



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

**The Limits to ‘Global’ Social Policy:  
The ILO, the Social Protection Floor  
and the politics of welfare in Africa**

Jeremy Seekings

CSSR Working Paper No. 432

February 2019



Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID



Published by the Centre for Social Science Research  
University of Cape Town  
2019

<http://www.cssr.uct.ac.za>

This Working Paper can be downloaded from:

<http://cssr.uct.ac.za/pub/wp/432>

ISBN: 978-1-77011-419-7

© Centre for Social Science Research, UCT, 2019

About the author:

Jeremy Seekings is Professor of Political Studies and Sociology and director of the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town.

Email: [jeremy.seekings@uct.ac.za](mailto:jeremy.seekings@uct.ac.za).

# The Limits to ‘Global’ Social Policy: The ILO, the Social Protection Floor and the politics of welfare in Africa

## Abstract

*Bob Deacon’s study of the Social Protection Floors initiative, led by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) entailed a pioneering study of the making of global social policy. Just how global is this ‘global social policy’? Africa is in some respects a laggard in terms of social protection, primarily because political elites remain unconvinced of the benefits or priority of social protection. African governments were minimally involved in the making of this global social policy. Most seem to have gone along with the policy, as they have with other ‘global’ declarations, in the expectation that it would have little effect on them. Indeed, there is little clear evidence of any significant effect. Even the social protection strategy documents adopted by either the African Union or national governments, typically written by external consultants, have generally avoided direct use of the concept of the social protection floor, whilst reiterating the commitment to ‘comprehensive’ (and appropriate) social protection that predated the ILO-led initiative. The trajectory of actual policy reform in East and Southern African countries does not appear to have changed. There continues to be a disjuncture between ‘global social policy’ at the global and African levels.*

## 1. Introduction

Bob Deacon’s 2013 study of the ‘social protection floors’ (SPFs) initiative provides an unrivalled analysis of the making of an apparently pivotal global social policy. One of the architects of the SPF initiative – Michel Cichon of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) – went so far as to describe the ILO’s Recommendation #202 (on SPFs) as ‘a “Magna Carta” of social protection’ (Cichon, 2013: 37), referring to the milestone charter of 1215 in which the King of England first recognised that his subjects had civil and political rights. The ILO generally talks up the significance of its Recommendation. For example, a

2016 ILO publication declared that ‘This Recommendation is the only internationally agreed treaty that reflects a global consensus on universal social protection’ (Ortiz, Schmitt and De, 2016: 1-2). Whilst Deacon himself was concerned with the making of the initiative rather than its importance, he did describe the SPF initiative as ‘historic’ for a number of reasons (Deacon, 2013: 157-8). His account suggests that the most important of these was that it made concrete the idea of *universal* social protection. The idea of universal social protection – or social protection ‘for all’ – had gathered momentum in the early 2000s (as Deacon himself noted in an earlier article – Deacon, 2005), but it was the SPF initiative that was the first major international commitment to ‘basic income security’ and ‘essential health care’ for *all* sections of the population, i.e. neither for workers only nor for the poor only, as the ILO and World Bank had respectively argued hitherto. Further respects in which the SPF initiative was historic, according to Deacon, included the recognition that social protection was as much a priority for low-income as for high-income countries, i.e. it did not become a priority only after some minimum level of development had been achieved, and the recognition that it required redistributive financing.

The importance of the SPF initiative is open to question. Deacon himself notes that the Recommendation #202 entailed multiple compromises. The ILO embraced the SPF concept in preference to the more radical idea of ‘basic income’ (whose champion was marginalized within the ILO). The final agreement took the form of a Recommendation, not a Convention. The SPF comprised a set of guarantees not a defined benefit package. The Recommendation was for a set of national SPFs (in the plural) not a single, global SPF. Specific proposals for funding the SPF(s) were omitted. The SPFs remained a national responsibility rather than a global social contract. The inclusion of the ‘vertical’ dimension to the ‘floor’ (i.e. social insurance) was an inegalitarian sop to the trade unions (Deacon, 2013). Moreover, it is not clear that the Recommendation went much further than the ILO’s 1944 ‘Philadelphia Declaration on Income Security’ and accompanying Recommendation (#67). Notwithstanding these qualifications, Deacon’s central point seems compelling: The Recommendation entailed the clearest statement of the need for *universal* social protection systems, at least since the 1940s. It went beyond earlier arguments in favour of ‘comprehensive’ social protection because ‘comprehensive’ was often understood as covering the risks of poverty, whereas the SPF initiative encompassed also provision for the non-poor.

The value of Deacon’s 2013 analysis does not depend, however, on the importance of Recommendation #202 or the broader SPF initiative. Deacon’s account was pioneering in setting out the process whereby international organisations and national governments came together behind the initiative. In

successive chapters, Deacon examines the emergence and revision of the SPF concept between 2000 and 2010 (in Chapter 3), struggles within the ILO (in Chapter 4) and the formation of a broader coalition of international organisations (including the World Health Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and UNICEF) (in Chapter 5). Deacon's account is based on close reading of documents, mostly from within the ILO, and interviews, mostly with (named) ILO officials in Geneva.

Deacon's close study of the contestation and cooperation within and between global organisations (especially the ILO) is the strength of his analysis. It also points to the limit of his analysis: Deacon pays secondary attention to the perspectives of national governments (or other national players, including business and union representatives to the ILO) with regard to the SPF initiative. National players walk across Deacon's stage in Chapter 4, shaping the way that the SPF initiative took form, but Deacon does not attempt to analyse how national players understood the initiative or the ILO's role in promoting policy reform. Indeed, he concludes that the adoption of a Recommendation is just the beginning of an uncertain process of implementation.

This paper builds on Deacon's foundations through a close study of how 'global' social policy is seen from and travels to (and within) a part of the world – Africa – where conditions are especially unfavourable to its implementation. Whereas Deacon analysed the social protection floor initiative primarily in terms of relationships within and between (often competing) global institutions, I reassess this case of 'global' social policy-making and implementation in terms of the interactions between institutions at the global, regional and national levels. The next section of the paper examines the role of African representatives in the making of the policy. The paper then turns to the 'vernacularisation' within Africa of global social policy, prior to, during and following Recommendation #202. The paper examines the character and role of the international organisation most closely associated with the SPF initiative – the ILO – in Africa, before reviewing the evidence for the impact of the initiative on national policy, focusing on countries in East and Southern Africa.

## **2. Africa and the making of global social policy**

Deacon's analysis of the process that culminated in the ILO's 2012 Recommendation details the importance of four factors: The idea of universalism, the agency of individual champions of the SPF (three within the ILO, one at the time within UNICEF), the institutional politics of the ILO itself,

and the changing structural context (including, especially, the global financial and economic crisis). This is a largely but not entirely Northern story, in the sense that the major players were from the global North, with players from the global South playing largely secondary roles.

Southern actors were certainly not absent from the process. Deacon notes that the SPF concept originated vaguely with the Chilean Juan Somavia, who became Director-General of the ILO in 1999. In Deacon's account, much of the impetus for universalism came from the South. Deacon implies that the ILO's shift away from a focus on the European model of social insurance in favour of a dual approach, combining social insurance with social assistance, was driven by a recognition that the European model was inappropriate in Southern contexts characterized by large informal economic sectors. When trade unionists within the ILO became anxious about departing from the employment-centred European model, one of the individuals who persuaded them to support the SPF initiative was the South Africa unionist (and subsequently government minister) Ebrahim Patel.

Deacon acknowledges that Southern actors were far from uniformly supportive of the push for global social policy. Deacon reveals that a British initiative in 2000 to push for global social policy principles was rejected by much of the global South (including Egypt, India, Indonesia and Pakistan), in part because of the unwillingness of the North to pay (Deacon, 2013: 21-3). When the SPF proposal formally came before the annual International Labour Conference, African representatives were at first (in 2011) supportive, but subsequently were much more guarded. African governments joined with some governments from the global North (as well as South Asia) in opposing 'progressive' amendments proposed by Latin American governments (*ibid.*: 87, 94). In 2012, Deacon records, fifty African countries proposed an amendment (that was not accepted) that would qualify social protection floors 'in accordance with national context and considering the level of national economic development'. The representatives of African governments also resisted the insertion of commitments to 'decent wages' and 'the reduction of informality' (*ibid.*: 89, 94).

Deacon also points to the participation of African governments in planning prior to the SPF proposal being presented at the 2011 International Labour Conference. In 2007-08, the ILO hosted tripartite regional meetings in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia and the Pacific. The final regional event, for Africa, was held in Yaoundé (in Cameroon), some time later, in October 2010. Compared to his detailed analysis of politics within the ILO, however, Deacon pays little attention to these regional meetings and associated politics.

The Yaoundé Declaration called on African governments ‘to engage with social partners and promote effective social dialogue to achieve the most appropriate national policies and time frames for the progressive implementation of effective social protection floors’, adding that they should take into consideration the African Union’s 2008 Social Policy Framework as well as ‘perspectives that also take into account the necessity to promote employment, economic and social development’ (ILO, 2010). This endorsement of SPFs needs to be qualified in at least three respects. First, the Yaoundé conference was a tripartite event, with representatives from governments (mostly ministers of labour), business and trade unions, focused primarily on promoting ‘decent work’. Ministers of labour cannot be considered as representative of African policy-makers, not least because they are often drawn from trade unions representing the small and non-poor minority of workers in formal employment. For ministers of labour, the expansion of social assistance (typically under the control of other ministers) was, in part, a way of legitimating social insurance programmes (typically under their own control). Secondly, the inclusion of caveats in the Declaration was important. The African Union’s Social Policy Framework was not entirely consistent with the SPF initiative, as we shall see further in the next section. The specification that developmental perspectives needed to be taken into account also undermined the boldness of the SPF initiative. Most importantly, the Yaoundé Declaration entailed essentially the ratification of a position drafted from within the ILO, not an autonomous statement originating within Africa itself. As we shall explore more fully in the next section, the Declaration entailed the very partial vernacularisation of a ‘global’ position, not an African position in itself. The ILO subsequently liked to refer to the ‘emergence of an African vision for social protection’ (e.g. ILO, 2011a: 3) but this was more an exercise in persuasion than a valid historical assessment. Indeed, the purpose of the conference, Declaration and ensuing Plan of Action (*ibid.*) was largely persuasive, i.e. to persuade policy-makers and interest group leaders that they should go along with the ILO’s agenda, rather than genuinely deliberative.

Deacon points to the position adopted by the African governments during the final deliberations over the proposed and then draft SPF Recommendation at the 2011 and 2012 International Labour Conferences (ILCs) in Geneva (see above). The import of his observation needs to be emphasised. In 2012, the ‘Africa Group’ of governments collectively and separately lined up on almost every divide alongside the government representatives from India and Bangladesh as well as the employers’ representatives, against the Latin American government representatives and the representatives of organised labour. On some issues they aligned with Northern governments, on others not. The long series of issues which divided the ILC included the expectation of reforms beyond the

introduction of SPFs, time-frames, explicit commitments to universalism, the need for higher wages and the importance of the informal economy. Deacon points to the amendment proposed by the Africa Group with regard to the insertion of a clause calling for the implementation of SPFs ‘in accordance with national context and considering the level of national economic development’. Deacon describes this as unsuccessful. In the committee stage, this amendment was initially opposed by the leaders of the representatives of organised labour, but a compromise formulation (‘in accordance with national circumstances’) was adopted (ILO, 2012: paras 507-18). The reference to the constraints of ‘national circumstances’ ended up in the key paragraph 4 of the Recommendation: ‘Members should, in accordance with national circumstances, establish as quickly as possible and maintain their social protection floors comprising basic social security guarantees.’ The Africa Group also proposed successfully an additional amendment for the addition of a clause calling for inclusion of people in the informal sector. Despite opposition from organised labour – who preferred a formulation that listed specific groups of informally-employed workers but did not include peasant farmers – this amendment was adopted (*ibid.*: paras 466-80), ending up as paragraph 3(e) of the Recommendation.

It is difficult to unravel precisely the contribution that African government ministers and others (including trade unionists and employers) made to the making of global SPF policy. It is not clear how ILO officials based in Geneva interacted with their colleagues in the African regional and local offices, although most ILO documentation appear to be driven centrally from Geneva. At least one individual from Africa – Ebrahim Patel, from South Africa – clearly wielded considerable influence within the ILO. For the most part, African governments seem to have been less invested in deliberations over the proposed Recommendation than their counterparts in Latin America (who backed a strong formalisation and SPF agenda) or even South Asia (who opposed these). African governments seem to have gone along with the general thrust of the Recommendation despite conservative anxieties over many of the details.

It appears that the developmental and often conservative concerns that are widespread among most African policy-makers (as we shall see further below) were reflected in some of the detail in ILO documentation (including the Yaoundé Declaration) and then more weakly in Recommendation #202 itself. It seems that African governments played a role in restraining the ambitions of organised labour, Latin American governments and the ILO’s own Social Protection Department with respect to the scope of the Recommendation. African governments probably played a significant role in the substitution of

SPFs (in the plural) in place of a single SPF (as set out in the Yaoundé Declaration).

### **3. The partial vernacularisation of global social policy in Africa**

The Yaoundé Declaration and other ILO documents point to the more general process of ‘vernacularisation’<sup>1</sup> of global discourse and documents in Africa. African governments have a long history of ignoring ‘global’ policies. When they have engaged with global policy, they have tended to vernacularise it through softening and modifying the more emphatic commitments to social and economic rights or state-led social protection that have emanated from ‘global’ institutions dominated by the countries and individuals from the global North. This is most evident in most of the general declarations adopted by the African Union (AU, and its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, OAU), beginning with the African Charter in 1981, but it is evident even in policy documents adopted by AU structures in which the ILO plays a significant role.

African governments’ history of ignoring global policy is most evident in their refusal to ratify ILO conventions on social protection. As recently as 2010, the ILO’s flagship social security convention – the 1952 Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (#102) – had been ratified by only five countries in Africa, none of which were Anglophone. In 2011, the AU explained the ambivalence of African countries towards Convention #102 in terms of the inappropriateness of contributory social insurance schemes in the African context, where most poor people were too poor to afford contributions and the state lacked the capacity to organize large-scale (or universal) social insurance (AU, 2011: para 18). More importantly, African governments have long seen social protection, in whatever form, as a distraction from (and possibly even undermining of) developmental imperatives.

The AU (and OAU before it) have not been able to ignore more general statements of rights, including social and economic rights, and have instead vernacularized them. Whilst a growing number of African scholars has denounced the global rights discourse for its ‘Western’ preoccupation with the rights of individuals (e.g. Mutua, 2002), the OAU opted ‘to append an African “fingerprint” on global policy (Chirwa, 2005: 323), resulting in an uneasy mix of external and African priorities. The foundational 1981 African Charter thus

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Vernacularisation’ refers here to the process of adaptation to local conditions (see Levitt and Merry, 2009, on the vernacularisation of human rights).

recognised a limited range of individual rights, added some group rights (including to ‘development’), emphasised the importance of the family and inserted a discussion of duties.

Since its establishment in 2002, the AU has adopted three major policy positions with respect to social protection specifically: A Social Policy Framework for Africa in 2008, a Social Protection Plan for the Informal Economy and Rural Workers (SPIREWORK) in 2011 and the Addis Ababa Declaration on Social Protection for Inclusive Development in 2015. Individuals or organisations from the global North played a role in each of these, but each reflected also a process of partial vernacularisation.

The 2008 Social Policy Framework was adopted at the first Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development of AU Member States (‘CAMSD’) in Windhoek. The context was important. A Social Policy Framework had been proposed five years earlier in the AU’s Labour and Social Affairs Commission (LASC), in which the ILO wielded considerable influence. Indeed, the LASC was established in part as an ILO-backed counterweight to the influence that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund exercised through the poverty reduction strategy paper process. The first draft of the Social Policy Framework was prepared through a team within the LASC. The ILO seems to have wielded much less influence within the new CAMSD. In Windhoek, an alternative draft Social Policy Framework was presented, without any mention of social protection. Discussion during the CAMSD led to the insertion of a section on social protection, but it was cautious and non-committal (Wright and Noble, 2010). The first of the guiding principles listed in the Framework declared that ‘Social policies must encapsulate the principles of human rights, development imperatives and be embedded in the African culture of solidarity’ (AU, 2008: para 16). The section on social protection emphasised that governments should ‘choose the coverage extension strategy and combination of tools most appropriate to their circumstances’ whilst aiming at an unspecified ‘minimum package of essential social protection’ (*ibid.*: section 2.2.3).

The Social Policy Framework remained the cornerstone of AU policy until at least 2015, despite the growing momentum behind the SPF initiative on the global stage. None of the subsequent CAMSDs – held in 2010, 2012 and 2014 – appear to have discussed SPFs. Their primary focus was on the importance of and need to strengthen the family. The theme for the 2014 CAMSD was ‘Strengthening the African Family for Inclusive Development in Africa’.

The LASC was a little more in tune with ILO-led thinking around social protection. In 2011 it adopted SPIREWORLD. The plan as a whole represented a compromise between the ILO, which pushed the idea that poverty could be addressed through the formalisation of the informal sector and the AU (and individual African countries) which pushed for employment creation ('job-rich and inclusive growth'), especially for young people. With respect to social protection, SPIREWORLD barely engaged with the SPF initiative. The plan did acknowledge what it called the 'UN SPF initiative' (AU, 2011: para 17) but immediately added the caveat that 'the current reality in Africa ... is that the Continent is faced with numerous constraints' – which explained why so few countries had ratified relevant ILO Conventions (*ibid.*: para 18). The plan used the discourse of a minimum package but pointed vaguely to community-based insurance schemes as the way forward. The plan did acknowledge the possibility of non-contributory (social assistance) programmes, but without any evident enthusiasm.

In 2015 the AU replaced the LASC and CAMSD with a new Specialised Technical Committee for Social Development, Labour and Employment (STC-SDLE). The first STC-SDLE session was held in Addis Ababa in 2015, with the theme 'Social Protection for Inclusive Development'. The prioritisation of social protection might have reflected (belatedly) the momentum around the SPF initiative, but the deliberations and ensuing 'Addis Ababa Declaration' focused on implementing the 2008 Social Policy Framework not the SPFs. The 2015 STC-SDLE also discussed the need for a Protocol (to the African Charter) on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security. This was discussed further within the AU in 2016-17. In 2018, external consultants prepared a draft Protocol. It appears that there continues to be little enthusiasm from African governments for any clear endorsement of the radical expansion of social protection implied through SPFs. As of 2018, it is far from clear that the AU has really embraced the concept or discourse of SPFs.

## **4. The ILO's promotion in Africa of its 'global' social policy**

The ILO has not been the only champion of the SPFs. Other international organisations have undoubtedly embraced – and championed – aspects of social protection in their own work (von Gliszczynski and Leisering, 2016; Hickey and Seekings, 2017) and notionally signed up to the SPFs, as Deacon himself documented. But the ILO has been the primary driver of the SPF initiative. The ILO has expended considerable energy in the promotion of SPFs within Africa,

both prior to 2012 (to generate support for what became Recommendation #202) and since 2012 (to encourage national governments to implement the Recommendation). The ILO has utilised its African Regional Meetings (held every four years) and its sponsorship of and support for AU structures (including the LASC and subsequent STC-SDLE, see above) to promote reform at the continental level. It has disseminated its publications, especially through its African head-office (now in Abidjan), its four regional offices and eight country offices. It has conducted specific research and advocacy projects.

The SPFs have not, however, been the ILO's primary priority in Africa. Its advocacy of SPFs in Africa has always been subordinate to its promotion of its 'decent work agenda', with more emphasis placed on the formalization of informal employment than on the expansion of social protection for the large majority of the population working in the informal economy (or not working at all). The decent work agenda – pushed strongly by Somavia from his appointment as Director-General in 1999 – was innovative in that it recognised that a large proportion of the world's workers were in informal, generally low-productivity employment. Formalising employment would entail higher wages and improved employment conditions, incentivising employers to raise labour productivity. In debates at International Labour Conferences, organised labour pushed strongly, often with support from employers, for using SPFs to accelerate the formalisation of employment (see, e.g., ILO, 2012).

The decent work agenda had two major flaws, however, in common with most previous ILO strategy. First, informal employment was imagined in terms of poorly-paid *employees* in sectors such as clothing manufacturing or domestic work. The decent work agenda largely ignored the *self-employed*, especially peasant farmers. Secondly, the agenda overlooked the challenges posed by chronic or structural *unemployment*, especially in Southern Africa. In a growing number of countries job creation was more of a priority than formalisation per se. The decent work agenda seemed to rest on the assumption that all work could, in the medium-term at least, be formal. The decent work agenda was thus firmly within the ILO's long tradition of preoccupation with formal employment.

The decent work and formalisation agenda reflected conditions and challenges in parts of the world like Latin America (from where Somavia came), not Africa. A 2009 report from the ILO itself acknowledged that formal employment accounted for only 6 percent of total employment in Tanzania in 2005. Almost two-thirds of total employment in Tanzania comprised peasant farmers working on their own land. Most of the rest comprised self-employment or unpaid family work. Non-family informal employment accounted for only

about 3 percent of total employment (ILO, 2009: 10). Given that the formalization agenda focused primarily on formalizing non-family informal employment, i.e. 3 percent of all working people in the case of Tanzania, the scope for formalization to make a big difference to poverty is small in most African countries. Across most of Africa, for the foreseeable future, decent work could be a reality for only a small and non-poor section of the population.

The ILO thus occupies an inherently contradictory position in Africa, even now focusing on a small proportion of the working population and wedded to a tripartite structure that provides for representation of only a very small proportion of the working population. It is not surprising that ILO conventions on the rights of ‘workers’ have rarely seemed a priority in countries that have been, at least until recently, overwhelmingly agrarian. Nor it is surprising that there is a disjuncture between the ILO’s predominant worldview and that of most members of Africa’s political elite.

The ILO’s inability to grapple with African realities was evident in its adoption of a Recommendation (#204) Concerning the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy (ILO, 2015). This Recommendation focused, from the opening paragraph of its preamble, on the rights of *workers*. It included the usual caveat respecting national circumstances and pointed to the need for SPFs, but the priority with respect to social protection was clearly the extension of ‘social security’ through social insurance.

The subordinate status of the SPFs in the ILO’s work is evident in both documents and the speeches of ILO officials. The ILO has stated repeatedly that social protection can only be built as part of national ‘Decent Work Country Programmes’. When Somavia himself reported to the ILO’s 12<sup>th</sup> Africa Regional Meeting in 2011, he did not mention the SPFs, focusing rather on the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda. The full report of the Regional Meeting – more than 100 pages in length – included only short discussions of social protection policy (ILO, 2011b: 35-6, 58-9). The subordination of SPFs to the decent work and formalisation agenda was also evident in the deliberations at the 2012 International Labour Conference. The representative of organised labour repeatedly referred to SPFs as a mechanism to achieve the primary goal of formalisation.

The ILO’s embrace of the SPF seems rather less progressive when the organisation’s preoccupation with decent work is taken into account. SPFs offered a means of legitimating the ‘vertical’ dimension of social insurance, linked to decent work, with an ill-defined promise of the ‘horizontal’ dimension

of social assistance for some set of people outside of decent employment. It was often unclear whether the horizontal floor protected only wage workers (whether employed formally or informally) against the risks of unemployment, old age and poor health, or whether it would protect everyone – including peasant farmers – against the risks of poverty. It is likely that the ILO was itself divided over these issues, with some departments and individuals in favour of a more genuinely universal policy whilst others remained preoccupied with the ILO's historic constituency of waged workers.

The ILO promoted decent work, with social protection tacked on, at different levels. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda in Africa 2007-2015 included, as its 4<sup>th</sup> priority, promoting Social Protection for all. The ILO initiated pilot country-level Decent Work Programmes in around 2006, before branching out more widely from about 2009. The Decent Work Programmes typically involved a social protection 'pillar', at least from 2011 onwards. At the regional level, the ILO organized tripartite 'Decent Work Symposia' from 2009 (including in Yaoundé, in October 2010, where the SPFs were endorsed).

It also promoted social protection directly. Prior to 2011, its primary focus seems to have been on costing social protection programmes to demonstrate that they were affordable (see e.g. Pal *et al.*, 2005). Since 2012, the ILO has talked up the SPFs in both its general and its Africa-specific publications. Its flagship *World Social Protection Report* – published first in 2014, then in 2017 – communicates strongly the basic argument that governments concerned with poverty have expanded their social protection programmes. In 2016, the ILO published a three-volume study of *Social Protection Floors* that showcased 'successful' social protection experiences across the world, including Africa, to dispel national governments' anxieties (Ortiz, Schmitt and De, 2016).

The ILO's most direct promotion of SPFs in Africa was an (initially) three-year project on Building National Floors of Social Protection, focused on three 'pilot' countries: Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. The project, funded by IrishAid, entailed the promotion of reforms through public events (including 'social protection weeks'), technical assistance and research. An evaluation of the initial three-year project was very positive: 'To have genuinely moved the debate towards a greater acceptance of social protection floors in all of the three countries where it operated, and in the space of only three years, is a significant achievement for a project with just a handful of staff ...' The project's impact was impressive 'in opening up the debates around social protection to a more integrated, more rights-based and more universal, approach, that is fully consistent with ILO's values and vision' (Freeland, 2017: 13, 18). In all three countries the project had helped to push the reform agenda forward. It had also

elevated the ILO to the position of premier international organisation in terms of influence over policy-making, whilst working closely with aid donors and other UN agencies over implementation.

The ILO project deserved the fulsome praise of the evaluator, but the evaluator did not comment on what is arguably the most striking feature of the project: The difficulties that the ILO (and other organisations and individuals, including local NGOs) had in persuading the governments of the three countries to take seriously universal social protection and to implement the reforms that turned the rhetoric of national ‘policy’ into actual programmes that realised the goal of a SPF. The evaluator did describe Malawi as a ‘challenging environment’, but without elaboration. The ILO project was an exercise in advocacy that made some progress in the face of strong and widespread resistance. Progress was slow. In Malawi, the ILO had reportedly anticipated at the outset that a redesigned national social protection strategy would have been adopted by mid-2015, resulting in the expansion of coverage. But Malawi did not publish its new National Social Support Programme (MNSSP II) (Malawi, 2018) until early 2018, and actual expansion of coverage has been slow. In Zambia, also, strategic planning and legislative reform lagged far behind the anticipated timetable. Coverage of social protection has continued to expand, as existing schemes have been rolled out to more districts, but coverage gaps remain immense. Overall, in these countries, the ILO participated in energetic and exemplary advocacy of social protection in the face of governments that appear to continue to drag their feet. The ILO-backed SPIREWORK plans also failed to make significant progress.

The ILO has played a major part in both the distribution across Africa of data and documentation that present the evidence-based case for the expansion of social protection and progress towards SPFs. Through events such as the Social Protection Weeks in Zambia, the ILO (with other organisations) has mobilised enthusiasm for reform. The extent to which this has transformed thinking among the political elites who preside over policy-making remains unclear, however. Insofar as progress has been slow, this attests to the resistance to ‘global’ social policy across much of Africa.

## **5. Social protection reform in Africa since 2012**

Did Recommendation #202 in 2012 mark a turning-point in social protection in Africa? Has there been progress towards more universal social protection in Africa in the six years since the adoption of Recommendation #202 in 2012? If so, what role did the SPF (or ILO) play in this?

Advocates of social protection tend to ‘talk up’ progress, as if to persuade recalcitrant governments that they are missing out on what other governments have accepted as good policy. The ILO’s most recent *World Social Protection Report* reports ‘notable progress in the extension of social protection coverage’ in Africa (ILO, 2017: 119), noting that ‘most African countries have made social protection a priority in their development strategies’ and have adopted or are developing national social protection policies and plans (*ibid.*: 131). Other organisations document the proliferation of social assistance programmes and rising coverage. The Social Assistance Politics and Institutions (SAPI) project counts the number of social assistance programmes in Africa rising more than fourfold from about 20 in 2000 to about 85 in 2015, with coverage rising fivefold over this period (Hickey *et al.*, 2018). The World Bank concurs that ‘safety net’ programmes have proliferated in Africa (World Bank, 2015: 10) and points to rising coverage in countries with poor coverage until recently, such as Tanzania and Senegal (World Bank, 2017).

Much of this expansion predated 2010-2012 (Garcia and Moore, 2012). South Africa’s social assistance programmes – which are by far the largest in Africa, accounting for about one half of the total in terms of the number of people reached – expanded primarily in the 2000s. Programmes in Ethiopia, which account for the second highest number of beneficiaries in Africa, also expanded in the early 2000s rather than the 2010s.

One possible indicator of the impact of the SPF initiative is the content of national social protection documents from across Africa. Zambia adopted a National Social Protection Policy in 2014, Lesotho a National Social Protection Strategy in early 2015 and Malawi a new National Social Support Programme (MNSSP II) in 2018. It is unclear who wrote these, but it is likely to have been consultants proposed and paid by one or other international organisation. All three propose the expansion of social assistance programmes, to provide (in effect) a more complete social protection floor.

All three documents appear to indicate a major shift in commitment on the part of their respective governments. The *Zambian National Social Protection Policy* explicitly referred to Recommendation #202 and arguments for ‘transformative’ social protection (citing Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler). It envisaged an expansion of provision for the working poor as well as children, the elderly and disabled, and criticised past governments for inconsistent and under-funding of social protection. The document detailed tasks for various government ministries and appended a timetable with specific targets for progress over five years (2014-18). These included the establishment of a National Social

Protection Coordinating Unit (in 2015) and a battery of new legislation: a Social Health Insurance Act in 2014, a new and harmonised National Pension Act in 2015 and a Social Protection Act in 2016. The existing Social Cash Transfer Scheme (SCTS) would be rolled out countrywide by 2016, an old age pension scheme would be introduced in 2015 (and 100,000 pensioners enrolled by 2018), and contributory welfare programmes extended to the informal sector. The new social health insurance system would register (by 2018) all public and (formal) private sector employees, 60 percent of all informal workers and more than 500,000 SCTS beneficiaries (Zambia, 2014). This was a bold set of apparent commitments.

Similarly, the Lesotho National Social Protection Strategy set out a bold set of commitments. The Lesotho Strategy seems to have been prepared without much or any input from the ILO, with UNICEF playing the leading role (and the World Bank also active). Nonetheless, the Lesotho Strategy reflected the universalist ambitions of the SPF initiative (and referred twice to the SPF). The document set out what it called ‘a comprehensive integrated suite of core programmes, implemented by different Ministries, to address vulnerabilities throughout the life-course’. This would include three new programmes: A new disability grant, a universal infant grant (for children to the age of two years) and the ‘first steps towards the establishment of a national seasonal employment guarantee scheme to offer public works to the working age poor who need it’. The existing means-tested grant for older children would be expanded, the age threshold for the existing old age pension lowered (although only from 70 to 68) and the existing discretionary public assistance grant would be reformed to provide ‘a residual safety net to catch those who fall through the (now much narrower) gaps in the social protection floor’. These reforms would be phased in over four years, so that they would be completed by the end of the 2018/19 year. The result would be an expansion of coverage from 23 to 41 percent of the population, at a cost of about 4 percent of GDP (or 5 percent if school feeding and other related programmes are included). The document envisaged further expansion by 2025 (Lesotho, 2015).

Malawi’s MNSSP II was more cautious than either the Zambian or Lesotho documents (and did not refer to SPFs). It combined aspects of the global social protection discourse with the more developmental approach – focused on farmers – that is favoured by Malawi’s governing party (the Democratic Progressive Party). Much of the document uses a developmental discourse, including discussion of ‘building resilient livelihoods’, integrating social protection and agricultural policies and ‘graduating’ out of poverty. Recognising resource constraints, the document commits only to the progressive realisation of rights. It also emphasises that the government must control

programmes, which is an unsubtle criticism of aid donors. No new programmes are proposed, but existing programmes – the Social Cash Transfer Programme (targeted on very poor, ‘incapacitated’ households), workfare and school feeding programmes – would be expanded (Malawi, 2018).

Whilst none of these documents was framed in terms of implementing a SPF, they all – with a qualification in the case of Malawi’s MNSSP II – envisaged substantial progress towards the implementation of a SPF, as understood by the ILO. These strategy documents might reasonably be seen as proposing progress towards SPFs by stealth. The Zambian case even reproduced much of the ILO’s blindness with respect to peasant farmers, providing largely for people who were unable to support themselves through farming (because of old age, for example) or who were employed in the formal or informal sectors. This was not so true in the Malawi document, which was more cognisant of agricultural factors.

The key question is, however, what actually happened, or what was implemented, following these bold visions? Did ‘coverage’ expand after 2010-12, in line with the bold vision set out in general terms in Recommendation #202 and more specifically in national strategy plans?

At a continental level, the ILO would have us believe that it has. The least incomplete data concern old-age pensions. In its first *World Social Protection Report*, the ILO calculated that 17 percent of elderly people in Sub-Saharan Africa received pensions. The proportion in North Africa was much higher, at 37 percent, giving an Africa-wide total of 21,5 percent (ILO, 2014). In its second *World Social Protection Report*, three years later, the ILO reported that coverage was 30 percent, suggesting that there had been a major expansion in coverage over a short time period (ILO, 2017). The national data provided by the ILO do not seem to confirm this trend, however. Neither contributory nor non-contributory schemes have expanded sufficiently to warrant the finding of aggregate expansion (Seekings, 2019).

Aggregate data on other forms of social assistance are less clear. It seems that the major category of expansion in social assistance programmes has been targeted (i.e. means-tested) programmes for very poor households. Since 2010 there has been considerable expansion in such programmes in Tanzania, and to a lesser extent in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal and Zambia. In these seven countries, by one estimate, the total number of people living in households that benefit from a social assistance programme rose to more than

10 million by 2015.<sup>2</sup> To put this into perspective, however, this corresponds to only 6 percent of the total population of these countries, despite their high poverty rates. Moreover, this 6 percent includes *all* members of households where *anyone* receives a benefit.

The cases of Zambia and Lesotho are instructive. As discussed above, the governments of these two countries adopted social protection plans in 2014-15 that promised bold reforms. Few of these reforms have been put into effect. In Zambia, the promised National Social Protection Coordinating Unit does not (as of 2018) appear to have been established (despite the plan's specification that this would happen in 2015). The Health Insurance Act was passed in 2018 (four years behind the promised schedule), and neither the promised National Pension Bill or Social Protection Bill have been published. The Social Cash Transfer Scheme has been expanded – although there is now a scandal over payments – but the dedicated old age pension scheme has not been introduced and contributory welfare programmes have barely been extended to the informal sector. The efforts of the ILO (through its Building National Floors of Social Protection project) and others can be viewed as attempts to push or persuade the Zambian state to inch in the direction mapped out in the country's 2014 plan. Siachiwena's analysis of the Zambian case only goes as far as 2016, but his thesis appears to continue to be relevant: One faction within the governing Patriotic Front was in favour of social protection programmes but the faction was marginalised politically in 2014-16, in many cases leaving the Patriotic Front (Siachiwena, 2016, 2017).

In Lesotho, also, the 2015 National Social Protection Strategy envisaged a substantial expansion of the country's social protection system. The only programme to have been expanded is the Child Grants Programme, and even after expansion it only reaches a small minority of the country's poor children. Analyses of Lesotho up to 2015 suggest that the then government was less committed to the child grant than it and previous governments were to the old age pension scheme. Whereas the old age pensions had been 'home-grown', the child grant programme had been pushed heavily (and funded until 2013) by UNICEF and aid donors (Granvik, 2015; Pellerano *et al.*, 2016).

In neither Zambia nor Lesotho was the lofty vision of the social protection plan matched by substantive reform. There appears to be a disjuncture between the rhetoric of reform and the practice of procrastination. Global social policy has changed the public discourse far more than it has expanded the actual coverage or reach of social protection.

---

<sup>2</sup> Data collated by SAPI.

Analysis of other countries in East and Southern Africa suggests that reform has generally been incremental and the expansion of coverage (or reach) slow. South Africa has the most extensive social protection system in Africa, on its own accounting for just over one half of the total number of beneficiaries of social assistance across Africa (Hickey *et al.*, 2018). In South Africa, however, the last major reform of social protection was initiated in 2008-09 (Seekings, 2016a). Since 2012 there has been no significant expansion of the reach of social protection. Moreover, a SPF is rarely mentioned in recent government documents or ministers' speeches. In Namibia, the government rejected proposals for a general child grant made by UNICEF and the ILO. In 2014, in the run-up to an election, the government introduced a means-tested child grant (the Vulnerable Grant). As of 2018, however, this reached only about one quarter of the country's children. Despite the appointment of Bishop Zephania Kameeta – the champion of the basic income grant – as Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare following the election, no further reforms have ensued (Chinyoka, 2019a). The government of Botswana also rejected proposals for a child support grant (proposed by foreign and local consultants in 2010) and for a family support grant (proposed by the World Bank in 2013) – although it did expand the public works programme (Chinyoka, 2019b). Case-studies of the politics of reform in these countries do not attach much importance to either the SPF initiative or the ILO as a player.

In East Africa, also, the expansion of coverage has generally entailed the expansion of existing programmes rather than the introduction of new ones. The only new programme in East Africa was an old age pension introduced in 2016 in Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous territory forming part of Tanzania. There is no evidence that this reform was in any way affected by the SPF initiative. The ILO had been involved briefly, but unsuccessfully. Other individuals and organisations had filled the gap, working with reformers within the Zanzibari state (Seekings, 2016b). Across most of East and Southern Africa the ILO has often not been the most prominent international organisation. Other organisations involved include the World Bank (in Tanzania, for example), UNICEF (in Lesotho and Namibia) and HelpAge International (in Zanzibar). Even in Zambia, it is not clear the ILO can claim much of the credit for the slow expansion of the country's Social Cash Transfer Scheme. The ILO's impressive publications and the very solid work of its staff in Lusaka and elsewhere have surely had some effect on attitudes towards social protection, but the bold vision set out in national policy documents has often not been matched by concrete reforms on the ground. The universalism underlying the SPF initiative has run up against the conservatism of many policy-makers across Africa.

## **6. Conclusion: The limits to ‘global’ social policy**

Is ‘global social policy’ really ‘global’? Viewed from Africa, the SPF initiative looks suspiciously Northern (with strong input from Latin America), hitched to a vision of individual social and economic rights that many African policy-makers view as alien. African governments went along with the SPF Recommendation, opposing stronger formulations and supporting (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) formulations that took into account ‘national circumstances’. Within the African Union and at the national level they have incorporated aspects of the SPF discourse into their official documents, but African governments have generally been slow to implement these. The evidence might be very strong that the expansion of social protection reduces poverty and encourages development, but many African policy-makers simply do not believe this, believing instead that ‘handouts’ encourage ‘dependency’ which both undermines development and is antithetical to norms of reciprocity and responsibility that are widespread across Africa (Seekings, 2018). They might go along with ‘global’ policy on the global stage, including in Geneva, and only vernacularise these partially in Africa-wide or national policy documents. But few ministers express in private much enthusiasm for reform. Just as they are slow to ratify ILO conventions, they have been slow to incorporate the ideas central to much ‘global’ social policy into their domestic policy-making in practice.

Unlike its ‘conventions’, ILO ‘Recommendations’ are not subject to ratification, making it hard to gauge their significance to governments. Unusually, the ILO itself is currently surveying progress with respect to Recommendation #202, through a General Survey of national governments (and social partners). The report form has been distributed (ILO, 2016) with a deadline for responses at the end of December 2018 so that the results can be presented to the 108<sup>th</sup> session of the International Labour Conference in June 2019. It will be interesting to see how African governments – and their critics in civil society – present progress towards social protection floors.

## References

African Union (2008), Social policy framework for Africa, presented to the first session of the African Union Conference of Ministers in charge of Social Development (CAMSD), Windhoek, 27-31 October.

----- (2011), Social protection plan for the informal economy and rural workers 2011-2015 (SPIREWORK), presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Ordinary session of the Labour and Social Affairs Commission of the African Union, 11-15 April 2011, Yaounde.

Chinyoka, Isaac (2019a), The child welfare regime in Namibia, 1990-2017, *CSSR Working Paper 431* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

----- (2019b), Familial child welfare regimes: The case of Botswana, *CSSR Working Paper 430* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Chirwa, Danwood (2005), The African human rights framework, in Malcolm Langford (ed.), *Social rights jurisprudence: Emerging trends in international and comparative law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 323-38.

Cichon, Michael (2013), The social protection floors recommendation, 2012 (No. 202): Can a six-page document change the course of social history?, *International Social Security Review* 66,3-4: 21-43.

Deacon, Bob (2005), From 'safety nets' back to 'universal social provision' Is the global tide turning?, *Global Social Policy* 5,1: 19-28.

----- (2013), *Global social policy in the making: The foundations of the social protection floor* (Bristol: Policy Press).

Freeland, Nicholas (2017), Building national floors of social protection in Southern Africa: Final independent evaluation, *ILO document RAF/13/04/IRL* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

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

Granvik, Mia (2015), Policy diffusion, domestic politics and social protection in Lesotho, 1998-2012, *CSSR Working Paper No. 357* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Hickey, Sam, Tom Lavers, Miguel Niño-Zarazúa & Jeremy Seekings (2018), The negotiated politics of social protection in sub-Saharan Africa, *UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2018/34* (Helsinki: UNU-WIDER).

Hickey, Sam & Jeremy Seekings (2017), *The global politics of social protection*, *UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2017/115* (Helsinki: UNU-WIDER).

International Labour Organisation (2009), *The informal economy in Africa: Promoting transition to formality: Challenges and strategies* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

----- (2010), Yaoundé tripartite declaration on the implementation of the social protection floor, adopted at the 2nd African decent work symposium on building a social protection floor with the global jobs pact, Yaoundé, 6-8 October.

----- (2011a), Yaoundé tripartite declaration on the implementation of the social protection floor: The action plan, draft for discussion at 12<sup>th</sup> African Regional Meeting [of the ILO], Johannesburg, 11-14 October.

----- (2011b), Empowering Africa's peoples with decent work, Director-general's report to 12<sup>th</sup> African regional meeting [of the ILO], Johannesburg, 11-14 October.

----- (2012), Fourth item on the agenda: Elaboration of an autonomous recommendation on the social protection floor, *ILC Provisional Record No. 14*, Report of the committee on the social protection floor, ILC, 101<sup>st</sup> Session, Geneva, May-June 2012.

----- (2014), Building economic recovery, inclusive development and social justice, *World Social Protection Report 2014/15* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

----- (2015), Recommendation concerning the transition from the informal to the formal economy, *ILC Recommendation (#204)* adopted at the 104<sup>th</sup> session of the International Labour Conference, Geneva, 12 June 2015.

----- (2016), *Report form for the following instrument: Social protection floors recommendation 2012 (No. 202)* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

----- (2017), Universal social protection to achieve the sustainable development goals, *World Social Protection Report 2017-19* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

Lesotho, Government of the Kingdom of (2015), *National social protection strategy 2014/15-2018/19* (Maseru: Kingdom of Lesotho).

Levitt, Peggy & Sally Merry (2009), Vernacularization on the ground: Local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States, *Global Networks* 9,4: 441-461.

Malawi, (2018), *Malawi national social support programme II (MNSSP II)* (Republic of Malawi).

Mutua, Makau (2002), The Banjul charter: The case for an African cultural footprint, in A.A. An-Na'im (ed), *Cultural transformation and human rights in Africa* (London: Zed): 68-107.

Ortiz, Isabel, Valérie Schmitt & Loveleen De (eds, 2016), *Social protection floors* (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

Pal, K., C. Behrendt, F. Leger, M. Cichon & K. Hagemeyer (2005), Can low-income countries afford basic social security? First results of a modelling exercise. *Issues in Social Protection Discussion Paper 13*. (Geneva: International Labour Organization).

Pellerano, Luca, Silvio Daidone, Benjamin Davis, Mohammad Farooq, Marian Homayoun, Andrew Kardan, Malefetsane Masasa, Ousmane Niang, Bettina Ramirez and Naquibullah Safi (2016), Does Evidence Matter? Role of the evaluation of the child grants programme in the consolidation of the social protection sector in Lesotho, in: Davis, Benjamin, Sudhanshu Handa, Nicola Hypher, Natalia Winder Rossi, Paul Winters & Jennifer Yablonski (eds), *From evidence to action: The story of cash transfers and impact evaluation in sub-Saharan Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, FAO and UNICEF): 247-80.

Seekings, Jeremy (2016a), Redefining the affordability of social assistance programmes: The child support grant in South Africa, 1998-2014, *CSSR Working Paper No. 379* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Seekings, Jeremy (2016b), The introduction of old age pensions in Zanzibar, *CSSR Working Paper No. 393* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Seekings, Jeremy (2018), Inequality, popular attitudes and elite ideology in Africa: The case of social protection, paper presented at the UNRISD Conference, Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization, 8–9 November, Geneva.

Seekings, Jeremy (2019), The coverage and reach of social protection in Africa, forthcoming *CSSR Working Paper* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Siachiwena, Hangala (2016), Social protection policy reform in Zambia during the Sata Presidency, 2011–2014, *CSSR Working Paper No. 377* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

----- (2017), Social policy reform in Zambia under President Lungu, 2015-2017, *CSSR Working Paper No. 403* (Cape Town: Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town).

Von Gliszczynski, Moritz & Lutz Leisering (2016), Constructing new global models of social security: How international organizations defined the field of social cash transfers in the 2000s, *Journal of Social Policy* 45,2: 325-343.

World Bank (2015), *The state of social safety nets 2015* (Washington DC: World Bank).

----- (2017), *The state of social safety nets 2017* (Washington DC: World Bank).

Wright, Gemma & Michael Noble (2010), Recent social policy developments in Africa. *Global Social Policy* 10,1: 111-19.

Zambia (2014), *National social protection policy* (Lusaka: Ministry of Community Development, Mother and Child Health).