



CHAPTER 7

# The Role of Social Protection in Improving Child Well-Being and Care in Africa

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**D**espite important strides in the fight against poverty in the past two decades, many children in Africa live in poor and vulnerable conditions. South of the Sahara, 1 in 5 children grow up in extreme monetary poverty (UNICEF and World Bank 2016), and two-thirds live in multidimensional poverty (OPHI 2017). Estimates suggest that by 2030, 9 out of 10 children suffering from extreme monetary poverty will be living in Africa south of the Sahara (UNICEF 2016).

Social protection is now widely recognized to constitute a key component of the response to poverty, including child poverty (UNICEF and Global Coalition to End Child Poverty 2017). Interventions that seek to be in the best interest of the child are referred to as “child-sensitive social protection.” The concept started to gain traction in 2009 when various international partners, led by UNICEF, came together to formulate the Joint Statement on Advancing Child-Sensitive Social Protection (UNICEF 2009). The statement outlines a range of guiding principles, including early intervention, inclusion of children’s voices, and prevention of adverse consequences. Subsequent work on child-sensitive social protection has highlighted the notion that “child-sensitive” does not equate with “child-focused” and that child-sensitive social protection is therefore not limited to interventions that target children directly, such as child grants. Rather, the premise of child-sensitive social protection is to “assess interventions against the extent to which they respond to children’s practical and strategic needs” (Roelen and Sabates-Wheeler 2012, 292).

Roelen and Karki Chettri offer the following definition of child-sensitive social protection:

Child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) refers to social protection programmes or a system of programmes that aim (i) to maximise positive impacts on children, when and where appropriate and (ii) to minimise potential unintended side effects or perverse incentives. This encompasses both direct interventions (i.e. child-focused or targeted) and indirect interventions. (2016, 13)

We use this comprehensive understanding as a backdrop for the analysis in this chapter because it highlights the need to look beyond interventions targeted at children and to consider both the positive and negative effects on children of any intervention.

Social protection as a policy tool for tackling child poverty and vulnerability has recently gained much momentum. At the global level, this momentum is evidenced by the commitment to reducing child poverty in all its forms and the establishment of nationally appropriate social protection floors by 2030, as proposed in Sustainable Development Goal targets 1.2 and 1.3, respectively. In Africa, strong commitment to social protection for children also exists. For example, the sixth International Policy Conference on the African Child, held in 2014, established a 12-point plan to advance child well-being in Africa through social protection (ACPF 2014). This commitment in the region is impressive, especially considering the fairly short history of social protection. As pointed out by Devereux, Webb, and Handa (2011), until the late 1990s and early part of the following decade, narratives surrounding the well-being of Africa’s poorest and most vulnerable were premised on strong mechanisms of community support and household coping strategies, with a limited role for the state. The abandonment of structural adjustment in the mid-1990s, coupled with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the acknowledgment that other types of aid were not effectively reaching their goals, has contributed to the emergence of social protection—and social assistance in particular—as an important element of national policies across the continent (Devereux, Webb, and Handa 2011; Garcia and Moore 2012).

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the role of social protection in improving child well-being and care in Africa by considering progress made and gaps to be addressed. First, it reflects on coverage, highlighting the rapid expansion of social protection and reflecting on undercoverage among particular groups of children. Second, it provides an overview of the impact of social protection on children, considering direct and indirect income effects, psychosocial and behavioral effects, and structural constraints. Third, it offers reflections on the way forward, particularly in relation to the design

and implementation of programs. Note that this chapter focuses primarily on social assistance, referring to interventions that offer cash or in-kind support on a noncontributory basis.

## *Reaching Poor and Vulnerable Children*

The provision of social protection has expanded rapidly across Africa in the last two decades. Based on a review of 39 countries, Cirillo and Tebaldi (2016, 9) found that “in the last 15 years the number of programmes in African countries has almost tripled.” The proportion of the population that benefits from some form of social protection has also increased dramatically. One in four people and one in three poor people living in Africa south of the Sahara are now covered by either social assistance, social insurance, or labor market programs (World Bank 2018).

Children are the most common target group across social protection programs, representing at least half of those targeted across programs in Africa (Cirillo and Tebaldi 2016). According to the most recent International Labour Organization (ILO) World Social Protection Report (for 2017–2019), 13 percent of children in Africa now have access to some form of cash benefit (ILO 2017). A closer look at individual interventions indicates that this overall percentage is reflective of their rapid expansion in the last decade; Kenya’s Orphans and Vulnerable Children Cash Transfer (CT-OVC) program increased its recipients from 3,000 in its pilot phase in 2007 to 340,000 in 2015 (Asfaw et al. 2013; Bosworth et al. 2016), and the Child Support Grant in South Africa increased coverage from 1 million children in 2000 to 12 million in 2015 (Stotsky, Kolovich, and Kebjah 2016). According to the ILO, 28 (out of 54) countries in Africa had at least one program focused on children or families anchored in national legislation in 2015 (ILO 2015).

Apart from including children as a target group, interventions are also often designed to benefit children. In considering conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs, for example, conditions are most commonly tied to behavior that aims to achieve better outcomes for children. School

attendance is the most popular type of conditionality, followed by health checks. Only a few programs stipulate the need for birth registration or child nutrition. Almost half of these programs entail more than one condition (Cirillo and Tebaldi 2016).

Notwithstanding these strides, considerable gaps persist. Compared with a global average of 35 percent of children, or of households with children, receiving any type of child or family benefit, Africa’s coverage rate of 16 percent is lower than any other region’s (ILO 2017). Most programs are targeted to relatively small proportions of the population, leading to exclusion of poor and vulnerable children due to undercoverage as a result of limited resources, and to exclusion errors as a result of targeting errors. Both types of exclusion are likely to affect families and children most in need, and most notably children living outside of household or family settings. The vast majority of social protection is targeted or delivered to households or individuals living in households. As a result, many of the most marginal and vulnerable children—those who do not live in households—are left out by design. These include children in institutional care, children on the move, and children living on the streets (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017).

At present, very limited information is available about the scale of exclusion because no estimates exist on the numbers of children living outside of family settings and therefore excluded from social protection. This knowledge gap signifies the scope of the problem: a first step in aiming to reach the “missing children” with an appropriate form of social protection is to understand who and where they are.

## *Changing Lives of Children and Their Families*

Social protection has been shown to have far-reaching and positive impacts on children and the families they live in. A wide evidence base on the effect of cash transfers, for example, indicates that such programs can reduce

poverty and improve well-being across a range of dimensions, including food security, health, schooling, productive activities, and safe transitions to adulthood (Baird et al. 2013; Bastagli et al. 2016; de Hoop and Rosati 2013; Lagarde, Haines, and Palmer 2007). Nevertheless, social protection may also have negative consequences for children (Blank, Devereux, and Handa 2011), such as school dropout or increased work burdens. These consequences are often unforeseen and unintended, resulting in adverse effects or perverse incentives that limit or reverse programs' potential positive impacts.

We can consider the role of social protection in children's and their families' lives across three types of effects: (1) direct income effects, (2) indirect income effects, and (3) psychosocial and behavioral effects (see Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017). This section provides an indicative review of findings from throughout the continent to identify main trends and patterns across the three types of effects.

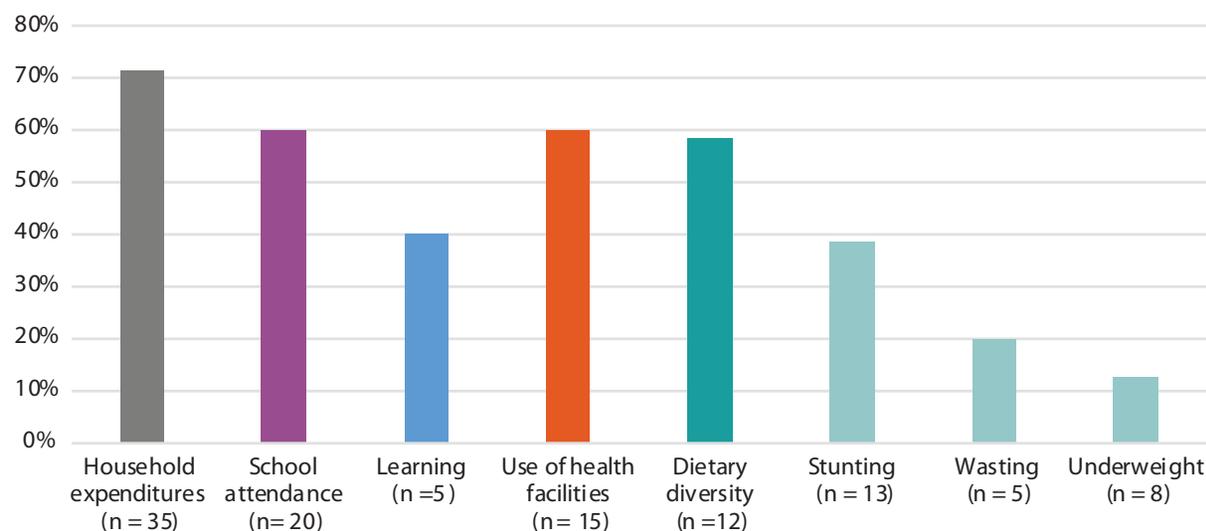
## Direct Income Effects

The provision of income through social protection directly reduces one of the largest risk factors undermining child development and care, namely poverty (Walker et al. 2011). Lack of economic resources and budget constraints undermine caregivers' ability to provide for their children's basic needs and can lead to family separation or loss of parental care (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017; Roelen, Devereux, et al. 2017). Regular cash payments can alleviate these constraints and help households smooth their consumption. Indeed, the direct income effect of transfers on material aspects of children's well-being has been well

documented, including improvements in nutritional, health, and educational outcomes (Attah et al. 2016; Bastagli et al. 2016). In qualitative research in Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa, caregivers and children considered the direct income effect of cash transfers to be very powerful, allowing for the purchase of a greater quantity and diversity of food, as well as school materials, health insurance, and clothing (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017). Although evidence is less well established, poverty reduction through direct provision of income may also increase family cohesion. Regular transfers may prevent the need for migration, for example, and thereby prevent family separation (Barrientos et al. 2014).

The available evidence also reveals areas in which social protection has been less successful than anticipated. Figure 7.1 provides an overview of the proportion of studies reporting positive and significant impacts of cash transfers in a range of different outcome areas (based on Bastagli

**FIGURE 7.1—PROPORTION OF STUDIES REPORTING SIGNIFICANT AND POSITIVE IMPACTS**



Source: Based on Bastagli et al. 2016.

et al. 2016). The findings indicate that programs are highly successful in increasing household expenditures and improving access to services, notably schooling and health services. However, learning and nutritional impacts are far less widespread. The direct income effect of social protection for children is thus most powerful in relation to issues for which budget constraints pose the most important barrier to effecting positive change; the effect is less powerful when it comes to outcome areas in which other constraints—such as quality of services, knowledge, attitudes, and practices—may come into play.

Furthermore, direct income effects are not unequivocally positive. Negative effects are unintended but can have real adverse consequences. In reference to migration, for example, transfers may allow parents to seek work elsewhere and leave their children in the care of others (with the transfers compensating for the cost of child care), as happened in South Africa (Barrientos et al. 2014). There are also concerns regarding the misuse of money, in particular that the receipt of transfers may exacerbate alcohol consumption or substance abuse. Although notions that such misuse occurs on a large scale have been dispelled (Evans and Popova 2017), female caregivers in both Rwanda and South Africa indicated that diversion of funds to the purchase of alcohol (especially by men in the family) impedes social protection's positive impact on children in two ways: first, it reduces the amount of money available to support children's well-being, and second, it may subject them to abusive behavior as a result of adults' substance use (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017).

Literature regarding the role of social protection—and cash transfers in particular—also reflects concerns that transfers may incentivize carers to provide foster or kinship care for primarily monetary reasons. In Botswana, for example, social workers reported that some individuals caring for orphans may be doing so primarily for material reasons as a result of the CT-OVC program, which is targeted at orphans. In this way, the program could be contributing to the “commodification” of children (Roelen, Long,

and Edstrom 2012). Social workers in South Africa have raised similar concerns about cash transfers for children in foster care (provided by the Foster Child Grant) that are two or three times larger than transfers for children in poor families (provided by the Child Support Grant) (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017). It should be noted, however, that these findings do not represent direct evidence of such perverse incentives and in fact may be informed by a combination of direct exposure to, experiences with, and negative narratives around the provision of kinship and foster care.

## Indirect Income Effects

Social protection may also lead to indirect income effects for children. In other words, changes in income as a result of transfers received through social protection set in motion other processes that subsequently impact children's lives. One such dynamic is the effect of greater income security on psychosocial well-being. Relatively recent but expanding research shows that receiving regular transfers can reduce poverty-induced stress and psychosocial tensions (Buller et al. 2016). This effect is not exclusive to adults but also holds for children. In Kenya, for example, regular transfers provided through the CT-OVC program were found to improve boys' mental health and life outlook (Handa et al. 2012).

The reduction of stress can be considered a positive effect in and of itself, but it reaches even further in terms of care for children. It can lead to improved relationships between carers, between children, and between carers and children. In Tanzania, cash transfers improved relationships within resource-constrained grandparent-headed households due to lower stress levels (Hofmann et al. 2008). A cross-country study in Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe concluded that cash transfers can improve the psychosocial well-being of both parents and children, and improve relationships between peers and with teachers (Attah et al. 2016). Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) argue that being certain of a regular stream of income and not having to worry (or worrying less) about making ends meet increases available cognitive bandwidth; that is, it allows for more headspace to engage

in other activities, including caring for children, with full attention. The interaction between greater income security, lower poverty-induced stress, and improved relationships may lead to greater self-esteem and sense of self. In Rwanda, a male beneficiary of the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP) indicated that being better able to provide for his children as a result of program participation and the ensuing positive effects for the family made him feel like a better parent (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017).

## Beyond Income

Notwithstanding the power of direct and indirect income effects, transfers in and of themselves are not sufficient for improving children's care and well-being. The wide and expanding evidence base regarding the impacts of social protection clearly points at both the power and the limits of cash transfers. Although they lead to strong positive results in reducing the material aspects of poverty and supporting access to services, they fail to significantly improve key development outcomes for children, such as nutrition and learning. These findings have led to growing momentum around the design of “cash plus” programs that aim to combine cash with complementary services (Roelen, Devereux, et al. 2017).

An increasing evidence base attests to the importance of such additional components in achieving positive psychosocial impacts for adults and children. An evaluation of a comprehensive “graduation” program in Burundi found that regular face-to-face training and coaching sessions for adult program participants with case managers were considered crucial in achieving and reinforcing positive nonmaterial change for the adult participants and their children (Roelen and Devereux 2018). Findings from Nigeria's Child Development Grant Programme show that a combination of cash transfers, education, and behavior change communication (BCC) had a large positive impact on both female and male caregivers' knowledge and beliefs about healthy infant and young child feeding practices (OPM 2018).

Nevertheless, the psychosocial and behavioral effects of social protection may not be universally positive. Particular design features may lead to unintended but adverse effects. Public works programs give rise to particular concerns regarding child well-being and care. The work requirement attached to the receipt of cash or food under such programs has implications for the demand for labor within families and may lead to children's being involved in work activities or, more commonly, to children's providing substitute labor for adult members within the household. Some cash-for-work programs that ask participants to provide labor in exchange for transfers—such as the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India—have been found to increase girls' workloads at the expense of study or leisure time as they take on domestic chores and unpaid care work (Hoddinott, Gilligan, and Taffesse 2011; Holmes and Jones 2013). In Rwanda, female VUP beneficiaries struggle with the balance between participating in public works, performing unpaid work, and spending time with their children. Children may be left on their own, without adult care or even food during the day, and older children may be pulled out of school to care for their younger siblings (Roelen, Delap, et al. 2017).

Social protection programs—particularly in their implementation—may also inadvertently cause or reinforce feelings of shame and stigma, potentially with devastating consequences (Roelen 2017). As much as the interaction between service providers and beneficiaries can be positive, it can also lead to negative impacts. Pejorative and derogatory treatment or judgmental and inconsiderate attitudes expressed toward program beneficiaries by administrators and social workers can undermine dignified and respectful treatment, with negative psychosocial effects. These results interact with the poverty-induced shame that is common across the globe, including Africa (Walker et al. 2013). The interaction between poverty, shame, and undignified implementation of social protection can cause great harm, particularly to children. Research in relation to the Child Support

Grant in South Africa found that some female applicants would rather forgo the receipt of transfers if it meant they would no longer face judgmental questions about their personal situation from program administrators (Wright et al. 2014).

## Structural Constraints

It is important to highlight the role of structural constraints when discussing the role of social protection in improving child well-being and care in Africa. Social protection is essentially a demand-side intervention, playing into the role of families and individuals as they work to improve their living conditions. However, supply-side issues and contextual barriers often represent key hurdles for families and children to improving their own well-being, and social protection can go only so far in trying to address these constraints. Failing to recognize these limitations would undermine both the importance of social protection and the role of families in fighting to overcome child poverty. In Ethiopia, for example, a core objective of the Integrated Nutrition Social Cash Transfer pilot program (within PSNP 4) is to improve nutritional outcomes for children. BCC is given particular emphasis in this pilot, premised on the notion that caregivers lack knowledge about feeding and sanitary practices. However, qualitative research among program participants indicated that drought was the most important reason that these individuals and their households were unable to engage in hygienic practices such as handwashing (Roelen, Devereux, and Kebede 2017). Greater acknowledgment of such structural constraints may support greater cross-sectoral collaboration while also precluding unwarranted conclusions that social protection is ineffective.

## Where Next?

The wealth of evidence and experience now available from across Africa allows for reflections on the future direction of social protection in a bid to improve its positive impact on children and prevent potential unintended

adverse consequences or perverse incentives—in other words, to make social protection more child sensitive.

The design of interventions is crucial in effecting positive change. A comparative review of the impact of cash transfer programs highlighted that, regardless of intervention type or modality, design features such as transfer size are key to achieving impact (Bastagli et al. 2016). This section elaborates on three issues in relation to child-sensitive social protection and the design of interventions that can have far-reaching implications for child well-being and care, namely “cash plus” approaches, the balance between paid and unpaid work, and linkages between social protection and child protection.

## “Cash Plus”

The “cash plus” (cash+) approach to social protection refers to interventions with cash transfers at their core that are complemented with other interventions. The rationale for this approach is grounded in the acknowledgment that budget constraints form an important, but not the sole, barrier to improving the well-being and care of children (Roelen, Devereux, et al. 2017). Social, cultural, and structural constraints may result in lack of access to high-quality services; limited allocation of monetary resources to children’s basic needs (as opposed to other household needs) and lack of knowledge may impede optimal feeding, health, and parenting practices. Interventions that are premised on the “cash plus” approach offer services complementary to cash transfers in a bid to address the set of constraints faced by families and children in a more holistic manner. Complementary services can be integral to the program, such as BCC or additional in-kind benefits, or external to the program, such as health insurance for program beneficiaries (Roelen, Devereux, et al. 2017).

Emerging evidence on “cash plus” approaches, such as the one in Nigeria (OPM 2018), show promising results in terms of strengthening social protection’s role in improving child well-being and care in Africa. Two caveats are important to keep in mind: First, there is a risk of

overburdening individual interventions by layering their design with too many components. Doing so makes the program increasingly complex and difficult to implement and administer. It also adds to an already ambitious set of objectives for social protection, potentially setting programs up for failure when these objectives are not met. Second, “cash plus” programs—and indeed social protection as a whole—cannot sufficiently address structural issues. As argued above, social protection is primarily geared at addressing constraints at the family level. Multisectoral collaborations will be vital for tackling supply-side issues that hinder efforts to improve the well-being of children.

## Balance between Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work

An appropriate balance between paid work and unpaid care work is crucial to support child well-being and care. Research shows that dual engagement in paid work and unpaid care work results in a considerable burden in terms of time and effort, particularly for women and girls (Chopra and Zambelli 2017). Despite the importance for children of an appropriate balance between types of work, and despite the drudgery and burden experienced by women and girls as a result of the combination of types of work, this issue is often overlooked within the design of social protection programs (Cookson 2018). As highlighted above, programs that incentivize paid work—such as public works—may have negative effects for children by exacerbating an unequal distribution of work across household members and adding to the burden and drudgery within the household as a whole or for individual members, including children.

The design of social protection interventions needs to take greater account of the tensions between paid work and unpaid care work, both by paying closer attention to the extent to which programs adversely reinforce the drudgery and burden of the combination of work, mostly for women and girls, and by looking at how programs may be (re-)designed to promote a better balance and thereby a higher quality of care for children. The former entails a widening of the monitoring and evaluation framework to

incorporate issues such as time use, gender norms, and care for children. The latter entails design considerations that take into account a range of conditions that need to be in place to support a better balance of work in relation to child care. An increasing number of countries, including Ethiopia and Rwanda, are providing child care as part of public works programs to begin to address this concern. However, as Chopra and Zambelli (2017) point out, this tactic should be complemented with high-quality and accessible public services, as well as decent and well-paid work.

It should, however, be noted that there may be a tension between, on the one hand, creating a better balance between paid work and unpaid care work for women (and redressing gender norms more generally) and, on the other, promoting greater well-being for children. The design of social protection is often gendered, with policy makers preferring to give cash to mothers rather than fathers for the presumed positive impact on children (Cookson 2018). Although building on this dynamic may lead to more beneficial outcomes for children in the short term, it also reinforces women’s role as main caregivers and is likely to add to the time they spend on unpaid care work. More critical debate is necessary to consider and address this tension in support of better care for children.

## Linking Social Protection and Child Protection

The policy areas of social protection and child protection are part and parcel of the response to children and their vulnerabilities, particularly because poverty (the primary concern of social protection) and child protection violations (the primary concern of child protection) are intricately linked. Poverty in and of itself undermines child well-being and care. In addition, it is an important factor in causing or reinforcing other types of child protection violations, including child labor, trafficking, abuse, and neglect (Jones 2011; Barrientos et al. 2014). Despite this overlap, the two policy areas have largely developed in silos (Roelen, Long, and Edstrom 2012). It is increasingly recognized that this dichotomy is artificial (Shibuya and Taylor 2013) and compromises the effectiveness of efforts to respond to the wide set of

needs of vulnerable children. At the household level, a strong delineation between issues of child protection and social protection is not relevant, and an integration of policy efforts therefore makes sense.

At the same time, it is important to point out that actions to provide social protection for children should not be confused or equated with child protection. Notwithstanding strong overlaps in the vulnerabilities they seek to address, child protection interventions are distinctly different from social protection. Child protection interventions aim to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation, and abuse (Blank, Devereux, and Handa 2011). Often such child protection violations are rooted in poverty and marginalization, which is the remit of social protection. Policy responses may overlap, such as in the form of psychosocial support or linkages to services, and these overlaps are bound to increase with the implementation of “cash plus” interventions. Nevertheless, core child protection interventions such as legal aid and redress fall outside of the remit of social protection. Given the overlap and mismatch of policy areas, the strongest potential for linkages lies in the establishment of strong case management and referral mechanisms at the community level that allow for coherent identification of and response to the specific needs of vulnerable children.

## *Conclusion*

Africa has experienced a rapid expansion of social protection across the continent, and more children than ever before are now covered by one or more programs. Social protection—and cash transfers in particular—has proven itself to be a powerful tool for improving child well-being and care, ranging from the material to the psychosocial aspects. At the same time, there are impact gaps with respect to nutrition, learning, and other outcomes, and some interventions may cause adverse effects. The strong momentum regarding social protection, coupled with the available knowledge about what works and does not work, provides a strong foundation for

strengthening social protection’s role in improving the well-being and care of Africa’s children. “Cash plus” programming, paying greater attention to the balance between paid work and unpaid care work, and strengthening the linkages between social protection and child protection are areas in which particular mileage is to be gained in moving forward.