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The Interacting Politics of Agricultural Input Subsidies and Cash Transfers in Malawi and Zambia

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Abstract

The influence of international donors in the policymaking of social protection (SP) in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a hot topic of debate since the early 2000s. Recent studies differ in perspective on whether donors' influence is limited to soft power, or whether the use of hard power is more dominant. This article investigates the relative policy power of domestic elites and international donors, by comparing recent SP reforms in Malawi and Zambia. The cases show divergent reforms, in which Malawi's SP programs are overall stagnating, while Zambia's are expanding. The article innovates by jointly analyzing the politics underpinning the two most dominant instruments of SP in both countries: agricultural input subsidies and social cash transfers. While most studies examine them in isolation, a joint analysis underscores the ways in which the programs are embroiled in ongoing political competition, on the ideological, electoral, and clientelist levels, often pitting international donors against domestic elites. Based on original qualitative data (2023–2024), the article makes three arguments. First, recent economic crises enhanced donor hard power via International Monetary Fund and World Bank loan conditions, compelling both governments to reform. Second, donors exercise soft power in tandem, tailoring reform strategies to national contexts. Third, long-term trajectories of SP institutionalization diverge: Zambia shows increasing institutionalization, while Malawi's remains static and limited. These trajectories are rooted in structural differences and reinforced by path dependency. The findings contribute to broader debates on the political economy of donor influence and the future of SP in the Global South.

Keywords

agricultural input subsidies; cash transfers; Global South; international aid; Malawi; political economy; social protection; Zambia

1. Introduction

In late 2022, both presidents of Malawi and Zambia made public announcements about the future of their governments' social protection (SP) programs. In his September 2022 speech to the National Assembly, President Hichilema of Zambia announced: "The Government is implementing the 'Cash Plus' approach to link SCT [social cash transfer] beneficiary households to other social protection programmes" (Hichilema, 2022). One month later, President Chakwera of Malawi held a special Presidential Address announcing that the government would be "streamlining various subsidy programmes and social protection programmes under one Consolidated National Safety Net that ensures that all 4 million households that need Government assistance are served by different interventions" (Chakwera, 2022). While the Zambian president announced an overall expansion of their SP programs, the Malawian president's announcement represented a reconfiguration and overall reduction.

This article investigates how and why these divergent reforms occurred, by investigating the relative roles of domestic elites and international donors in changing contexts. It contributes to the growing literature on the politics of SP (e.g., Adesina, 2020; Hickey et al., 2020), in particular the question of what the relative importance of soft and hard power is in determining donor influence. Recent studies suggest that donors' soft power is most relevant, i.e., the use of ideational means to shape others' agendas (Lavers & Hickey, 2021). Others have raised the critique that donors continue to use hard power, i.e., the use of material sanctions or rewards, through for instance the use of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loan conditions (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; Yiyugsah, 2023).

The period under analysis commences with the 2020 elections in Malawi and the 2021 elections in Zambia. Both resulted in a shift of ruling parties, and significant SP reforms. The article undertakes a joint analysis of the political dynamics underpinning the two predominant forms of SP in Malawi and Zambia. The first is agricultural input subsidies (AIS), which annually offer chemical fertilizer and hybrid seeds to smallholder farmers at below-market prices (Jayne et al., 2018). The second is social cash transfers (SCTs), which periodically and unconditionally provide cash to impoverished citizens (World Bank, 2025c). A third type, public works (PW), is only implemented in Malawi and pays people to work on public infrastructure projects (Beegle et al., 2017). A joint analysis underscores the ways in which the programs are embroiled in ongoing political competition, on the ideological, electoral, and clientelist levels. Furthermore, a most-similar research design allows for an analysis of different outcomes in cases with similar background characteristics. Utilizing Lavers and Hickey's (2021) drivers of SP expansion as comparators, this article ascertains that Malawi and Zambia exhibit comparable levels of electoral competition, distributional crisis, and donor influence. Substantial differences remain with respect to levels of urbanization and the structure of the agricultural sector.

From this analytical starting point, the article presents three empirical arguments based on original qualitative data collected between August 2023 and April 2024, as well as an in-depth review of existing literature. First, recent economic crises in Malawi and Zambia have temporarily enhanced the hard power of international donors through the channel of IMF and World Bank loan conditions. This has driven the governments of Malawi (GoM) and Zambia (GoZ) to implement SP reforms that they otherwise would not have. Second, donors complemented this with soft power through reform strategies tailored to the specific policy space. This resulted in the Consolidated National Safety Net reform in Malawi and the Cash Plus reform in Zambia.

Third, a comparison of the 2020–2024 period with earlier studies reveals diverging long-term trajectories of SP institutionalization. SP in Malawi has been characterized by static and limited institutionalization, while Zambia is marked by increasing institutionalization. This article posits that the different background factors of urbanization and the structure of the economy are pivotal to these trajectories.

Theoretically, the article argues that soft power and hard power are emphasized differently by different donors, and they reinforce one another. As recipient countries encounter political or economic crises, donor influence tends to increase. In the context of the rising debt crisis in the Global South, this raises critical questions of policy autonomy and social sector spending (see also Fischer & Storm, 2023; Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2024). Second, it is important to examine long-term dynamics in the politics of SP to identify the factors that result in long-term trajectories of increased or limited institutionalization.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 contains a literature review on donor–government relations and SCT–AIS interactions, Section 3 a most-similar analysis of Malawi and Zambia, Section 4 a background section on SCT and AIS in Malawi and Zambia, and PW in Malawi, Section 5 an empirical section on the 2020–2024 policy reforms, and finally Section 6 a conclusion.

2. What We Know About the Interacting Politics of SCT and AIS in Sub-Saharan Africa

This section describes how Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) governments and international donors compete over policymaking of two distinct forms of SP: SCT and AIS. It defines SP as "initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized" (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, p. 9). It aligns with Lavers and Hickey (2021) in adopting the concept of institutionalization to analyze not just program adoption, but also implementation and financing.

2.1. Policymaking Competition Between Donors and Recipient Governments

Domestic elites and international donors can be regarded as the primary agents of public policymaking in SSA, particularly following the Structural Adjustment era starting in the 1980s, which marked an enhanced influence of donors. This has carried through to the present despite reform attempts to improve recipient state ownership (Kpessa-Whyte, 2021). Nevertheless, donor influence over public policies differs strongly per recipient country, depending on a range of factors, including economic dependence on aid, and the state's institutional capacity to undertake centralized development planning (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010).

In the field of SP, Lavers and Hickey (2021) have argued that domestic elites are most influential in decisions to expand SP programs. They do so as part of "political survival strategies," such as targeting SP programs to specific groups for electoral gain or in an attempt to build state legitimacy. Since the 2000s, donors rely predominantly on soft power to influence these elites, using influencing strategies such as advocacy, coalition-building with domestic bureaucratic elites, and the funding of pilot programs and evaluations. This leads to the formation of "transnational policy coalitions" which include donors and pro-reform governmental actors (Lavers & Hickey, 2021). However, Lavers and Hickey (2021) argue that domestic elites are inclined to institutionalize reforms only in circumstances where they face a genuine threat to their power and where the proposed reforms have an ideological fit with domestic conceptions of social welfare.

While the analysis of Lavers and Hickey is overall strong, they underestimate donors' use of hard power. A prominent strategy is the use of loan conditions by the international financial institutions (IFIs; Yiyugsah, 2023). IMF loans can alleviate foreign exchange (FX) constraints for governments that face balance-of-payments crises and signal to other parties that governments have adequate macroeconomic adequacy, thereby facilitating additional loans and investments (He et al., 2024). Using this leverage, the IMF places strict policy reform conditions on these loans, which often includes the retrenchment of social programs (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023). Donors' hard power fluctuates with the economic conditions in recipient countries. Debt relief in the early 2000s through the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative improved the ability of many countries to raise capital from different sources, thus reducing donor leverage (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010). This may be why few studies have centralized the role of IFIs in driving SP reforms, apart from Yiyugsah (2023). However, debt crises in the Global South have markedly increased again, and accelerated since Covid-19. This is likely to intensify donor influence in a way that echoes the 1980s and 1990s (Fischer & Storm, 2023).

2.2. The Joint Analysis of SCT and AIS

SCT and AIS have distinct histories. AIS have been a preferred mode of support to smallholder farmers by many SSA governments since the 1960s (Chirwa & Dorward, 2013). Following mounting donor opposition, governments largely eliminated AIS programs in the 1980s and 1990s under pressure from Structural Adjustment Programs. In the 2000s, at least 10 SSA governments reintroduced scaled-up versions, with the largest being established in Malawi and Zambia (Jayne et al., 2018). Drivers included the electoral pressures resulting from the introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, and debt relief through the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative, which increased many governments' fiscal space and thus their ability to pursue their preferred policies (Jayne et al., 2018). Conversely, SCT programs were introduced in the early 2000s. Driven and often financed by international donors, including the World Bank, UNICEF, the United Kingdom through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and the European Union (EU), they have since expanded rapidly (World Bank, 2025c). An expanded form has recently emerged called Cash Plus, which combines cash transfers with other programs, focused on outcomes such as nutrition, healthcare, or education (Roelen et al., 2017).

The objectives of SCT and AIS are often described as distinct, in which SCTs have a protective function toward the poorest and most vulnerable by improving their consumption capabilities (World Bank, 2025c), while AIS are productive by stimulating farmers' production decisions (Jayne et al., 2018). In practice, AIS also have a clear protective function in subsistence farming settings, because farmers' production decisions are crucial to food security (Ellis & Maliro, 2013). Several authors have previously identified this, for instance referring to AIS as SP "through other means" (Mkandawire, 2020), or "protection through agriculture" (Dorward et al., 2007).

Micro-level evidence tends to evaluate AIS relatively unfavorably. Moderate yield improvements can occur, but they are variable, and paired with issues such as soil degradation, high expenses, and corruption (for overviews, see Chirwa & Dorward, 2013; Hemming et al., 2018; Jayne et al., 2018). Meanwhile, studies on SCTs find a range of poverty-reducing effects, including improvements in people's consumption and nutrition levels, and increased investments, human capital, and aggregate demand (Burchi, 2021).

Despite this, the broad tendency is that SSA governments pursue and largely self-fund AIS as their main SP program, while most donors object to them (Jayne et al., 2018). Most donors are more supportive of SCTs through advocacy and financing (World Bank, 2025c), while SSA governments' support for SCTs and social protection is limited and strongly varies across contexts and over time (Hickey et al., 2020). This broad tendency is partly ideological. Domestic elites tend to prefer AIS because it supports what Seekings (2008) has called the agrarian form of social welfare, which centralizes notions of self-sufficiency and community. They often see SCTs as fostering dependency on state support, although seeing merit in targeting limited "deserving" groups such as the elderly (Seekings, 2022). International donors, on the other hand, support SCTs over AIS because the former target the poorest directly and more efficiently, i.e., the pauperist form (Seekings, 2008).

Beyond ideological leanings, governments support AIS for political and clientelist reasons. AIS frequently dominate elections, because they provide an avenue for politicians to provide immediate relief to farmers (Chirwa & Dorward, 2013). SCTs are rarely electorally relevant (Seekings, 2022), which is likely due to their relatively limited scale, and the fact that SCT recipients are generally poor and unorganized (Yiyugsah, 2023). Moreover, AIS programs serve as vessels for rent capture. Studies in Zambia (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023; Yiyugsah, 2023) and Malawi (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014) document that large fertilizer contracts are often granted to politically-connected companies who in turn provide kickbacks to the ruling party. SCTs do not offer the same rent-seeking opportunities, because they are distributed through easily traceable bank transfers (World Bank, 2025c).

3. Malawi and Zambia: A Most-Similar Comparison

This article uses a most-similar design, which allows one to hold various background variables constant and identify causal links between remaining background factors and the different outcomes (Gerring, 2017). To structure this comparison, Lavers and Hickey's (2021) drivers of SP expansion are used: electoral competition, distributional crisis, and the influence of transnational coalitions.

First, both Malawi and Zambia are relatively electorally competitive. Since the introduction of multiparty politics (1991 in Zambia, 1994 in Malawi), both have changed ruling party several times, in contrast to many neighboring countries. In both Malawi (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014) and Zambia (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023), scholars have identified this as a major driver of SP reform and expansion, because SP programs can be instrumental in winning elections. The downside is that political time horizons can be short, and policies subject to shifting priorities (Hickey et al., 2020).

Second, Malawi and Zambia both face distributional crises, which create strong pressures for SP expansion. This includes high and increasing poverty rates, estimated at 70% of the population at USD 2.15 a day (2017 PPP) in Malawi in 2019, and 64% in Zambia in 2022. Zambia has a higher GDP per capita, but this is paired with a much higher degree of inequality (World Bank, 2024, 2025b). Moreover, both countries' rural populations largely rely on subsistence agriculture and low-yield maize cultivation, which has led to food security being closely linked to political legitimacy in Malawi (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014) and Zambia (Chapoto et al., 2015). Low and variable yields make widespread food insecurity an annual concern, exacerbated by the increasingly regular occurrence of extreme weather events induced by climate change (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2022, 2024).

Third, both countries have strong susceptibilities to donor influence. Whitfield and Fraser (2010) characterize the Zambian state as an "institutional entanglement between donors and recipients" (p. 358), driven by the priority to maximize aid in the short term as opposed to policy control through a more centralized bureaucratic apparatus. In Malawi, a similar dynamic has been well-documented (Hemsteede, 2024; Wroe, 2012). High levels of aid dependence exacerbate donor influence. In 2022, official development assistance (ODA) constituted 11.2% of Gross National Income in Malawi, and 6.7% in Zambia (World Bank, n.d.-b). Moreover, given their commodity dependence, Malawi and Zambia are both vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations for FX inflows. Import cover of FX reserves averaged roughly 3.5 to 4 months in Zambia in 2010–2024, compared to 2.2 to 2.5 months in Malawi (CEIC, n.d.-b). The slightly higher average in Zambia reflects their copper exports. Not surprisingly, Malawi has had 18 short- and long-term IMF loans since 1979 (IMF, 2025b), and Zambia has had 13 long-term loans since 1973 (IMF, 2025c).

Two important differences include urbanization levels and the structure of their agricultural sectors. Malawi's population is 82% rural, compared to 54% in Zambia (World Bank, n.d.-c), whose population has urbanized around its copper mines (Potts, 2016). This impacts the relative political importance of AIS, support for which is strongest in rural areas. Moreover, in Malawi, an estimated 84% of households relied to some extent on subsistence agriculture in 2019, and maize is exclusively cultivated by smallholders (Benson & De Weerdt, 2023). Like in Malawi, subsistence agriculture remains dominant in Zambia, estimated at 92% of farming households (Mwanamwenge & Harris, 2017). Unlike in Malawi, Zambia has a small commercial maize sector, which grows and mills most of the country's maize surpluses. The unions that represent this sector are highly influential in the country's maize subsidies (Sitko et al., 2017).

4. Setting the Scene: AIS and SCT Programs in Malawi and Zambia

Sections 4 and 5 are based on qualitative data collected between August 2023 and April 2024 in the capital cities of Malawi and Zambia. The data, described in detail in Table 1, comprises 115 semi-structured interviews with 126 unique individuals, with 59 interviews conducted in Malawi and 46 in Zambia.

Table 1. Sample breakdown.

	Malawi	Zambia
Civil servants	27	11
Elected politicians	17	14
Independent researchers	7	8
Interest group reps	1	5
NGO officials	4	0
Donor officials	14	11
Private sector reps	2	2

The higher number of interviews in Malawi, especially with civil servants, reflects the author's stronger network in Malawi. The uneven distribution across categories reflects their relative importance in the policymaking process. In the analysis, high importance is given to interviews with a unique insider perspective, which skews towards civil servants, donor officials, and elected politicians. The author took care to triangulate evidence. The text clearly indicates where uncertainties remain, and where contradictory explanations emerged. The interviews are complemented by existing literature, including journal articles, government and donor reports, and independent evaluations.

Tables 2 and 3 provide the program names, but for clarity they are referred to in the text as Z-AIS, Z-SCT, M-AIS, M-SCT, and M-PW. Interviews are referred to as either IntZam or IntMal, to distinguish the case they speak to. Interviews from Malawi and Zambia are never referenced together. The institutional affiliation of the interviewees is also clarified where possible. Next to the donor organizations noted in Section 2.2, finance ministries are abbreviated to MoF, and agriculture ministries, which implement the AIS programs, are abbreviated to MoA. Ministries implementing SCT are referred to as MoG in Malawi (Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare) and MCD in Zambia (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services). Finally, SH refers to State House, MPs to members of parliament, and IRs to independent researchers.

4.1. The Political Dominance of AIS Programs

Many studies in Malawi (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014; Chirwa & Dorward, 2013; Hamer & Seekings, 2019) and Zambia (Chapoto et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2013; Yiyugsah, 2023) have identified that political leaders have used AIS to gain political and electoral support. This, together with other factors described in Section 2, maintains AIS as the largest SP program in both countries.

Table 2 describes the main attributes and developments of M-AIS and Z-AIS since 2000. The first difference is that M-AIS has had a relatively volatile trajectory since 2005, while Z-AIS has followed a more linear path. M-AIS expenditure has spiked in election years including 2010 and 2020, and undergone a period of retrenchment in 2016–2020 (Benson et al., 2024). In Zambia, no reduction in recipient numbers has occurred since 2002, and budgets have increased over time (MoA Zambia, 2023). A plausible explanation is GoM’s limited ability to deal with financial shocks compared to GoZ. For one, GoZ has a much higher borrowing capacity—sovereign debt in 2020 totaled USD 2 billion in Malawi and about USD 16 billion in Zambia (CEIC, n.d.-a). A second explanation is that the special interests for Z-AIS are more stable than those for M-AIS. Notably, the supplier market for fertilizer imports is more concentrated in Zambia, with only a handful of firms that have consistently secured government fertilizer contracts (Nsomba & Roberts, 2023). Personal ties between politicians and fertilizer companies have been well-recorded (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023), as well as established local patronage networks (Pruce & Hickey, 2019). While rent seeking in M-AIS is also pervasive and well-recorded (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014; Holden & Lunduka, 2013), it has been subject to shifting modes of targeting and distribution (Benson et al., 2024), and a larger and shifting set of public and private sector actors (Kaiyatsa et al., 2019).

A final difference between M-AIS and Z-AIS is the long-standing e-voucher reform project pursued by donors in Zambia, not in Malawi (see e.g., World Bank, 2021). The e-voucher allows farmers to select an input package at local agro-dealers, while Direct Input Supply (DIS) sets a standard package (Chapoto et al., 2015). GoZ has long resisted the e-voucher reform (Resnick & Mason, 2016). Commonly cited reasons include vested private interests in DIS, but also more technical challenges (IntZam: MoA official, Oct. 2023; agro-dealer, Oct. 2023; MP, Oct. 2023).

Table 2. AIS in Malawi and Zambia since 2000.

	M-AIS (Malawi)	Z-AIS (Zambia)
Programme names	Farm Input Subsidy Programme (2005–2019) Affordable Inputs Programme (2020–present)	Fertilizer Support Programme (2002–2008) Farmer Input Support Programme (2009–present)
Number of annually targeted households	2005/2006 to 2015/2016: between 1.3 and 2.2 million. 2016/2017 to 2019/2020: 900,000. 2020/2021: 3.8 million. Reduced over 4 years to 1.1 million in 2024/2025.	2002/2003 to 2015/2016: gradual increase from 120,000 to 1 million. 2016/2017: 1.6 million. 2017/2018 to 2024/2025: 1,024,434.
Targeting criteria	2008/2009 to 2019/2020: either minimum land size (0.4/0.5 ha), or vulnerable household. 2020/2021 to 2022/2023: universal. 2023/2024: minimum land (0.4 ha); no civil servant.	Member of cooperative; maximum land (5 ha); no civil servant.
Modality	DIS	2002/2003 to 2014/2015: DIS. 2015/2016 to 2020/2021: DIS & e-voucher mixed. 2021/2022 and 2022/2023: DIS. 2023/2024: DIS & e-voucher mixed.
Benefits, annually	5kg bag of maize seed; 2× 50kg bags of fertilizer. Some years, seeds for other crops.	DIS: 10 kg bag of maize seed; 6× 50kg bags of fertilizer; seeds for other crops. E-voucher: self-selection.
Annual budgets (note: costs often exceed budgets)	USD 32 million in 2004/2005. Generally increased over time. 2020/2021: USD 200 million.	2002–2007: between USD 10 and 50 million. 2008–2014: between USD 110 and 180 million. 2021–2023: between USD 250 and 350 million.
Proportion funded by donors	2006–2011: between 7 and 35%. 2012–present: no support.	No donor support.

Note: DIS = Direct Input Supply. Sources: Benson et al. (2024); Chirwa and Dorward (2013); Mason et al. (2013); MoA Malawi (2023); MoA Zambia (2023); Resnick and Mason (2016); Sabola (2024).

4.2. The Diverging Paths of SCT Expansion in Malawi and Zambia, and PW in Malawi

From Table 3, two clear differences can be identified between M-SCT and Z-SCT. First, Z-SCT has expanded more quickly than M-SCT since 2014. Second, since 2014 GoZ has also started funding the majority of the program from its own budget (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023), while M-SCT has remained majority-funded by donors (Hemsteede, 2024).

M-PW was designed and funded by the World Bank, but downsized after a negative evaluation (Beegle et al., 2017). In 2022, the World Bank expanded the program again to include 400,000 people who had been removed from M-AIS (World Bank, 2022a), making it immediately larger than M-SCT.

Table 3. SCT and PW programs in Malawi and Zambia since 2000.

	Malawi		Zambia
	SCT	PW	SCT
Programme names	Social Cash Transfer Scheme (pilot phase) 2006–2012 Social Cash Transfer Programme (2012–present)	Malawi Social Action Fund (1996–2020) Climate-Smart Enhanced Public Works Programme (2020–present)	Pilots (2003–2009) Social Cash Transfer Programme (2010–present)
Number of annually targeted households	2012: 90,000 2018: 250,000 2023: 372,000	2016: 500,000 2021: 35,000 2022: 435,000	2014: 85,000 2017: 590,000 2024: 1,300,000
Targeting criteria	Ultra-poor and labor-constrained households	Poor with labor capacity	Ultra-poor and vulnerable households
Benefits, monthly	2021–2024: MWK 9,000 Since 2024: MWK 15,000	2012: MWK 300/day, 48 days per year	Since 2021: ZMW 400 or ZMW 200
Annual budgets	2021/2022: USD 13 million	Unclear	2021: USD 92 million 2025: USD 328 million
Proportion funded by donors	27 out of 28 districts	All	2010: approx. 95% 2017: approx. 25% 2020–2025: less than half, but fluctuates

Sources: Angeles et al. (2016); MCD (2022); MoF Zambia (n.d.); MoG & UNICEF Malawi (2022); Mtukula Pakhomo (2025); World Bank (2022b).

The diverging degrees of financial ownership of SCT programs between Malawi and Zambia may be explained by fiscal space. GoM's 2025/2026 budget is set at USD 4.6 billion (MWK 8 trillion), and Zambia's 2025 budget at USD 9.3 billion (ZMW 217 billion). However, preference is also involved, given the higher costs of AIS, which are entirely borne by GoM and GoZ.

The ambivalence of Malawi's political elites towards SCT programs is well documented, shifting from resistance until 2012 under President Bingu wa Mutharika (Kalebe-Nyamongo & Marquette, 2014), to a failed attempt by Joyce Banda in 2014 to use SCTs as an electoral tool (Hamer & Seekings, 2019), to an acquiescence of relatively slow donor-funded expansion under Peter Mutharika (Hemsteede, 2024). Interviews for this article confirmed this ambivalence. Notably, a SH official noted: "There is a Chewa word that says *manja lende* (hanging hands)," which "makes fun, they are lazy people, they need to be given 9,000 kwacha per month." By contrast, AIS are SP "with dignity," because they provide the means to grow one's own food (IntMal: SH, Nov. 2023). A senior MoF official recalled that "Treasury, Minister of Finance, and most of the directors were of the view that we are promoting laziness" (IntMal: MoF, Aug. 2023). Some interviewees did report an increase in politicians' support for SCTs, albeit limited (IntMal: MoG, Aug. 2023; MoF, Sep. 2023; MP, Nov. 2023; UNICEF, Sep. 2023).

GoM's budget allocations reflect this ambivalence. An MoF official noted that "if not for [M-SCT] being donor-supported, I don't think we would have anything." A former Minister of Gender argued that the government will not increase SCT funding, because they know donors prioritize funding it themselves (IntMal: Aug. 2023). Numerous civil servants also noted that GoM has no intention of increasing government contributions to SCTs in the foreseeable future (IntMal: MoF, Aug. 2023; SH, Nov. 2023).

Elite ambivalence to SCTs seemed similar in Zambia in the 2000s (Kabandula & Seekings, 2016). This changed in 2014 when President Michael Sata, and his party the Patriotic Front (PF), introduced a major budget increase for SCTs, to the surprise of international donors (Pruce & Hickey, 2019). Sata was elected in 2011 on a leftist pro-poor platform with strong urban support. Unlike his predecessors, he came to power without the support of the patronage networks benefiting from AIS, or the rural constituencies demanding it. Siachiwena (2021) has argued that this gave him the leeway to engage in an SCT expansion. More direct drivers included a persuasive coalition of a social-democratic wing of the PF and international donors (Siachiwena, 2021), a crisis moment in the Z-AIS program (Pruce & Hickey, 2019), and donors' use of financial leverage (Yiyugsah, 2023). By comparison, Joyce Banda in Malawi was not able to drive this SCT expansion in 2014, because among other things, she depended on pro-AIS constituencies for support (Siachiwena, 2021).

However, the limits of elite SCT support were revealed when Edgar Lungu succeeded Sata after his death in 2014. Representing a more pro-business wing of the PF with special interests in AIS and infrastructure, Lungu ushered in a period of de-prioritization of Z-SCT, in favor of Z-AIS. While official Z-SCT budgets increased and Z-AIS budgets decreased, actual expenditures revealed government preferences. This included severe underspending of Z-SCT, and major and regular overspending of Z-AIS (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023). In doing so, GoZ defied pressures from the IMF and World Bank. This was possible, at least for a period, by relying on private sector and Chinese loans (Yiyugsah, 2023). A period of existential uncertainty in 2019–2020 with regard to the future of Z-SCT required a major donor intervention led by the World Bank, who started taking a leading role in 2020 (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023).

5. Reforms Since 2020: Policymaking Power and Divergent Trends

5.1. The Reforms Explained

From 2016 to 2020, M-AIS was reduced to 900,000 recipients. In the run-up to the 2019–2020 elections, all major parties promised major expansion, including the incumbent Democratic Progressive Party, and the opposition parties Malawi Congress Party and the United Transformation Movement (IntMal: SH, Nov. 2023; MoA, Sep. 2023; IR, Aug. 2023). AIS prominently featured in each of their election manifestos (Democratic Progressive Party, 2019; Malawi Congress Party, 2019; United Transformation Movement, 2019), with the Malawi Congress Party and United Transformation Movement promising universal targeting. After an annulment of the 2019 presidential elections, the 2020 re-run was won by an alliance of the Malawi Congress Party and United Transformation Movement, named the Tonse Alliance, with Malawi Congress Party leader Lazarus Chakwera as president (Dulani et al., 2021). As promised, the Tonse Alliance universalized M-AIS targeting and effectively quadrupled its scope and expenditure in 2020 to target all of Malawi's 4.2 million farming households (Benson et al., 2024). Despite rhetoric of increasing food security, an MP who served in Cabinet at the time recounted that this expansion was purely politically driven (IntMal: MP, Nov. 2023). No notable increase in GoM's SCT expenditure occurred following the election.

Malawi's SP reform in 2022 occurred in this context. The three SP programs (M-AIS, M-SCT, and M-PW) are conceptualized as "one Consolidated National Safety Net" (Chakwera, 2022), in which targeting is harmonized so that the programs jointly target all households without overlapping. Specifically, SCT targets the poorest households with no labor capacity, PW targets the poorest with labor capacity but without land, and AIS switches from targeting all poor households to targeting poor households with land, so-called productive farmers. Practically, this comprised a major reduction in the number of AIS beneficiaries, which were scaled back to 2.5 million recipients in 2022/2023, 1.5 million in 2023/2024, and 1.1 million in 2024/2025 (Banda, 2025; Benson et al., 2024). This reduction was paired with a World Bank-funded increase in PW recipients by 400,000, and an increase of 300,000 recipients for shock-responsive SCTs (World Bank, 2022a). The reform formalized the government's concern over double dipping, which means no households should receive more than one type of SP (IntMal: World Bank, Aug. 2023; SH, Apr. 2024).

Zambia's SP reform was expansionary, in contrast to Malawi. While Lungu's government had de-prioritized Z-SCT in 2016–2019 (Siachiwena & Seekings, 2023), the main parties PF and United Party for National Development (UPND) both used SCTs in their campaigns for the 2021 elections (Sambo & Siachiwena, 2021). The PF warned that the UPND would remove Z-SCT if elected, which led the UPND to express its support (IntZam: IR, Apr. 2024) and make election promises of at least doubling monthly cash amounts ("UPND dismisses reports," 2021). After the UPND's victory, President Hakainde Hichilema majorly expanded SCT spending, and prioritized the improvement of implementation (IntZam: MCD, Oct. 2023). Based on Annual Economic Reports (MoF Zambia, n.d.), the SCT budget increased from ZMW 699 million in 2019 to ZMW 2.3 billion in 2021 and over ZMW 4 billion in 2024. Furthermore, budget execution rates increased from a low of 15% in 2019 to nearly full execution in 2021, 2022, and 2023. This surprised and relieved donors, who had expected the UPND to retrench the Z-SCT program despite election promises, given the party's historical record of ideological resistance to SCTs in favor of supporting farmers' self-sufficiency (IntZam: UNICEF, Oct. 2023; former civil servant, Oct. 2023; see also Hallink & Siachiwena, 2023).

President Hichilema embraced the "Cash Plus Approach" (Hichilema, 2022), which is a term borrowed from SP programming. Hichilema invoked the term Cash Plus as not a specific program, but rather the broader idea that households should receive more than one type of SP support from the government. This dispelled with a no double dipping discourse that previously dominated in government. Note: Cash Plus programs are also implemented in Malawi (World Bank, 2022b), but the term is not used more broadly.

Moreover, the SCT expansion did not come at the cost of AIS. On the contrary, the official Z-AIS budget increased from ZMW 1.1 billion in 2020 to ZMW 5.7 billion in 2021, and budget execution rates were 179% in 2021 and 140% in 2022 (MoF Zambia, n.d.). GoZ remained able to maintain this even as international fertilizer prices spiked in 2021–2023 as a result of the war in Ukraine (Nsomba & Roberts, 2023). While international fertilizer prices fell again in 2023, the Z-AIS budget further increased to ZMW 9.2 billion in 2023 and ZMW 8.5 billion in 2024 (MoF Zambia, n.d.). GoZ cancelled the e-voucher modality in 2021, returning to DIS in full, but re-introduced it again for the 2023/2024 season (MoA Zambia, 2023).

5.2. Hard and Soft Power: Donors' Elevated Policymaking Power Post-2020

This section analyzes the ways in which hard and soft power of donors reinforced one another to push GoM and GoZ to implement SP reforms that they otherwise would not have.

5.2.1. Malawi

GoM faced a multitude of pressures that elevated the hard power of donors. First, Malawi has been experiencing a protracted economic crisis since 2020, characterized by slow growth, high inflation, chronic FX shortages, and deepened food insecurity (World Bank, 2025b). Covid-19 and extreme weather events triggered this crisis, while existing economic vulnerabilities and GoM's fiscal and exchange rate policies exacerbated it. GoM has maintained a fixed exchange rate since 2020 but has had to severely limit the access to this rate in the context of the FX shortages. This has led to the development of a parallel shadow exchange market with much higher rates, further suppressing economic recovery (World Bank, 2025b). GoM also cancelled an ongoing Extended Credit Facility (ECF) from the IMF in September 2020, soon after the July 2020 presidential elections, in the hope of quickly re-negotiating a more favorable alternative (IMF, 2020, p. 4). A donor official argued the government did this to enable financing of the AIS expansion, which was not possible under existing ECF terms (IntMal: donor official, Apr. 2024). By contrast, two senior government officials cited debt misreporting by their predecessors (IntMal: GoM, Nov. 2023; GoM, Apr. 2024). Regardless, the ECF re-negotiation became a painful and protracted process, further exacerbating the FX crisis. The debt misreporting became a major hurdle to negotiations (IMF, 2022a), leading the IMF to declare Malawi's debt unsustainable in early 2022 (IntMal: three donor officials, Apr. 2024).

The AIS program became an integral part of the crisis, because of its major drain on FX reserves for fertilizer imports (World Bank, 2025b), exacerbated by sharply increased international fertilizer prices in 2021–2023. Chakwera noted in his 2023 State of the Nation Address that fertilizer imports dropped by 30% in 2022 (Chakwera, 2023).

The second pressure was GoM's failure to address food security challenges with the M-AIS expansion. Universal targeting inevitably ensured a large number of non-farming or unproductive households received subsidized fertilizer, which led to a thriving market for re-selling (De Weerdt & Duchoslav, 2022). Moreover, large quantities of fertilizer did not arrive in the 2020–2024 period, or arrived too late in the growing season, along with many other issues (Office of the Ombudsman, 2024). Next to FX shortages, this was due to GoM's attempt at overhauling its existing fertilizer supply. GoM attempted to engage in importing directly through its parastatals (Office of the Ombudsman, 2024), most likely to access the formal (and cheaper) exchange rate (IntMal: IR, Aug. 2023). Moreover, in search of better prices, GoM attempted to engage non-traditional parties to replace the traditional suppliers. From contracting 12 suppliers in 2015/2016 (Chirwa et al., 2016), GoM shifted to contracting 85 suppliers in 2020/2021, 166 in 2021/2022, and 92 in 2022/2023 (Fertilizer Association of Malawi, 2021, 2023). These actions marginalized the more long-standing fertilizer suppliers in favor of a large number of inexperienced parties, including GoM itself, who reportedly faced little due diligence, and frequently did not deliver (IntMal: MoA, Sep. 2023; World Bank, Sep. 2023). This was a ripe period for fraud, as illustrated by a number of high-level procurement scandals ("ACB says probing," 2022; iDigital – The Investigator, 2023).

GoM desperately needed a new ECF agreement to relieve FX shortages, and to get the IMF's "stamp of approval" for further financing (IntMal: GoM, Nov. 2023; donor, Apr. 2024). This elevated the IMF's hard power to demand far-reaching reforms from GoM, including AIS retrenchment and SCT expansion. In lieu of an ECF agreement, the IMF granted one-off loans under the Rapid Credit Facility in 2020 and 2022 to mitigate acute FX shortages. The 2022 Rapid Credit Facility specified that "[M-AIS] is set to be phased out and replaced by [M-SCT] and public works programs" (IMF, 2022b, p. 9). An ECF was finally agreed in November 2023, in which the IMF noted that the government was "committed to the rationalization" of the AIS program (IMF, 2023, p. 10).

The final form of hard power was a carrot. The World Bank and GoM agreed on USD 137 million direct budget support to government through a Development Policy Operation (DPO), which was approved soon after the ECF approval, in December 2023 (World Bank, 2025b). The prior condition was an ECF agreement, as well as SP reform (IntMal: World Bank, Sep. 2023). Budget support was especially important to GoM, because all donors had ceased budget support after the 2013 Cashgate corruption scandal (German Institute for Development Evaluation, 2018). As a World Bank official noted: "Knowing that this budget support was coming, I think it made it easier for [government] to do what they needed to do to get the ECF" (IntMal: World Bank, Apr. 2024).

Complementing the ECF and World Bank loans, donors used soft power to pursue a tailored reform strategy that GoM could accept. Donors understood that not enough support for SCTs existed in GoM, and that any expansion would need to be donor-funded, especially in the current context of extreme fiscal constraints (IntMal: World Bank, Apr. 2024). Moreover, GoM was concerned with double dipping risks. An idea of fairness in GoM prevailed that scarce government resources should be spread fairly and no household should receive more than one type of government support (IntMal: MoF, Aug. 2023; MoF, Apr. 2024). Various reports in recent years also identified this concern (GoM, 2017; Holmes et al., 2018). Led by the World Bank, donors responded to these concerns by pushing the idea of the Consolidated Social Safety Net, with non-overlapping target groups of SCT, PW, and AIS. Donors offered to fund the expansion of the SCT and PW programs (IntMal: MoF, Aug. 2023), and presented them as an alternative to M-AIS. This served, as one World Bank official described, as an "off-ramp" for government to retrench its unsustainable AIS program (IntMal: World Bank, Apr. 2024).

Donors also adapted to the hierarchy of preferences in government over different SP programs. M-AIS was re-targeted to "productive" smallholder farmers only. Given the limited support for SCTs in GoM, SCTs would only be targeted at the most vulnerable categories of households who had no labor capacity. Households with labor capacity but without land would be targeted with a more palatable alternative to SCTs which made cash conditional on work—the PW program. Notably, donors drove the PW expansion for strategic reasons, despite their view that PW programs are less effective than SCTs in reducing poverty (IntMal: EU, Aug. 2023; World Bank, Apr. 2024).

Several high-level meetings occurred in early 2022, which included the president, relevant ministers, and the World Bank (IntMal: World Bank, Sep. 2023). As a World Bank official recalled, the initial consultation phase was slow. However, once the economic and the AIS implementation crises worsened in 2022, GoM started showing signs of willingness. The World Bank then made the SP reform a condition for receiving a DPO (IntMal: World Bank, Sep. 2023). GoM reluctantly agreed, which required overcoming substantial internal resistance to the AIS retrenchment, including from MPs and senior traditional chiefs (IntMal: SH, Nov. 2023; GoM, Apr. 2024). A senior SH official said that accepting the AIS reduction was a "very painful decision," especially since they were "less than two years away from an election." He continues: "We did not have a choice. Malawi desperately needed the IMF program" (IntMal: SH, Aug. 2023).

At time of writing, the AIS reforms are implemented as planned, given a reduction to 1.1 million recipients in 2024/2025, almost returning to the pre-2020 number of 900,000. For 2025/2026, budget allocation has dropped from MWK 161 billion to 131 billion (Banda, 2025). However, a major external pressure to the AIS cutback, the ECF agreement, was terminated on May 14, 2025, when no review was completed for 18 months. The IMF reported an inability of GoM to maintain fiscal discipline, rebuild international reserves, and restructure external debt (IMF, 2025a). Some expressed the worry that the 2025 elections would drive government to announce a last-minute expansion (Singini, 2025). However, this did not materialize, with the Democratic Progressive Party regaining the presidency in October 2025, and none of the major parties running on a promise of AIS expansion (Mtemang'ombe, 2025). Continued economic crisis, exacerbated by the loss of the IMF program, is likely to be the leading constraint. A recent report shows that Malawi has started building up arrears for its commercial debt payments and continues to have extremely low FX reserves (Hill, 2025).

5.2.2. Zambia

Similar to Malawi, the SCT and AIS reforms in Zambia were strongly driven by the hard power of the IMF, due to GoZ's need to get an IMF loan. Zambia faced an economic crisis in 2020, when its GDP shrank by 2.8% (World Bank, 2024). GoZ faced a default of its Eurobonds in November 2020, and a protracted process of debt restructuring (Grigorian & Bhayana, 2024). Covid-19 was the immediate trigger of this recession, but the pandemic also came at a period of macroeconomic fragility, driven by low copper prices, excessive borrowing, and inefficient public investments (World Bank, 2024). In contrast to Malawi, Zambia's GDP bounced back in 2021, aided by higher copper prices. FX reserves reached a low of just over 1 month of import cover in 2021, but returned to over three months (CEIC, n.d.-b). Donor funds also came in, first with a windfall allocation of Special Drawing Rights from the IMF in August 2021, and then an ECF agreement in 2022 (IMF, 2022c). Nevertheless, poverty and food insecurity have deepened across the country (World Bank, 2024).

In contrast to Malawi, GoZ majorly increased the AIS budget in the face of fiscal crisis and heightened international fertilizer prices. Notably, fertilizer prices in Zambia remained artificially high after international prices came back down in 2023, which led to bloated profits for the major fertilizer companies in Zambia (Nsomba & Roberts, 2023). Implementation challenges were recorded, including insufficient and late deliveries of fertilizer in 2022/2023 (Kaoma & Mpundu, 2023), but not to the extent found in Malawi.

An ECF agreement was integral to the debt restructuring process. IMF Board approval of the ECF hinged on receiving adequate financing assurances from the creditors under the G20 Common Framework, and the ECF in turn formed a basis for long-term debt sustainability (Muwezwa, 2022). While the full debt restructuring process has proven complex (Grigorian & Bhayana, 2024), the ECF was approved quickly, in late 2022 (IMF, 2022c).

An ECF condition was AIS reform, including a complete switch to the e-voucher modality, to ensure AIS becomes “insulated from the previous abuse” (IntZam: World Bank, Oct. 2023). Another condition was improving the implementation, and expanding the scale, of the SCT program (IMF, 2022c, pp. 67–68). This was the culmination of a longer process. The IMF had regularly communicated the importance of these reforms prior to 2022 (IMF, 2017, 2019, 2021). Other donors also pushed for this. An FCDO official noted, for instance, that they had long lobbied with the IMF to emphasize these reforms (IntZam: FCDO, Oct. 2023).

However, it was not until the debt crisis and the election of the UPND that the IMF gained enough leverage. GoZ under the UPND was proactive in conforming to IMF’s reform priorities. UPND’s strong support for SCTs was striking, given their historical skepticism of unconditional cash support (Hallink & Siachiwena, 2023). The most obvious driver, also argued recently by Hinfelaar (2025), is the enhanced pressure from the IMF resulting from the economic and debt crisis. Plus, the UPND is ideologically more aligned with the IMF than its predecessor the PF, making the UPND more willing to comply with loan conditions (Hinfelaar, 2025). Moreover, a donor attributed an important role to the incoming responsible minister, who became a strong supporter after being exposed to the program’s successes (IntZam: UNICEF, Oct. 2023), while Hinfelaar (2025) identifies the Minister of Finance Situmbeko Musokotwane.

The UPND’s cooperation was in sharp contrast to their predecessors, who had been in various failed IMF loan discussions in 2016–2020 (Yiyugsah, 2023). The MoF proudly emphasized this, by announcing they had reached a Staff-Level Agreement with the IMF in “barely three months,” which was “on the backdrop of futile efforts previously pursued for more than five years” (Muwezwa, 2022).

The e-voucher reform for Z-AIS was enacted more reluctantly. Its rollout was the only unmet target in the ECF’s second review, and subsequently met in the third review (IMF, 2024c). A senior MoA official explained they had reduced the e-voucher districts in 2022/2023 from 33 to 17 to ensure these districts would produce enough maize to support national food security (IntZam: MoA, Oct. 2023). This illustrates GoZ’s lack of faith in the e-voucher modality. Moreover, Hinfelaar (2025) cites a forthcoming study by Chapoto which describes a strong resistance coming from Cabinet as well as large fertilizer companies. The degree of the IMF’s leverage at this point is illustrated by its ability to persuade the government to complete the e-voucher rollout or risk the ECF altogether (IntZam: donor official, Apr. 2024). GoZ announced a rollout of the e-voucher to all districts for the 2025/2026 season, replacing the DIS modality (Tembo, 2025).

Similar to Malawi, the ECF agreement was paired with promises of further grants and concessional loans. A World Bank DPO was agreed in 2022, also requiring the macroeconomic adequacy that an ECF guaranteed, and the completion of the e-voucher reform. Notably, the DPO specified nothing on SCTs, which a World Bank official noted was unnecessary because its expansion was already ensured through other World Bank programs (IntZam: World Bank, Oct. 2023). Furthermore, in July 2023, upon completing its first ECF review, Zambia became eligible for an International Development Association (IDA) grant.

Donors in Zambia also complemented hard with soft power. Similar to Malawi, the discourse of no double dipping had been dominant in Zambia. Yet instead of reinforcing this discourse, donors in Zambia elected to counter it. They did so by pursuing what the FCDO has called “the cash plus agenda” (FCDO, 2022), defined as the “shift from an idea of fairness of everyone getting something, to an understanding of equity in how we deliver services, to target vulnerable people with multiple interventions" (FCDO, 2022, p. 3). An FCDO official described this agenda as the next step in expanding SP in Zambia, following the preceding phases of evidence-building, national systems-building, and emergency-responsive SCTs (IntZam: FCDO, Oct. 2023). Donor efforts included extensive advocacy in various government ministries, and the pursuit of more sophisticated institutional and coordination mechanisms (Pruce, 2025).

The Cash Plus agenda was markedly successful, as evidenced by the president's speech (Hichilema, 2022). The FCDO recorded a "deepening and increasing acceptance of the cash plus agenda" (FCDO, 2022, p. 3) in GoZ, and "a move away from concerns over 'double dipping'" (FCDO, 2022, p. 16). A government official involved in the SCT program noted that Cash Plus was now seen as the solution to the fact that only SCTs were not enough to tackle poverty (IntZam: MCD, Oct. 2023), while another involved in the development of the new national SP policy said that the official strategy was to implement Cash Plus effectively (IntZam: MCD, Apr. 2024). An MoA official also claimed that the predominant view had shifted within the MoA. It was now considered beneficial if households receive both AIS and SCT, and there is complementarity because SCTs can be used to buy into the AIS program (IntZam: MoA, Oct. 2023).

Z-SCT received another boost during the 2024 drought response. As Z-AIS was rendered ineffective by the drought, GoZ reportedly turned to SCTs (IntZam: FCDO, Apr. 2024). The budget execution rate of Z-SCT in 2024 was 201.5%, making 2024 the first year that outturn for SCTs was higher than for AIS (MoF Zambia, n.d.). Moreover, a Cash-for-Work scheme has recently been introduced, which is more aligned with UPND's brand. This potentially expands total SP recipients in Zambia, given a historical reluctance to extend SCTs towards able-bodied adults (Pruce, 2025). However, with the IMF program set to end in January 2026, and national elections set to occur in August 2026, Hinfelaar (2025) notes that "economic analysts worry that [AIS] will return to its old form before the 2026 elections."

5.3. Zooming Out: Two Divergent Trajectories of Institutionalization

Zooming out, two divergent trajectories of SP are revealed with strong path dependencies. Malawi's SP trajectory has been static institutionalization, and high volatility. At least two major continuations can be identified. First, the fact that the SCT expansion remains entirely donor-funded echoes the argument by Hemsteede (2024) that government has acquiesced to donor-driven SCT expansion. This maintains the self-reinforcing dynamic of SCTs being owned by donors as opposed to government. It also reveals donors' limitation to hard power, because there is no expectation that GoM will be persuaded to take financial ownership over SCT. Moreover, M-AIS's expansion in 2020 and retrenchment starting in 2022 fits a long-term trend of volatility. It reflects the unstable policy environment of M-AIS, driven by high political pressure to expand, recurring fiscal constraints forcing retrenchment, and international donors with high levels of influence during periods of economic crisis. As one World Bank official noted, AIS reform is an "evergreen" in IFI conditionalities, having reappeared many times in the past decades (IntMal: World Bank, Apr. 2024).

By contrast, Zambia's trajectory is one of increased institutionalization of SP. GoZ's 2021 SCT expansion is an echo of the 2014 expansion, but two major differences illustrate how the program has become increasingly institutionalized. The first is its absolute scale. Applying an inflation adjustment of 147% for 2014–2021 (World Bank, n.d.-a), the budget in 2014 was only 21% of the 2021 budget. Moreover, budget-execution rates for SCT averaged 56% in 2014–2020, but increased to about 100% from 2021 onwards (MoF Zambia, n.d.). Second, the 2021 expansion occurred despite the ruling party's politics not traditionally aligning with SCTs. They also went beyond ECF conditions by embracing Cash Plus and expanding to 1.3 million recipient households in response to the 2024 drought. Zooming out, it appears the 2014 expansion created a strong path dependency allowing for the larger 2021 expansion to occur. It shifted donor expectations, who took to further nurturing support for SCTs within GoZ, even despite a protracted period of government de-prioritization in 2016–2019. Following recent events, several researchers have argued that the SCT program has gained sufficient political momentum to be self-sustaining (Hinfelaar, 2025; Pruce, 2025). Next to the SCT expansion, Z-AIS also expanded, even in the face of high international fertilizer prices, once again illustrating the program's centrality to the political economy of Zambia.

The remaining question is what drove these trajectories to diverge in the first place. Two explanations stand out, based on the most-similar comparison. First, mining-driven urbanization in Zambia allowed for a presidential candidate to win elections through largely urban support in 2011, without relying on constituencies that supported the AIS program. Together with donor influence, this led to the 2014 SCT expansion, which in turn laid the groundwork for the most recent expansion. In Malawi, low urbanization has meant politicians have had to continue to rely on AIS for electoral gains, foreclosing Zambia's path. Second, overall stronger economic performance in Zambia, combined with donor support, has given GoZ the leeway to not have to choose between SCT and AIS expansion. In Malawi, tighter fiscal constraints have made their opportunity costs much higher.

6. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the use of hard and soft power by donors in the 2021–2024 period in Malawi and Zambia, which led to reforms that both GoM and GoZ would have otherwise not undertaken. In both cases, donors' hard power was elevated through IFI loan conditions, but their relation to soft power was different, as were the reforms themselves. In Malawi, hard power was the decisive factor, while soft power enhanced the reforms' acceptability to GoM. Donors knew that reform options were limited from the start, given stable preferences among Malawi's elites for AIS and against SCTs, and severe fiscal constraints. GoM accepted the reforms under high external pressure, while donors achieved as much as they could. In Zambia, the debt crisis and the election victory of the UPND coincided with a context in which SCTs had already become increasingly institutionalized. Hard power was clearly important in putting SCT reform high on the agenda. However, the extent of the SCT expansion since 2021 illustrates that the UPND has gone beyond responding to pressure to genuinely supporting it. Donors capitalized on this by successfully advocating for the Cash Plus agenda, thereby accelerating this institutionalization. The e-voucher reform has had less GoZ buy-in, and is at risk of reversal once pressures ease.

This article's main theoretical contribution bridges findings from Lavers and Hickey (2021), who emphasize the role of soft power by donors such as the FCDO and UNICEF, and findings from Yiyugsah (2023), who has focused more on the levers for hard power controlled by the IFIs. This article argues that soft and hard power co-exist and reinforce one another, and their relative levels of influence depend on the degree of economic crisis in the recipient country. Most studies on the politics of SP expansion since 2010 emphasize soft power, with hard power arising in some cases where the FCDO used the threat of funding withdrawal to coerce governments into reform (Abdulai, 2021). However, with the post-Covid economic and debt crises worsening in the region, hard power wielded by the IFIs has become a more salient concern (Fischer & Storm, 2023).

It will be important to extend the analysis to neighboring countries to improve our understanding of the extent to which, and under which circumstances, recent IFI loans have accelerated SP reforms. The relevance is clear: The number of SSA countries in debt distress, or at high risk of debt distress, has increased from eight in 2014 to 23 in 2025 (World Bank, 2025a). Concomitantly, the outstanding credit of SSA countries to the IMF has increased from SDR 5.4 billion in October 2014 to 28.6 billion in November 2025 (IMF, n.d.).

This is not to suggest outcomes will be similar, as different political and economic conditions can drive diverging outcomes irrespective of shared pressures. Whitfield and Fraser (2010) argue, for instance, that Zambia's government is strongly beholden to donor influence, not just because of financial dependence, but also because of an institutional structure that is geared toward maximizing aid in the short run instead of centralized planning. In countries with more coherent institutions, such as Ethiopia and Rwanda, outcomes are likely to vary. A brief look already reveals that the causal link between recent IFI loans and SP expansion is not clear-cut. Kenya agreed an ECF with the IMF in 2021, which emphasized the importance of cash transfers (IMF, 2024a). A major expansion of the Older Persons Cash Transfer program followed in 2024 from 750,000 to 1.2 million by a presidential directive (Government of Kenya, 2024, p. 48). By contrast, Uganda's 2021 ECF agreement was followed by a reduced scope of the Senior Citizens' Grant, by increasing the minimum age to 80 (IMF, 2024b).

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