someone to accompany them throughout the process, and transportation challenges involved in commuting to the district headquarters or even Kampala to attend a court case. A female participant in an FGD in Gulu shared her experience complaining about the ID:

> I have been complaining about the wrong dates on my ID. I am already 84 years old, but the ID shows something below. When I went to the sub-county chief, he told me that I am an old person, but some people who are younger than me are getting the money. That's why I am here to complain to SAGE people about it. (FGD, 24 October 2023)

In essence, the targeting mechanisms used by SAGE, whether through ID requirements or setting an age threshold, continued to exclude citizens from their social and economic rights. Rather than adopting a more universal approach for social provisioning, these mechanisms limited access. Fischer observes that such institutional practices not only restrict access but also contribute to the depoliticisation of social provisioning and alter accountability relations. This process results in the "severing of practices of rights-claiming and contestation by beneficiaries from processes of beneficiary selection" (Fischer, 2018, pp. 10–11). Similarly, Mkandawire (2005) highlights the limitations of targeting mechanisms in the African context, emphasising that targeting often demands high and costly administrative capacity, which is frequently lacking in many developing countries.

The third category of complaints was related to the impact of inflation and the inadequacy of the grant. For example, beneficiaries complained about the grant's amount and the frequency of payment, including delays and errors. Among the most common complaints was the grant's insufficiency in fulfilling older people's basic needs, especially since the amount has remained the same without inflation adjustment. Beneficiaries expressed concerns about persistent inflation and the rising prices of goods and commodities on markets, which have not been reflected in any correction measures. Often, politicians and MPs were blamed for being unable to increase the grant amount. This is understandable, given the clientelist nature of Ugandan politics and politicians' use of the grant as a political mobilisation tool. Complaints about the low amount of the grant were regularly coupled with complaints about the frequency of payouts, with irregular payments in some cases taking up to nine months. Notably, the disbursement plan of the programme has been affected by changes in the implementation of SAGE, such as the division of districts between donors and government, the national rollout of the programme, and the allocation of the required funds. All of this has led to significant delays in the distribution of the grant. These findings are relevant to Ouma and Adésínà's (2019) argument that the top-down approach through which donors establish SCTs provides very little information and transparency on the implementation of the programme, thus limiting the ability of citizens to hold the government accountable to its commitments and obligations.

A final category of complaints focused on social dynamics, family relations, and the allocation of alternative recipients for collecting beneficiaries' payments. For example, several participants in FGDs mentioned their lack of trust in family members to collect money on their behalf, while others reported that family members registered as alternative recipients kept the payment instead of handing it over. This issue highlights that registration of alternative recipients has been one of the key challenges in the programme. Additionally, some families could not register alternative recipients and, due to health challenges, were unable to go to the payment locations themselves.

To conclude, the targeting of SCT participants in developing countries is often shaped by social and political considerations (Lind et al., 2022) and accompanied by inclusion and exclusion errors (Devereux et al., 2017). Furthermore, linking targeting to digital identity as a "deterministic condition of development" (Masiero & Bailur, 2021, p. 3) might intensify the exclusion of the most vulnerable citizens. Over time, targeting strategies

in the SAGE programme have changed; however, citizens still report significant grievances about exclusion due to the programme's association with the ID card. Additionally, the financial and legal difficulties involved in obtaining or modifying the ID have prevented citizens from holding programme implementers to account through existing SA mechanisms, such as submitting complaints to the programme's GRM. These unresolved complaints highlight the limitations of the GRM in addressing major citizen grievances, further exacerbating citizens' vulnerability and exclusion from entitlements and legal rights as eligible recipients.

5.2. State–Citizen Relations: The Paradox of Fear and Empowerment

SP programmes are often assumed to deepen and strengthen the relationship between the state and citizens by creating a new social contract dynamic in which citizens feel empowered to demand their rights from the state (Hickey & King, 2018). The SAGE programme provides mixed evidence on the ability and effectiveness of beneficiaries to demand their entitlements to social assistance and feel empowered. The results of the FGDs show that citizens have contradictory assumptions about their entitlement to the grant, expressing conflicting views and contradictory feelings: Some were afraid of losing the money if they complained about the problems they encountered, while others expressed that they were entitled to this money because they had contributed to the development of the country, either by being part of the labour force or by paying taxes. This understanding of citizens' entitlements and obligations (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2014) shapes their views on accountability demands from the government.

The literature on SP suggests that citizens' activity and engagement with the state might increase due to activities during the delivery of the programme (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2023). This is true in the case of SAGE. However, citizens are also influenced by how often the state engages with them. For instance, the frequency of payments determines the level of interaction between citizens and district programme staff. Citizens in FGDs reported that since the national rollout of SAGE, payment delays have reduced engagement between the state and citizens. In some cases, this may make citizens feel that they should appreciate the payment when it arrives rather than express complaints about delays or grant amounts. The findings show that less engagement fosters the view that these grants are a gift from the government or the "president," as indicated in several FGDs, so citizens should be grateful and not make claims. This ties into targeting mechanisms: Recipients see that other older people are excluded, so they feel grateful for being chosen.

One key factor influencing feelings of entitlement is the gender of beneficiaries. It is increasingly acknowledged that gender dynamics affect participation and engagement in SP interventions. These dynamics also shape state–citizen relations (Jones, 2021; Kuss & Hällström, 2024; Molyneux, 2006; Perera et al., 2022; Puorideme & Agustín, 2023). Yet, gender is often overlooked in the design and implementation of SP by governments or development organisations (Kuss & Hällström, 2024). Findings from the FGDs show that the majority of women saw the grant as a gift from the government, since they did not have to work for it. In many cases, they did not even know the source of the money. As stated by one female beneficiary in Gulu: "It is not our right, it is just a gift from government because we are now old and cannot do something productive. It is just sympathy from government" (FGD, 24 October 2023). On the contrary, men often linked their entitlement to the grant to either working for the government and becoming pensioners who deserve to be compensated for their work or to the taxes they had to pay if they were not working for the state.

These gender dynamics can also be attributed to the social and cultural norms of rural communities in Uganda. A female participant in Nebbi expressed her view about the lack of political capabilities of female recipients in the programme and their inability to complain or ask for their rights from the government due to the social agrarian structure:

> One day, I was lodging a complaint with the officials about the transfer of accounts from Post Bank to Centenary Bank, but we could not hold these people accountable because they were government employees. For us, we are peasants in the villages. What could we do? (FGD, 17 May 2023)

After the national rollout of the programme, MoFPED decided that older people who were already on the pension payroll would not be entitled to the SAGE grant. MoFPED's justification for this decision was that the government pays both the pension and grant, and therefore, citizens should not be paid twice from the same resource envelope. However, this rule had just been introduced to the programme during the fieldwork, which means that pensioners were paid the grant during the donor-financing period and the first two years of government coverage. One observation is that this change will negatively affect citizens' ability to demand accountability. Removing citizens who are already recipients of pension schemes means that mostly educated people who hold positions in the government will be expelled from the programme. This leaves only non-pensioners, who are mostly not educated and have never been part of the government, as the main beneficiaries of the grant.

5.3. Political Dynamics, Clientelism, and Patronage Structures

The establishment of SAGE was initially guided by a pragmatic technical approach, but it quickly came under the influence of political interests and local pressures. According to an interview with a representative from DFID, the early selection of districts was based on national statistics related to poverty indicators (KII, 31 May 2023). However, this strategy has changed over time. The SAGE programme has experienced political scrutiny since the early phases of the programme. While donors piloted the programme in 14 districts across the country, political pressure on the government emerged when local political leadership from Yumbe district pressured President Museveni to include Yumbe in the programme, so it would be treated like its neighbouring districts. In fact, Yumbe's political history and marginalisation—due to the continued presence of rebel groups and the Lord's Resistance Army fighting against the NRM until a peace agreement was signed in 2002—make it a clear example of the impact of local political leadership influencing the central NRM leadership.

Over time, political pressure from districts that were not part of the programme increased. Following the pilot phase, surging political demands for the incorporation of other districts into the programme intensified. Due to the increasingly politicised nature of the programme and the clientelist logic of Ugandan politics, citizens approached local politicians to advocate for addressing complaints about the programme. Local politicians used several communication channels to highlight and advocate for these issues: community gatherings, radio shows, local council meetings, and pressure on MPs to discuss the topic in parliament. In some cases, local politicians also used their political weight to ensure the enrolment of some of their family members or their voter constituencies.

The national rollout of the programme to all 146 districts was a result of this political pressure wielded at the local level. Despite initial plans to roll out the programme in different stages, the government—under local

political pressure—made the decision to implement it nationally during the 2021 national elections, despite the initial agreement between the government and donors to roll it out gradually to avoid mistakes during implementation. While MPs exerted political pressure to ensure the national rollout of the programme so they could claim success in bringing the programme to their districts before the electoral cycle, this political pressure was not reflected in increased resources for SP interventions.

Another political factor that affected the implementation of the programme was the creation of new districts over time. For example, Nebbi district was split into two new districts, Pakwach and Zombo, during the programme. The creation of new districts by the NRM government is mostly seen as creating patronage networks through newly appointed and employed local administration and political staff on the district level (Green, 2015). For instance, if a new district is created, it will have its own MP, and those MPs will be able to advocate for supporting the government, since the latter did them a favour. The creation of new districts has created political tensions in some instances between programme administration staff and the residents of the new district.

There were often tensions between the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and elected politicians about the grant amount and targeting strategy of the programme. Due to a certain level of pressure from local communities and the opportunity for politicians to use the programme to strengthen their support base, local politicians are constantly advocating for reducing the eligibility age of beneficiaries to less than 80 years and increasing the grant amount. Advocacy efforts to address some of the critical institutional barriers of the programme occur on multiple governance levels, and each governance level attempts to lobby the next tier. As explained by the RTSU coordinator of Gulu, during a visit to Acholi in June 2023, the Minister of Gender, Labour, and Social Development met with representatives of beneficiaries, district councillors, chairpersons, and civil society organisations to discuss the challenges facing programme implementation. The minister promised that she would present their demands to the cabinet and parliament, since she is also an MP. It is noteworthy that politicians at different levels are involved and interested in the programme's implementation for several political reasons; however, their ability to address the complaints remains limited. During observational visits, I saw that politicians ranging from MPs to local councillors were often present during payment visits. In one case, an MP was visiting pay points and beneficiaries of the programme along with programme staff and international organisations like UNICEF.

Local politicians also often play a role in spreading misinformation about the programme on the community level. They urge citizens to show up at pay points even if the latter are not eligible or enrolled in the programme to pressure the administrative staff and gain support from their constituencies, mainly when these local politicians identify themselves with the programme. In some instances, as expressed during an FGD with beneficiaries in Yumbe, local politicians, such as a sub-county chief known as local council 3 (LC3), promised citizens that they would be enrolled in the programme even if they had not reached the target age or that the payment would be made monthly instead of quarterly. The programme's administrative staff expressed dissatisfaction with how local politicians meddled in the implementation of the programme.

Beneficiaries also expressed dissatisfaction with electoral messages, often politically incentivised, during the campaigning period, with politicians promising them they would push the government to increase the grant amount. They explained that while they interacted with politicians during the campaign period to express their

demands to improve the programme's conditions, they often left feeling that local politicians would not do anything once elected to office. In Uganda, where votes are largely exchanged for handouts, the programme has been frequently used as a political tool on national and local levels. There is a widespread assumption among beneficiaries that this money is a gift from the government and the president for the votes they cast to support the NRM government. On the contrary, local politicians often feel their hands are tied, since SAGE is a government programme and they cannot force the government to address citizens' demands. A female councillor for older people shared that while they try to share problems with MPs, who are more inclined to address these challenges at a higher level, local politicians are not informed about whether these issues are addressed at that level.

Misinformation about the programme also surged at a time when village chiefs were cut off from incentive payments they used to receive during the donor-funded period. During that time, a lump sum payment per quarter was made to several local government tiers, such as village chief known as local council 1 (LC1) and parish chief known as local council 2 (LC2), to support information-sharing and complaints-handling in communities. However, this amount was decreased and then cut off when the government took over the financing of the programme. The government's justification was that since SAGE is a government programme, LC1 are supposed to oversee SAGE like any other government programme, without any additional remuneration. The amount that is currently paid to LC1 is about UGX 120,000 per annum (approximately USD 33), meant to support all government programmes at the village level. This has also affected the programme's administrative staff in their communication with village, parish, and sub-county staff. Overall, when the government took over the financing of the programme, it was not able to sustain the payment and financial incentive structure created during the donor-financed period. The hired staff members per RTSU had already decreased from seven to only three employees, additional payment for local staff such as village and parish chiefs was cut off, and the overall administrative budget of the programme was decreased significantly.

Ultimately, the implementation of SAGE has been influenced by clientelist politics and the patrimonial logic of Ugandan politics, subjecting the programme to political pressures since its inception. From the start, international donors employed strategies to politically influence the government and secure its support for the programme (Hickey & Bukenya, 2021). This situation raises important questions about accountability: Who holds the donors responsible for the design and execution of these programmes? Additionally, there are long-term negative consequences of legitimising clientelist politics rather than fostering a fair social contract between the state and its citizens. The incentive structure that donors established during the first two phases of the programme also impacted how complaints are addressed, particularly when local political actors no longer receive compensation for their role in gathering citizens' complaints.

5.4. Administrative Challenges, Diffuse Responsibility, and Fragmented Structures

The administrative capacity and rules of SCTs are often overlooked when assessing the effectiveness of these programmes (Heinrich & Brill, 2015). Administrative staff's capacity to effectively administer multiple activities can either facilitate or hinder citizens' ability to make accountability demands and engage with the state and service providers. The inclusiveness of SCTs can be improved by increasing administrative staff's capacity to disseminate accurate information about programme activities, effectively settle citizens' complaints and grievances, provide feedback, and be responsive to citizens' demands (Barca et al., 2021).

In the context of SAGE, programme administrative staff have faced several challenges that negatively affected citizens' reporting of their grievances and receiving responses to their complaints. For example, given the extreme vulnerability of grant recipients aged 80 and above, many are often sick or unable to attend in person on payment day, which means they might lose their transfer for another quarter or even more. Programme staff expressed the challenge of reaching out to beneficiaries who cannot show up on payment day, taking into account the inadequate resources they have for programme administration.

Registration problems regularly appeared on payment day. For instance, the list of recipients is compiled based on information provided by NIRA and put together by the central PMU in Kampala. Several registration problems occur during the payment process due to the long information chain that determines how recipients' names are compiled, updated, and verified. Given the long information chain and the multiple actors involved in collecting registration information and complaint forms, local administrative staff expressed their inability to address complaints, either due to the insufficient number of staff allocated to the programme's administration or the inadequate budget for its administrative activities. This also became evident in the staff's capacity to address complaints and grievances submitted through the official complaints and grievances form. Once complaints are lodged by the RTSU staff using an online complaints-handling system, the PMU in Kampala is responsible for investigating them. This process often entails long waiting periods for feedback, and sometimes cases are closed without sufficient answers being provided to recipients.

Administrative staff have highlighted issues related to information-sharing between them and the payment provider staff. For instance, there was an agreement between the government and Centenary Bank stating that recipients could still collect their money if they had a letter from NIRA indicating their national ID number. However, on payment days, bank staff refused to pay any beneficiaries who did not present a physical ID card. Administrative staff in the regional offices reported that they frequently complained to the PMU about problems caused by the payment provider. In many instances, their feedback was dismissed or deemed less relevant than the bank's statements. Tensions between administrative staff and payment providers arose due to ongoing complaints from citizens about payment processes and the verification of beneficiaries. The conflict between administrative staff and bank representatives resulted from the diffuse responsibility of each party to ensure effective programme delivery. Some of these tensions manifested during the verification of beneficiaries' payment lists, where RTSU staff blamed the PMU for not considering their suggestions about this process and instead relying on the bank's registration system.

Another administrative challenge was the fragmentation and lack of cohesion in Uganda's SP sector. For example, the SP sector has fragmented accountability structures, where many programmes operate in isolation, each with distinct accountability mechanisms and procedures. Fieldwork revealed that each SP programme is managed by a separate donor or international organisation, each maintaining its own accountability systems. Additionally, every programme establishes distinct methods for reporting grievances and complaints that citizens have while navigating SP interventions. For instance, the SAGE programme relies mainly on the formal complaints and grievance channels established by donors during its pilot phase, which continued after the government assumed responsibility. Other programmes use different mechanisms involving various state accountability actors. For example, the World Bank's Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project integrates collaboration with the Office of the Inspector General directly into its design and implementation.

This section has argued that, in the context of SAGE, weak administrative capacity, diffuse responsibility between administrative staff and payment providers, and fragmentation of accountability structures due to the technocratic logic of setting up SP programmes (Ouma & Adésínà, 2019) lead to a weakened and inefficient response from the state and service providers to citizens' complaints and grievances. As discussed earlier, the role of international donors in SP programmes can lead to a fragmented accountability landscape (Seferis & Harvey, 2022); as seen in the Ugandan case, different SP programmes operate simultaneously in the same districts with very different accountability structures. Moreover, in line with other literature on the effectiveness of formal institutionalised complaints and grievances mechanisms (Hossain et al., 2024), it is apparent that SAGE's formal GRM mechanism is limited in addressing citizens' grievances. Local administrative staff lack the power and authority to respond to citizens' complaints, given that ultimately, complaints should be channelled to the PMU in Kampala. Local staff's role is often limited to collecting complaints and uploading them to an online system. Moreover, the role of private actors such as banks complicates the notion of answerability when complaints are caught between the administrative staff on the one hand and bank staff on the other.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on fieldwork in four districts across northern Uganda as well as Kampala, this article provides evidence of citizens' claims-making processes in the SAGE programme. It expands the discussion on transformative SP programmes by highlighting the challenges citizens encounter in navigating the complex social and political structures that impede the implementation of SCTs and the limits of SA mechanisms in addressing these grievances. Citizens' complaints and grievances in SAGE were mostly attributed to institutional problems that the existing GRM mechanism embedded in the programme management structure cannot overcome. For instance, citizens' failure to acquire or correct their national ID to enrol in the programme has been a significant problem with NIRA, affecting citizens and preventing them from acquiring their social and economic rights. This type of complaint exposes the failure of targeting mechanisms in SCTs to overcome administrative and capacity challenges, often present in developing countries, and ensure that citizens can claim their social and economic rights.

Moreover, most citizens' complaints pointed to the low amount of grants and increasing inflation that negatively affected the grants' impact on improving citizens' economic status. The government's refusal to make any inflation corrections to the grants is tied to the austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund agreement and the lack of adequate resources allocated to the programme. These institutional problems undermine the impact of accountability mechanisms in addressing citizens' desires for more dignified and effective service provision and contribute to a lack of trust between citizens and the state in seeking resolutions to their grievances. They also stress the lack of donors' accountability for pushing the state to institutionalise a programme in which it will have significant financial challenges to sustain.

The assumption that SP programmes will increase citizens' ability to engage with the state and realise the full potential of their entitlements needs to be debunked. The SAGE programme shows that while citizens' activity and engagement with the state have increased, their ability to make claims on the state has been two-sided. In many cases, citizens expressed their fear of submitting complaints or raising claims against the state, mainly because they perceived the grant as a government gift or did not even know who provided the

money. However, certain social groups—such as men and educated citizens—emphasised their entitlement to the grant, either due to their previous work for the government or the taxes they paid over time. This finding is aligned with recent discussions on state–citizen relations in SP that predict that SP programmes may increase state–citizen engagement. Yet, increasing activity or engagement does not necessarily reflect the strength of state–citizen relations, particularly in these programmes' design and oversight phases (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2023). The findings also show that the degree of empowerment is highly influenced by other social markers, such as gender and education.

In line with other studies that have examined the politics of SCTs in Uganda (Bukenya & Hickey, 2019; Grisolia et al., 2023; Nystrand et al., 2024; Nystrand & Yawe, 2024), accountability relations in the SAGE programme are shaped by social and political factors that determine communities' perceptions of their social and economic rights. For example, in northern Uganda, community leaders and citizens often attributed their right to be included in the programme to the longstanding conflict that affected the region for decades. As shown by other scholars examining citizenship modalities in Uganda, the citizenship environment in Uganda differs from liberal notions of citizenship, particularly as the articulation of citizenship has been shaped by patrimonial, religious, conflict, and identity histories (Alava et al., 2019). Moreover, as Ndidde et al. (2019) argue, the notions of citizenship, particularly in rural Uganda, are highly gendered, and Ugandan women are struggling with discrepancies between their rights, which are granted in government legislation, and societal control, which prohibits them from realising these rights. Ultimately, I subscribe to the view that the effectiveness of SCTs in Uganda is limited in establishing a new just social contract, given the patrimonial logic in which these programmes are implemented. I conclude that SA efforts to enhance the relationship between the state and citizens are not likely to be fully realised in Uganda under these circumstances.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

The author has used Grammarly for grammar corrections.

References

Alava, H., Bananuka, T. H., Ahimbisibwe, K. F., & Kontinen, T. (2019). Contextualizing citizenship in Uganda. In K. Holma & T. Kontinen (Eds.), *Practices of citizenship in East Africa* (pp. 57–72). Routledge.

Anderson, C. (2023). Understanding accountability in practice: Obligations, scrutiny, and consequences. *Development Policy Review*, *41*, Article e12687.

Angucia, M., & Katusiimeh, M. W. (2017). Social assistance as election bait: The expansion of the senior citizens' cash transfer programme in Uganda. In N. Awortwi & E. Aiyede (Eds.), *Politics, public policy and social protection in Africa* (pp. 86–102). Routledge.

Ayliffe, T., Schjødt, R., & Aslam, G. (2017). *Social accountability in the delivery of social protection*. Development Pathways.

Barca, V. (2016). *Grievance mechanisms for social protection programmes: Stumbling blocks and best practice*. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth. https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/OP320_Grievance_mechanisms_for_social_protection_programmes_stumbling_blocks_and_best_practice.pdf

Barca, V., Hebbar, M., Cote, A., & Wylde, E. (2021). *Inclusive information systems for social protection: Intentionally integrating gender and disability*. Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 Expert Advice Service (SPACE). https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/ninja-forms/2/SPACE_Inclusive-information-systems-for-social-protection_FINAL.pdf

Barca, V., Notosusanto, S., & Emmett, B. (2012). *Review of, and recommendations for, grievance mechanisms for social protection programmes*. Oxford Policy Management. https://www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/7748-indonesia-grievances/grievances-exec-summary-final.pdf?noredirect=1

Barrientos, A., & Hulme, D. (2009). *Social protection for the poor and poorest: Concepts, policies and politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Barrientos, A., Hulme, D., & Shepherd, A. (2005). Can social protection tackle chronic poverty? *The European Journal of Development Research*, *17*, 8–23.

Bassett, L., Giannozzi, S., Pop, L., & Ringold, D. (2012). *Rules, roles, and controls: Governance in social protection with an application to social assistance*. World Bank.

Beegle, K., Coudouel, A., & Monsalve, E. (2018). *Realizing the full potential of social safety nets in Africa*. World Bank.

Bergh, S. I. (2019). Social accountability, citizenship and social protection in the MENA region: Exploring the linkages. In D. Leavy & R. Jawad (Eds.), *Social policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 220–242). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Browne, E. (2014). *Social protection accountability* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1178). Governance and Social Development Resource Centre.

Bukenya, B., & Hickey, S. (2019). The politics of promoting social protection in Uganda: A comparative analysis of social cash transfers and social health insurance. In S. Hickey, T. Lavers, M. Niño-Zarazua, & J. Seekings (Eds.), *The politics of social protection in Eastern and Southern Africa* (pp. 202–224). Oxford University Press.

Bukuluki, P., & Watson, C. (2012). *Transforming cash transfers: Beneficiary and community perceptions of the Senior Citizen Grant (SCG) in Uganda*. Overseas Development Institute.

Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, and Unwanted Witness. (2021). *Chased away and left to die*. https://iser-uganda.org/publication/chased-away-and-left-to-die

Cornwall, A., & Nyamu-Musembi, C. (2004). Putting the 'rights-based approach' to development into perspective. *Third World Quarterly*, *25*(8), 1415–1437.

Devereux, S., Masset, E., Sabates-Wheeler, R., Samson, M., Rivas, A. M., & Te Lintelo, D. (2017). The targeting effectiveness of social transfers. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, *9*(2), 162–211.

Devereux, S., & McGregor, J. A. (2014). Transforming social protection: Human wellbeing and social justice. *The European Journal of Development Research*, *26*, 296–310.

Devereux, S., McGregor, J. A., & Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2011). Introduction: Social protection for social justice. *IDS Bulletin*, *42*(6), 1–9.

Devereux, S., & Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2004). *Transformative social protection* (IDS Working Paper 232). Institute of Development Studies.

Fischer, A. M. (2018). *Poverty as ideology: Rescuing social justice from global development agendas*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Fischer-Mackey, J., & Fox, J. (2023). Pitfalls of "slippery indicators": The importance of reading between the lines. *Development in Practice*, *33*(6), 665–674.

Garcia, M. H., & Moore, C. M. T. (2012). *The cash dividend: The rise of cash transfer programs in sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank.

Gaventa, J., Joshi, A., & Anderson, C. (2023). Citizen action for accountability in challenging contexts: What have we learned? *Development Policy Review*, *41*, Article e12697.

Gaventa, J., & McGee, R. (2013). The impact of transparency and accountability initiatives. *Development Policy Review*, *31*(s1), s3–s28.

Green, E. (2015). Decentralization and development in contemporary Uganda. *Regional & Federal Studies*, *25*(5), 491–508.

Grisolia, F., Dewachter, S., & Holvoet, N. (2023). Follow the hand that feeds you? The effects of non-governmental cash transfers on citizenship. *Social Policy & Administration*, *57*(6), 976–992.

Heinrich, C. J., & Brill, R. (2015). Stopped in the name of the law: Administrative burden and its implications for cash transfer program effectiveness. *World Development*, *72*, 277–295.

Hickey, S. (2011). The politics of social protection: What do we get from a 'social contract' approach? *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, *32*(4), 426–438.

Hickey, S., & Bukenya, B. (2021). The politics of promoting social cash transfers in Uganda: The potential and pitfalls of "thinking and working politically." *Development Policy Review*, *39*(S1), O1–O20.

Hickey, S., & King, S. (2018). Understanding social accountability: Politics, power and building new social contracts. In M. Molyneux, N. Jones, & F. Samuels (Eds.), *The social and political potential of cash transfers* (pp. 139–154). Routledge.

Hickey, S., Lavers, T., Niño-Zarazúa, M., & Seekings, J. (2019). The negotiated politics of social protection in East and Southern Africa. In S. Hickey, T. Lavers, M. Niño-Zarazua, & J. Seekings (Eds.), *The politics of social protection in Eastern and Southern Africa* (pp. 1–41). Oxford University Press.

Hossain, N., Joshi, A., & Pande, S. (2024). The politics of complaint: A review of the literature on grievance redress mechanisms in the Global South. *Policy Studies*, *45*(2), 139–158.

Institute of Social and Economic Rights. (2023). *ISER's position on the 2023–24 social protection budget*. https://iser-uganda.org/publication/isers-position-on-the-2023-24-social-protection-budget

Institute of Social and Economic Rights. (2024). *Unpacking Uganda's 2024–25 budget: ISER's insights on public services funding*. https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Unpacking-Ugandas-2024%E2%80%9325-Budget-ISERs-Insights-on-Public-Services-Funding.pdf

Jones, N. (2021). Gender and social protection. In E. Schüring & M. Loewe (Eds.), *Handbook on social protection systems* (pp. 337–347). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Joshi, A. (2023). What makes "difficult" settings difficult? Contextual challenges for accountability. *Development Policy Review*, *41*, Article e12681.

Joshi, A., & Houtzager, P. P. (2012). Widgets or watchdogs? Conceptual explorations in social accountability. *Public Management Review*, *14*(2), 145–162.

Kpessa, M. W., & Béland, D. (2013). Mapping social policy development in sub-Saharan Africa. *Policy Studies*, *34*(3), 326–341.

Kuss, M. K., & Hällström, S. (2024). Beyond design: Examining the implementation of gender-responsive social protection in Ethiopia. *IDS Bulletin*, *55*(2), 151–164.

Laruffa, F. (2018). Social investment: Diffusing ideas for redesigning citizenship after neo-liberalism? *Critical Social Policy*, *38*(4), 688–706.

Lind, J., Sabates-Wheeler, R., Hoddinott, J., & Taffesse, A. S. (2022). Targeting social transfers in Ethiopia's agro-pastoralist and pastoralist societies. *Development and Change*, *53*(2), 279–307.

Masiero, S., & Bailur, S. (2021). Digital identity for development: The quest for justice and a research agenda. *Information Technology for Development*, *27*(1), 1–12.

Mkandawire, T. (2005). *Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction* (Social Policy and Development Programme Paper Number 23). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/mkandatarget.pdf

Mkandawire, T. (2010). Aid, accountability, and democracy in Africa. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, *77*(4), 1149–1182.

Molyneux, M. (2006). Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda: Progresa/Oportunidades, Mexico's conditional transfer programme. *Social Policy & Administration*, *40*(4), 425–449.

Molyneux, M., Jones, N., & Samuels, F. (2018). Can cash transfer programmes have 'transformative' effects? In M. Molyneux, N. Jones, & F. Samuels (Eds.), *The social and political potential of cash transfers* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.

National Identification and Registration Authority. (2023). *Mass enrolment & mass renewal FAQ's 2023-2024*. https://www.nira.go.ug/media/2022/11/FAQs-on-Mass-Enrolment-Renewal.pdf

Ndidde, A. N., Ahimbisibwe, K. F., & Kontinen, T. (2019). Gendered citizenship in rural Uganda: Localized, exclusive and active. In K. Holma & T. Kontinen (Eds.), *Practices of citizenship in East Africa* (pp. 105–120). Routledge.

Nyst, C., Makin, P., Pannifer, S., & Whitley, E. (2016). *Digital identity: Issue analysis—Executive summary*. Consult Hyperion.

Nystrand, M. J., Ulrich, J., Buur, L., Yawe, B., Mwinuka, L., & Kisaame, E. K. (2024). Politicization of non-state cash transfers: The cases of Uganda and Tanzania. *Forum for Development Studies*, *51*(1), 1–27.

Nystrand, M. J., & Yawe, B. L. (2024). *The development of political settlements in Uganda from independence to the present day: Background study for the CASH-IN research programme* (SECO Working Paper No. 2024:2). Roskilde University, Department of Social Sciences and Business, Socio-Economic Research Centre (SECO).

Ouma, M., & Adésínà, J. (2019). Solutions, exclusion and influence: Exploring power relations in the adoption of social protection policies in Kenya. *Critical Social Policy*, *39*(3), 376–395.

Perera, C., Bakrania, S., Ipince, A., Nesbitt-Ahmed, Z., Obasola, O., Richardson, D., Van de Scheur, J., & Yu, R. (2022). Impact of social protection on gender equality in low-and middle-income countries: A systematic review of reviews. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *18*(2), Article e1240.

Puorideme, D., & Agustín, L. R. (2023). The discursive construction of gender identities and roles for women in cash transfer programmes: Implications for gender power relations. *World Development Perspectives*, *29*, Article 100487.

Sabates-Wheeler, R., & Devereux, S. (2007). Social protection for transformation. *IDS Bulletin*, *38*(3), 23–28.

Sabates-Wheeler, R., Wilmink, N., Abdulai, A. G., De Groot, R., & Spadafora, T. (2020). Linking social rights to active citizenship for the most vulnerable: The role of rights and accountability in the 'making' and 'shaping' of social protection. *The European Journal of Development Research*, *32*(1), 129–151.

Samuels, F., Jones, N., Alder, H., & Foley, C. (2013). *Holding cash transfers to account: Beneficiary and community perspectives*. Overseas Development Institute. https://odi.org/en/publications/holding-cash-transfers-to-account-beneficiary-and-community-perspectives

Seekings, J. (2024). The future politics of social protection in Africa. *IDS Bulletin*, *55*(1), 41–58.

Seferis, L., & Harvey, P. (2022). *Accountability in crises: Connecting evidence from humanitarian and social protection approaches to social assistance* (BASIC Research Working Paper 13). Institute of Development Studies.

Uganda Social Protection Forum. [@upfsp]. (2024, February 13). *Errors on National IDs remain a major challenge especially for vulnerable population groups to access much needed social protection interventions* [Post]. X. https://x.com/upfsp/status/1757353697783296134

Ulriksen, M. S., & Plagerson, S. (2014). Social protection: Rethinking rights and duties. *World Development*, *64*, 755–765.

Ulriksen, M. S., & Plagerson, S. (2016). The principles and practice of social protection. *Global Social Policy*, *16*(2), 127–131.

Ulriksen, M. S., & Plagerson, S. (2023). Social protection and state-citizen relations: A review of the literature. *Social Policy & Administration*, *57*(6), 841–854.

UNICEF. (2024). *Social assistance targeting in Uganda: Implications for social cohesion in communities*. https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/15851/file/Social%20assistance%20targeting%20in%20Uganda.pdf

About the Authors

Ahmed El Assal is a PhD researcher and Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses on civil society, foreign aid, accountability, social policy, as well as the politics of knowledge production and Southern epistemology.