Zambia Electoral Analysis Project (ZEAP) Briefing paper series

Briefing Paper 5: The interplay between social cash transfers and elections in Zambia ahead of the August 2021 general elections

Findings

- Social cash transfers are one part of a much broader set of payments and funds through which the government seeks to alleviate poverty and maintain political support.
- The reliance on this form of clientelistic political mobilisation has increased as the popularity of the government and the state of the economy have declined.
- The amount of money budgeted for cash transfers has increased dramatically over the past four years.
- Social cash transfers are open to manipulation, abuse and inconsistent delivery in part because implementation lacks a legislative framework.
- Failure to actually follow through with budgeted expenditure – with only 13% of funds dispersed in 2019 – means that popular satisfaction with cash transfers is not always high.
- Zambia has a history of voters accepting payments and financial inducements from the ruling party and then voting with their conscience, as in 2011.
- The negative impact of economic decline, which has not been fully compensated for by the provision of cash transfers, means that some recipients believe that political change would be in their interests.
- Social cash transfers may help to sustain support for the ruling party, but not necessarily at the levels that the government desires and needs.

1. Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in social protection programming across African countries in the last 20 years. Most common among these programmes are social cash transfers (SCTs), which by 2018 had been implemented in 46 countries in the region. Social cash transfers are a form of social assistance, means-tested (non-contributory) monetary support given to households in poverty to ensure a minimum standard of living. Current evidence suggests that political leaders of countries where cash transfers have been implemented since the 1990s, especially in low- and middle-income countries, implement them with a dual purpose – to alleviate poverty and also to win electoral support. However, it is not yet clear whether implementing social cash transfers provides electoral benefits to governing parties.

In Zambia, cash transfers are a defining feature of the government's social policy framework and anti-poverty response. About 54% of Zambians live in poverty and about 20% of the population are registered to receive SCTs as of 2021. On 12 August 2021, the country will hold its sixth general elections (and eighth presidential election) since the reintroduction of multi-party democracy in 1991. Recent Afrobarometer survey data shows that these elections will be very closely contested between the incumbent Patriotic Front (PF) party and the main opposition party, the United Party for National Development (UPND). Cash transfers as a governmental policy have in this context emerged as a topical issue and area of political contestation in the electoral process, given declining living standards occasioned by a poorly managed economy and the effects of the raging COVID – 19 pandemic on livelihoods. However, the interplay between cash transfers and elections ahead of the August 2021 general election remains unclear. This brief addresses this gap and considers the extent to which cash transfers are relevant for understanding electoral dynamics in Zambia.

1. A brief history of SCTs in Zambia

Zambia has a long history of means-tested social safety net programmes. These first appeared as subsidies offered by the United National Independence Party (UNIP) government to urbanites in the late 1980s, in response to falling living standards following the onset of structural adjustment programmes. The second appearance, which included coupons for the urban poor, was implemented by UNIP before the 1991 general election. It was largely a response to soaring prices of maize during a period of heightened economic hardships resulting from structural adjustment and a falling economy. These programmes were, however, criticised for apparently appeasing trade unions, and aiming to improve UNIP's electoral prospects.[1] However, in their current form, SCTs in Zambia coincide with marketisation and the social safety net logic of the World Bank-led social protection programmes that proliferated across sub-Saharan Africa in the early 2000s.

SCTs were the most prominent of the programmes that emerged to provide income support to the poorest (mostly rural) households and were introduced in Zambia by transnational agencies including the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID),[2] and United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).[3] The first pilot SCT programme was introduced by the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) in 2003, targeting the poorest 10% of all households in a single district in the south of the country.[4] The number of SCT pilots increased steadily to five out of 72 districts nationally, targeting 24,500 households by the end of 2010.[5] The pilots were implemented by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services but largely funded by transnational actors with limited budgetary support from the state, under the then governing party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD).

Following the election of President Michael Sata in 2011, the newly elected Patriotic Front (PF) government began to expand cash transfers from pilot schemes implemented in selected districts, to a national programme that would eventually target the poorest households across all districts in Zambia. By the time Sata died in office in 2014, about 145,000 households were receiving cash transfers.[6] Cash transfers had emerged as a defining feature of Zambia's response to extreme poverty and inequality and were also the most salient feature of the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) that was published in 2014 by the Sata administration. Sata's demise in office in 2014 triggered a presidential by-election that was held in January 2015. The election was won by Edgar Lungu for the PF by a margin of about 27,000 votes against his closest rival, Hakainde Hichilema of the UPND. Cash transfers, which had featured in the PF manifesto and campaigns, continued to expand under Lungu and were expected to reach 994,000 households in 2021, or about 5 million people, representing close to 30% of the national population.[7] The expansion of cash transfers under President Lungu should signal that the ruling PF considers SCTs to be significant for both poverty reduction and mobilising electoral support. However, the increase in beneficiaries added to the national SCT programme belies the fact that funding for cash transfers has been erratic since 2015. This period also coincided with increased funding for women and youth empowerment funds, mostly targeting urban informal economy workers, and a massive expansion of the Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP), targeting small and medium scale farmers.

2. Expansion of SCTs under Lungu's administration

While the PF expanded social cash transfers between 2011 and 2014, SCTs did not emerge as a salient issue during the 2015 presidential by-election campaign. Exceptions involve a case where the Minister of Community Development and Social Services at the time, Emerine Kabanshi, used her influence as minister to reinstate "economically able families" on the SCT programme in Luapula Province.[8] While the economically able families were eligible for the scheme based on the targeting criteria, they were deregistered from receiving transfers, following demands from community members that families with labour capacity should not receive transfers. While Kabanshi correctly reinstated the families, her decision was motivated by a fear that the exclusion of some families from the programme would negatively affect support for the PF in one of its rural provincial strongholds.[9] Another case involves reports in Petauke district in Eastern province where ruling party candidates would send people to the district social welfare office to "collect money", arguing that the government had released enough money for their livelihoods because it loves them.[10] It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of SCT beneficiary households continued to expand under President Lungu, with Kabanshi maintaining her Community Development portfolio. Figure 1 shows that the number of registered beneficiary households in the country grew from 145,000 in 2015 to 700,000 at the end of 2020 as shown below:

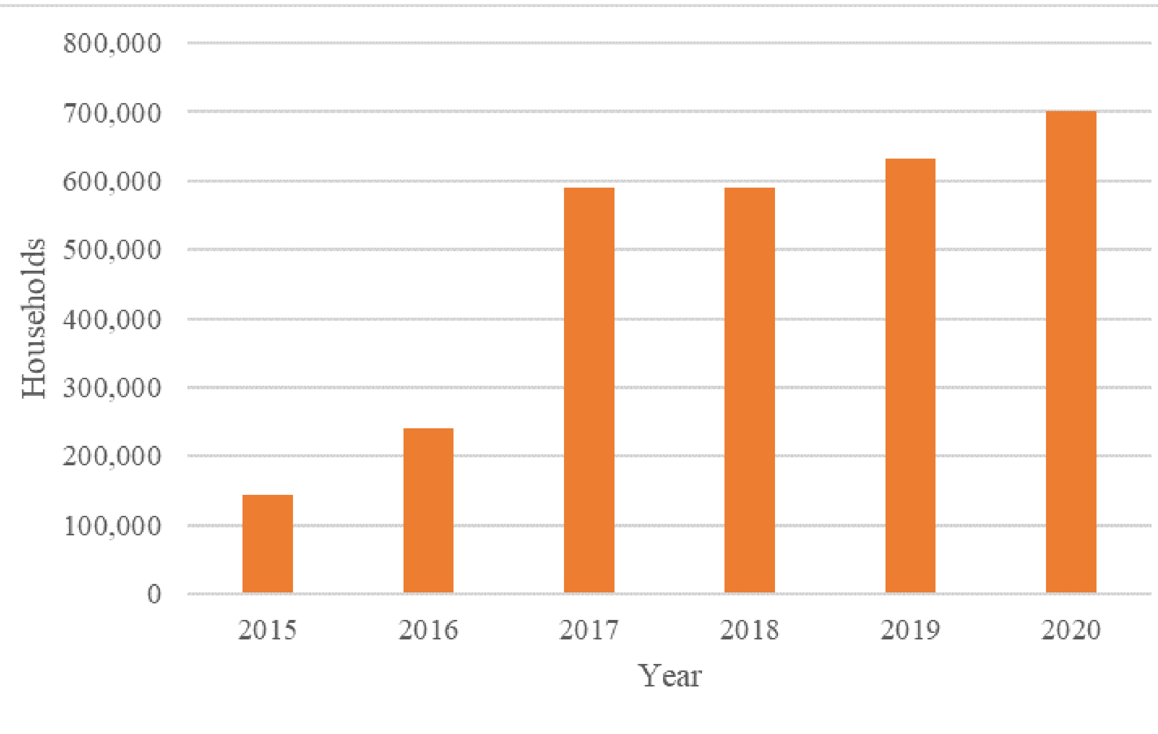

Figure 1: The expansion of SCT beneficiary households 2015-2021

The expansion of beneficiaries contradicted the fact that funding for the programme was erratic, especially since 2015. A 2019 DFID report showed that the Ministry of Finance only disbursed 48% of funds meant for SCTs in 2016. Although this improved to 71% in 2017, it worsened to 58% in 2018 and then collapsed to 13% in 2019.[11] This meant that there have been districts where beneficiaries have not received payments for over two years. It is not clear how this affected perceptions of the government. However, on the few occasions that transfer payments were made, leaders from the ruling party increasingly used cash transfers as an indication of the PF's benevolence towards the extreme poor. This may have had the effect of making beneficiaries appreciate the little they could receive from the government. It is also likely that some beneficiaries would feel they were not receiving what the government owed them and would decide not to support the ruling party. Furthermore, a scandal involving SCT funds was unearthed in 2018, when it emerged that $4.3 million of donor funds meant for poor families had gone missing.[12] Kabanshi was implicated in the scandal, and was first dismissed from her position in 2018, and then sentenced to a two-year jail term in 2021, for her involvement in the misappropriation of funds.[13]

At least four factors help to explain the PF's government's decision to effectively roll back spending on SCTs while simultaneously expanding the number of household beneficiaries:

- First, the decline in economic growth and increased national debt, since 2012, negatively affected government revenue. This limited the PF government's ability to adequately fund all its programmes. Yet, the government increased its budgetary allocations to FISP by 400%[14] between 2020 and 2021, with no corresponding increase in the number of beneficiaries. The government also prioritised the disbursement of various youth and women empowerment funds that mostly benefitted urban informal economy workers – a core PF voting constituency. The expansion of FISP and empowerment funds was seemingly at the expense of cash transfers.

- Second, SCTs became increasingly politicised. While the government struggled to meet its SCT funding obligations, funds were made available for beneficiaries living in districts that held local government or parliamentary by-elections.[15] Cash transfers had begun to be used as mechanisms for clientelist politics deviating from an initial programmatic implementation.

- Third, social cash transfers were not a major policy issue for the main opposition, the UPND, which instead promoted agriculture subsidies which are popular among the party's core ethnic support base in the south of the country.[16] This meant that the PF did not cede political ground to the UPND on cash transfers.

- The last is that although cash transfers now dominate Zambia's anti-poverty policy response, their implementation lacks a legislative framework. SCTs fall under the social assistance pillar of the NSPP, which proclaims a transformative approach to social protection. The transformative approach establishes a supranational rights-based approach to social protection.[17] However, the NSPP by its own admission falls short of this criterion because social protection in Zambia lacks a legislative framework and economic social and cultural rights are not recognised by the constitution in a manner that would provide for rights-based provision.[18]

An attempt to remedy this gap and institutionalise rights-based social protection was made with the national referendum to amend the constitution and to include economic, social and cultural rights into the bill of rights of the constitution in 2016.19 The referendum failed because of the over-politicisation of what was otherwise a national issue with the two leading political parties campaigning on opposite sides of the referendum. Further analysis also suggests that the framing of the amendment clause meant that, were the amendment successful, it would not change anything as the rights would still not be justiciable. In the end, it appeared that the amendment was a political manoeuvre meant to enhance the electoral chances of the ruling party, by giving the impression that it was progressive enough to want to make economic, social, and cultural rights justiciable in Zambia when in fact this was not the case.20 The lack of a sound legislative framework means that, despite what appears to be an overriding political commitment to social cash transfers by the Patriotic Front government, the implementation of cash transfers in Zambia remains subject to political benevolence and manipulation.

3. Social Cash Transfers, COVID-19 and the 2021 elections

The COVID-19 pandemic has been significant for the 2021 election on two levels. The first is the constriction of the political space, where the ruling party has used the pandemic to limit opposition party campaigns and repress critics.[21] The second is on livelihood interventions. While the COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse effects on living standards across the globe with governments releasing various forms of support to citizens, such support in Zambia has been limited. A 10 billion kwacha stimulus package targeting only formal private sector institutions was released by the central bank. Support to informal livelihoods has come through the Emergency COVID-19 Cash Transfer (ECCT) programme. The ECCT was implemented with the support of three UN agencies, namely the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNICEF, under the multisectoral UN plan for COVID-19. The ECCT aims to support households directly and indirectly affected by the crisis, in order to protect livelihoods, strengthen epidemic control and avert negative coping strategies. The ECCT is also meant to be aligned with other services so as to cover areas such as nutrition, hygiene and protection as well as disability. Politically, the ECCT has been used to buttress ruling party election messaging and at some point, the United Nations issued a clarification statement following media reports that people were collecting voters' cards in exchange for "emergency cash transfers".[22]

Generally, there is strong evidence that social cash transfers in Zambia work. With robust selection criteria, cash transfers target the most vulnerable of the Zambian population, intervening to prevent further destitution and providing a base from which such households can resist poverty and vulnerability.[23] Street level bureaucrats and beneficiaries alike acknowledge the important role of cash transfers in consumption smoothing. However, cash transfers continue to be highly politicised through the narrative - peddled by street level bureaucrats - that they are not what citizens deserve, but rather reflect government benevolence within a limited fiscal space.[24] In this narrative, government is benevolent and responding to livelihood needs in the best way it can, given the economic challenges and limited fiscal space resulting from the pandemic. As a benevolent government, it deserves to continue in office.

Demonstrating this active politicisation of the social cash transfer in 2021, Dora Siliya - former Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services and Chief Government Spokesperson, who is recontesting her parliamentary seat under the Patriotic Front in Petauke Central - is on record encouraging traditional leaders in her constituency to take responsibility for the selection process of new social cash transfer beneficiaries. She encouraged her constituents to lie to the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services officers regarding their material status. She argued that most of them were excluded because they told the truth about their socio-economic status when interviewed, but she preferred that all her constituents benefitted from this programme which her government intends for them.25 The former minister's remarks were intended to increase her popularity and that of her party in the upcoming August 12 election. Yet, they have broader implications for the functioning of cash transfers as a policy tool.

- First, the remarks undermine the legitimacy of the beneficiary selection process by making it seem as though it is open to undue influence. Candidate selection is guided by a robust selection matrix involving the participation of local level community welfare assistant committees (CWACs). This puts undue stress on welfare officers at the local district level.

- Secondly, it recasts the limited social cash transfer coverage as a problem not of limited budgetary allocation, but as selection bias perpetuated by street level bureaucrats, effectively casting officers and CWACs as enemies of the people.

A second example, demonstrating the UPND's awakening to the potential of cash transfers as a citizenship concern, is in election manifestos. The PF's 2021 manifesto takes credit for introducing and expanding social cash transfers, while also promising to increase coverage of the programme nationally if re-elected in 2021.26 Despite erratic funding for the programme since 2015, media reports show that the PF government has increased the pace of disbursement of SCT funds in 2021.27 At the same time, ruling party officials have made claims that the UPND would scrap cash transfers if elected. The implications of such statements are that only the PF can sustain the programme, and beneficiaries need to vote for the ruling party to safeguard their interests. The UPND through Anthony Bwalya – the presidential spokesperson of the UPND president – issued a rebuttal to this framing of cash transfers as a PF innovation, arguing instead that the UPND would not scrap cash transfers if elected but would instead increase the amount of money given to beneficiaries by 200%.28

Paradoxically, the UPND's 2021 manifesto only gives a vague statement on cash transfers suggesting that it "will improve social cash transfers" and "...depoliticise the social cash transfer scheme and ensure budget allocation is enhanced" without further detail.29 It is unclear what can be expected from the UPND due to this lack of detail. However, given that cash transfers have not been a salient issue for the UPND, the inclusion of social cash transfers in its manifesto and Antony Bwalya's statement suggests a realisation of the potential of cash transfers in mobilising electoral support.

Hitherto, cash transfers have not served as an important tool for mobilising political support during national elections. Yet, given the severe economic decline in the last five years, the massive expansion of beneficiary households, and heightened electoral competition between PF and UPND, cash transfers could prove to be more crucial in 2021 than in previous contests. If beneficiaries are unhappy about the erratic payments of cash transfers, they may view the disbursements made in 2021 as political bribes. This would have the effect of beneficiaries receiving the cash but voting for other parties instead. This is similar to the PF's "Don't kubeba" strategy in 2011, when then opposition leader, Michael Sata, encouraged voters to accept campaign bribes from the MMD but to vote with their conscience instead.

4. Implications for the future

Our analysis indicates that social cash transfer will continue to be an important policy issue in Zambian politics and elections for two reasons:

1. Current levels of poverty and vulnerability mean that such a programme is absolutely necessary for guaranteeing livelihoods. As has been shown, cash transfers work, and they are a pragmatic response to Zambia's chronic poverty problem. Because they work, cash transfers are likely to be popular among Zambian citizens due to their effects on consumption smoothing.

2. Following from this, cash transfers offer a potentially rewarding route to political capital, and the lack of a well-defined legislative framework makes them particularly malleable to political interests. It is easy to demonstrate impact of the transfers and, therefore, easy to claim this impact as evidence of government commitment to livelihoods. It is also easy to reframe problems of coverage as procedural difficulties related to programming, rather than as a lack of financial commitment by government. In this way, the government can claim the SCT's victories and disown its problems.

5. Conclusion

The inclusion of cash transfers in the manifestos of the two leading political parties suggests a degree of political commitment to cash transfers in the future. However, the lack of detail offered in both manifestos means that it is difficult to predict the form of this future. Overall, it is clear that political parties see cash transfers as important to their electoral prospects and while the contribution of cash transfers to poverty alleviation is easily discernible, it remains unclear whether SCTs are, in fact, a viable pathway to electoral victory for political parties.

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