

The importance of a system strengthening approach to social protection: A case study of Uganda's urban social protection programme for adolescent girls.

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List of abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT),
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DG-ECHO	Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EPRI	Economic Policy Research Institute
EU	European Union
GCP	Directorate of Gender, Community Services and Production
GEG	GirlsEmpoweringGirls
GIZ	German Society for International Cooperation
GoU	Government of Uganda
GRM	Grievance Redressal Mechanism
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Viruses
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISGs	In-school Girls
KCCA	Kampala Capital City Authority
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LEAP	Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MIS	Management Information System
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSPP	National Social Protection Policy
OOSGs	Out-of-school Girls
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SPACE	Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 - Expert Advice Helpline
SPIAC-B	The Social Protection Inter-Agency Coordination Board
TMF	Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation

UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USP	Universal Social Protection 2030
UYDEL	Uganda Youth Development Link
WB	World Bank

1. Introduction

The complex nature of poverty and vulnerability in an increasingly complex world demands a ‘big picture’ approach from all stakeholders. Traditionally, a linear, mechanical way of thinking, where a problem was neatly decomposed into components and addressed in isolation, was the norm. This linear approach had produced its benefits when the problem was clearly defined and where cause-effect relationships could be sufficiently mapped out. That is increasingly not the case anymore. As a result, academic and practical attention has been shifting from the components to the whole. This shift, commonly referred to as ‘systems thinking’ and more specifically, ‘system approaches’, focuses attention on the interactions between different parts of a system to understand how together they are effecting change. Systems thinking has reverberated across disciplines and provided the academic and the practical world with a toolset to map out complex system structures and discuss their understanding with others.

Within the field of social protection, a systems approach can be most simply described as a move from fragmentation to coordination and harmonisation of social protection efforts. This move has undeniable applicability and appeal for social protection practitioners. Two main reasons stand out. First, a systems approach to social protection translates into the harmonisation of social protection programmes and policies for increased efficiency and effectiveness. Second, it creates the premises for addressing multiple vulnerabilities comprehensively, along a life-cycle continuum. Governments, development partners and donor organisations alike recognise both the shortcomings of addressing the challenges specific to social protection in isolation and the promises of harmonisation and stronger coordination.

However, as concepts such as ‘strengthening of social protection systems’ or ‘integration of social protection systems’ grow in popularity, they also run the risk of diluted meaning through overuse. Both of these concepts have a similar meaning, and for the purpose of this paper, they will be used interchangeably. However, their definition is mostly intuitive and sufficiently broad that it can mean anything and ultimately risks ceasing to be a useful concept. Moreover, system strengthening, or integration of a systems approach is threatening to become an empty notion because it is being used without understanding the underlying concepts. What defines and characterises a system? What systems do we aim to strengthen? What are the leverage points for affecting effective changes? How do we know how to strengthen them? Why do systems require strengthening in the first place? Without a common understanding and vocabulary to think of and discuss these questions, social protection practitioners are also not in a position to answer them.

This working paper does not claim to answer all of the above questions. Rather, it aims to contribute to the observed gap by unpacking the underlying concepts and providing readers with a brief introduction to a very rich field of research, systems theory, and systems thinking. A greater understanding of systems and how they behave is instrumental in designing and implementing interventions that can lead to systemic change. At the same time, this paper addresses practical

aspects of applicability of systems approaches to social protection, first in theory and afterwards in practice, through a case study of the Kampala Capital City Authority's (KCCA) GirlsEmpoweringGirls (GEG) programme, Uganda's first urban social protection programme for adolescent girls, implemented in Kampala.

1.1. Purpose and scope of the paper

The purpose of this working paper is two-fold. First, through a comprehensive but by no means an exhaustive review of the academic and grey literature, the paper aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the theory behind the systems approach, to discuss the components of a system and to unpack the concept of systems thinking. The theoretical background aims to create a common understanding of what a systems approach brings to social protection, the benefits and challenges and how it can be achieved. Second, through a critical look at the case study of the GEG programme in Uganda, the paper aims to illustrate how a social protection programme can contribute to the strengthening of social protection systems and vice versa: how a systems approach to social protection can impact the success of a social protection programme. Building on the theoretical foundation yielded by the literature review and drawing on the case study findings, the working paper aims to answer the following two questions:

1. How is GEG strengthening the social protection system in Uganda?
2. How has the systems approach to social protection in Uganda impacted the success of GEG?

The working paper is primarily intended for an external audience comprised of policymakers and social protection practitioners interested in developing a broader understanding of systems thinking, the applicability of a systems approach to social protection, and the impact of social protection programmes on the strengthening of social protection systems.

1.2. Structure of the paper

The working paper is divided into five main sections. This first section, the introduction, presents the reasoning behind the topic of interest for the working paper. It goes on to highlight the purpose and objectives of the paper and, finally, its structure. The second section discusses the methodology applied for the research and development of the working paper, i.e., the overall approach for the selection of data and framing of the research questions as well as the data and data sources used. The third and fourth sections constitute the body of the paper. The third section grounds the discussion theoretically through a literature review of academic papers and grey literature on systems thinking and the systems approach to social protection. A review of the extensive body of knowledge in this field has been conducted to distil a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, description of the main components of a system, identify the advantages and challenges of a system approach in social protection and what it means to strengthen social protection systems. The fourth section narrows the focus of the working paper on the case study,

i.e. the GEG programme in Uganda. The section discusses the contribution of social protection programmes to social protection systems strengthening through the example of the GEG programme. At the same time, it observes how a systems approach to social protection can impact the design and implementation of a social protection programme. The final section of the paper concludes with a series of system strengthening recommendations.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, a combined qualitative approach was adopted. The methodological approach was comprised of a structured desk review of available academic and grey literature and key informant interviews conducted with GEG programme stakeholders across various levels of programme implementation. Thus, secondary data obtained from the literature review has been triangulated with primary observations from the interviews with programme stakeholders. Both data sources and methods for collecting the data are introduced below.

In the first step, as part of compiling relevant **secondary data**, a comprehensive, structured desk review of academic and grey literature was performed. The search parameters inputted for identifying relevant literature included systems theory, systems thinking, and systems approach, among others. The search results were then filtered based on relevance for the disciplines under review, i.e. social work, child protection, international development, and education. Alongside academic papers, the grey literature search focused on the same topics. Examples of grey literature referenced in this paper are reports, evaluations and working papers published by international organisations and NGOs such as UNICEF, the World Bank, the ILO, the WFP, Save the Children, strategic country documents (e.g., Uganda’s 2010 National Development Plan), and GEG programme-specific documents.

To complement the information compiled through the structured desk review, **primary data** was collected through key informant interviews. The key informants were selected either based on their knowledge and experience working on social protection system strengthening in Uganda or based on their involvement in the design and implementation of the GEG programme. In addition, secondary data was also retrieved from the key informant interviews conducted for the EPRI “Rapid Review of Global Social Protection Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic” synthesis report. Below, **Table 1** provides an overview of the organisations to which interviewed stakeholders belonged and the number of interviews conducted with each organisation's representatives.

Table 1. *Key social protection and GEG stakeholders consulted*

Organisation	Number of KIs	Data
Kampala City Council Authority (KCCA)	4	Primary
UNICEF Uganda	2	Primary
Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation (TMF)	3	Primary
Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL)	3	Primary
Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) Expanding Social Protection Programme / DAI International Development	1	Secondary ¹
World Bank Uganda	1	Secondary ²

Semi-structured interview guides, tailored to the different groups of key informants' anticipated knowledge and expertise, were developed and utilised during the interviews. The purpose of the guides was to steer the conversation to some extent, keeping enough flexibility for a free consultation to evolve and allowing the interviewer to frame questions spontaneously and probe for information. In addition, it enabled respondents to discuss and raise issues that may not have been considered while developing the interview guide. As a direct result of the travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely, via the videoconferencing platform Zoom or telephonically, in those cases where internet connectivity or other resources for setting up a Zoom call were not available.

3. Strengthening social protection systems

Among social protection practitioners, either government or development partners, the notion of system strengthening is appealing, due to the promises it holds for the practice of social protection. First is the confidence that strong, integrated systems can deliver efficiently and effectively on social protection results, better than what fragmented interventions can achieve on their own. Second is the expectation that system strengthening will create the premises for comprehensively addressing the build-up of poverty and vulnerability from childhood, through adulthood and into old age. There are multiple pathways towards the strengthening of social protection systems, and this is in part, a reflection of the interrelated and interdependent nature of components within a system and the multitude of leverage points for systemic change, among others. Therefore, the following sub-sections will start by introducing concepts of systems, system

¹ (EPRI, 2020)

² Ibid

theory, systems thinking, adaptive challenges, and systemic change. This theoretical analysis will form the background for a more practical discussion of how a system strengthening for social protection looks like and how it could be achieved.

3.1. Systems and systems thinking

Traditionally, advancement in the understanding of the world around us has been achieved through a reductionist, analytical way of thinking, i.e. the belief that a complete understanding of the parts is equivalent to understanding the whole. This way of thinking has served a purpose in the past. For certain issues it can still be useful. However, more and more often, the reductionist way of thinking fails to address today's major social, economic, political and environmental challenges. The main reason for this failure is the fact that the challenges themselves are characterized by complex cause-effect patterns and are highly interrelated. Continuing to address complex, non-linear challenges with linear approaches has also been referred to as "a distinctive cultural dysfunction of society."³

An alternative, non-linear way of thinking has evolved in the form of systems thinking. A recent and comprehensive definition of the concept refers to systems thinking as the "set of synergistic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviours, and devising modifications to them to produce desired effects. These skills work together as a system."⁴ The principal contribution of systems thinking is the attention to the dynamic between system components and the impact of this dynamic on systemic change.⁵ Moreover, systems thinking brings tools that enable practitioners to describe system structures, functions, and capacities and communicate about them with different audiences.

Naturally, at the core of systems thinking is the concept of systems. Simply put, systems are defined as "any group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent parts that form a complex and unified whole with a specific purpose"⁶ and can be observed everywhere, from natural to economic, technological, ecological or social systems. This definition highlights several key aspects that form the appeal of systems, and by extension of systems thinking for understanding and dealing with the world. First, a system has a purpose. The identification of the system purpose will serve to identify the system's boundaries, i.e. where one system ends and another one starts. Let us consider the social protection system, as an example. There are different definitions for social protection, national or international, coming from governments or from development partners. How a group of actors defines the purpose of social protection will determine what falls within the systems, what are the components (i.e. stakeholders, policies, programmes), what are the

³ (Hjorth & Bagheri, 2006)

⁴ (Arnold & Wade, 2015)

⁵ (Bowman, Chettleborough, Jeans, Rowlands, & Whitehead, 2015)

⁶ (Kim, 1999)

expected interactions, etc. Second, systems are defined by the interaction between their components, and this interaction is expected to have implications on the components themselves but more importantly, on the system as a whole. The more complex a system is, the less straightforward the interactions are. More specifically, it is more difficult to determine what was the cause of any specific effect. In our example, interactions could refer to how policies impact programmes or how programmes influence policy, but also how the development of policy and implementation of programmes shapes the social protection landscape in general. Third, systems are usually nested, integrated structures. That means that within any larger system environment, numerous sub-systems can exist. Using the same example of the social protection system, social assistance and social insurance can be seen as sub-systems, fulfilling complementing purposes and interacting with each other in a manner that influences the entire social protection environment. And finally, systems never exist in a void. Systems operate within a broader context, and the structure and dynamic of the system are impacted by this context.⁷ This means, that not only internal interactions have an effect on the system as a whole, but also those between the system and external factors. The social protection system interacts for example with the education, health, or productive sectors both at policy and at programming level.

Systems thinking is not limited to any one discipline or field of study. Scholars have recommended it as a skill set beneficial to everyone to better understand our day-to-day lives.⁸ It represents the practical application of systems theory, “an interdisciplinary theory about every system in nature, in society and in many scientific domains as well as a framework with which we can investigate phenomena from a holistic approach.”⁹ In 1968, Van Bertalanffy introduced the notion of a general systems theory, highlighting that there is a common set of models, principles and laws that apply to all systems across multiple fields of discipline.¹⁰ Even before formalising general systems theory, system theory had developed simultaneously across multiple disciplines, developing different conceptualisations and areas of focus. The applicability of system theory across various disciplines produced a plurality of perspectives and enriched the body of knowledge with interdisciplinary contributions.¹¹ This allowed experts from different disciplines to enrich their understanding of the phenomenon, adapt approaches, and draw innovative conclusions.

3.2. A system approach to social protection

The socio-economic challenges and vulnerabilities that the world faces today, such as intergenerational poverty, gender discrimination and abuse, child poverty, the disparity in accessing opportunities, to name just a few, are interdependent and systemic, rooted in structural

⁷ (UNICEF, 2010)

⁸ (Arnold & Wade, 2015)

⁹ (Mele , Pels, & Polese, 2010)

¹⁰ (Bertalanffy, 1973)

¹¹ (Mele , Pels, & Polese, 2010)

faults and complex legacy.¹² Moreover, they are deepened by financial, political or climate crises and emergencies. Yet, in many countries, despite the indisputable evidence of the role of social protection in the alleviation of poverty and the support to vulnerable populations, the social protection response is mostly fragmented and uncoordinated. Different social protection policies and programmes have been designed and implemented to respond to individual issues, often implemented in isolation from each other and in isolation from interventions across other social sectors. This is partly a consequence of the traditional, siloed way of thinking, i.e. addressing one challenge at a time, in isolation from other, potentially related aspects. At the same time it reflects “challenges and constraints to institutional capacity and organisation, political leadership and incentives, different time frames in terms of design and expected impacts, and limitation in financial capacity.”¹³

In a report aiming to define a common ground for building social protection programmes, UNICEF and the World Bank (WB) identify several factors that explain the current fragmentation of the social protection sector across policy, programme and administration. First, different legislative frameworks and often the lack of a national unifying policy strategy to govern the delivery of social protection interventions have a large impact on the ability of the social protection sector to act in a harmonised manner. While countries have made progress towards the development of national social policy frameworks and their domestication at sub-national level, this is a fairly new development (in Uganda for example, the National Social Protection Policy was adopted in 2015). Second, the weak vertical coordination between national and local levels of implementation as well as the weak horizontal coordination among stakeholders leads to reduced impacts, limits the ability to act in a harmonised manner and react flexibly to challenges. Third, fragmentation across the sector is also caused by the limited organisational and financial resources. To introduce large, coordinated more capital and human resources investments, are required, at least in the initial phases. Although these investments become smaller as vertical (between national and local levels of implementation) and horizontal (among stakeholders) coordination improves. Finally, the lack of coordination of administrative tools for similar processes across programmes increases the potential for fragmentation and makes it more challenging to integrate and use programmes as starting points for a systems approach. Independent of the combination of factors that cause it, fragmentation “creates significant inefficiencies, at the policy, programme and administrative levels, undermining the potential impact of social protection on building resilience and contributing to human development.”¹⁴

It is becoming increasingly obvious that fragmentation can be effectively addressed through a systems approach to social protection. Applying a systems approach to complex social problems

¹² (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2017)

¹³ (UNICEF & WB, 2013)

¹⁴ Ibid.

provides social protection practitioners with a useful set of tools for outlining the functions, structures and capacities of the systems underpinning the complex problems they are trying to address. Within social protection, a systems approach focuses on coordination and harmonisation among policy, actors, and programmes.¹⁵ Thus, a system approach could be explained as a means to create coherence within social assistance, between social assistance with other social protection pillars, (i.e. social insurance, labour market interventions) and between social protection and other sectors. More specifically, this coherence could be achieved by linking programmes within the social assistance pillar, linking programmes across sectors, integrating social protection considerations within other relevant sector strategies (i.e. education, health, agriculture), among others.

Arguably, there are multiple pathways towards a systems approach within social protection. Positive examples come from multiple countries, such as Zambia, who adopted a comprehensive social protection policy in 2014 or Ghana, who brought together several interventions under the umbrella of Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme. Even so data on the effects of different pathways for strengthening social protection systems remains limited. This is partly due also to the need for a longer timeframe for observing large scale impacts. Therefore, a discussion about the benefits and challenges of a systems approach are, to a large extent, theoretical. Among the benefits, the academic literature mentions the ability of a systems approach to better deliver on the promises of social protection, i.e., building resilience against system vulnerability and shocks, enhancing equity and expanding coverage, and promoting investment in human capital and economic opportunities, and increasing efficiency and effectiveness. Several features of a systems approach are conducive to these expected benefits. To start with, adopting a systems approach offers social protection practitioners a broader perspective. This perspective allows them to observe the vulnerabilities that people face at different stages of life, and to understand the build-up of vulnerability across the life-cycle. Likewise, through a systems lens, it is easier for practitioners to take a birds-eye view and observe how different system components (i.e. cash transfers, social policies, etc.) interact and what is the impact of context (economic, politic, social, etc) on the overall social protection system. With these insights, social protection practitioners can incorporate aspects of flexibility and resilience to shocks in their policy and programming. Moreover, a systems approach serves to map the array of actors and programmes that comprise the system and identify potential leverage points for system change.

Although a systems approach to social protection is undoubtedly the way forward, the literature also cautions on challenges and potential risks. The purpose of this cautioning is to make social protection practitioners aware and guide the practical operationalisation of social protection systems integration. Coming from a more theoretical perspective and speaking broadly about the

¹⁵ (UNICEF & WB, 2013)

applicability of a systems approach to public sector challenges, a report produced by the OECD in 2014 identifies four core challenges for applying a systems approach to the public sector.¹⁶ These challenges are also accurately applicable to the social protection domain.

First, the authors speak of the balancing act between the need for evidence and the need to act. A systems approach will inevitably introduce complexity within the decision-making process, from the legislative framework's structure to the mapping of stakeholders. Decision-makers will never be in a position to have all the information and fully avoid uncertainty. They are, nonetheless, expected to identify enough data and act under the premise of uncertainty. A second identified challenge refers to the ability of the system to assimilate feedback and change accordingly. According to the report, this ability is dependent on the existence of open-ended processes, with tolerance for risks and risk-taking. While these processes have been embraced by business, the public sector is still slow in identifying lessons learned and transforming them into input for the system. The third challenge refers to the ability to produce system reforms without disturbing the systems' functioning, i.e. 'changing the tires while driving a car.' For domains such as healthcare, education, social protection, the provision of services is continuous, making reform more difficult. A conflict of interest appears if the actors responsible for identifying what is required for change are also responsible for keeping the system going. The final challenge refers to the speed of change of conditions. It refers to the discrepancy between the speed with which challenges evolve compared to the perceived resistance to change of institutions.¹⁷

In addition, the UNICEF and World Bank report identifies additional practical challenges for the strengthening of social protection systems. UNICEF and WB speak of the need to carefully consider political context and past reform dynamics, the need for strong political leadership to provide direction and incentives to encourage alignment. UNICEF and WB also caution against misalignment between donors with different mandates and against the temptation to produce short-term results over long-term system strengthening. Alongside challenges, it is equally important to recognise the risks attached to a systems approach for social protection. First is the potential to propagate errors across the system. The highly interconnected nature of systems means that both good practices and mistakes can be as easily replicated. At the same time, complex systems tend to become less flexible, due to the high number of components and interactions. This loss of flexibility is partially responsible for the slowness with which complex systems change. Lastly, because aggregated approaches touch on a multitude of stakeholders, mobilising support for comprehensive initiatives becomes more challenging.¹⁸

¹⁶ (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2017)

¹⁷ (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2017)

¹⁸ (UNICEF & WB, 2013)

3.3. Towards the strengthening of social protection systems

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for strengthening social protection systems, and the switch towards a systems approach in social protection may take different forms and pathways. In practice, the pathway is influenced heavily by context and other key factors, such as institutional capacity, financial sustainability, and political leadership. Several countries have already taken steps towards a stronger integration of social protection systems. For example, Ghana's Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme links its social cash transfers with a social health insurance programme to generate a systematic approach with more comprehensive poverty and human capital outcomes. Brazil is building developmental and cross-ministerial linkages into its social protection programmes. For its part, Mozambique is considering broader macroeconomic areas for social investments to raise overall living standards through interventions in agriculture, food security, and employment-generating activities.¹⁹

The switch towards a systems approach is a gradual process, and it involves changes across the policy, programme, and administrative levels.²⁷ **Figure 1** below visualises the relationship between the three levels. In line with the nature of systems, changes across one level are needed to produce and support change across the other levels. The policy level represents the highest level of engagement, where a shared purpose of the social protection system is established, and the objectives and functions of the social protection system are defined in the context of national goals and parameters.²⁰ System strengthening efforts at the policy level aim to ensure policy coherence across programmes and government levels and focus on aspects such as policy coherence, policy development and realisation, and policy sensitisation. At a programme level, efforts towards system strengthening focus on strengthening the integration and harmonisation of social protection programmes to comprehensively address multiple and cumulative risks and vulnerabilities across the life-cycle. This can be achieved by expanding and improving existing social protection programmes, connecting cash transfers to providing information or related services, expanding and improving health insurance, supporting childcare and adolescent employability, etc.²¹ Finally, at an administrative level, the focus is on building sub-systems to support efficient and equitable delivery of one or more social protection programmes. Examples of such sub-systems are social registries, management information system (MIS), payment

¹⁹ (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG-DEVCO), 2015)

²⁰ (Kaltenborn, Abdulai, Roelen, & Hague, 2017)

²¹ (UNICEF, 2019)

systems, and grievance redressal mechanisms (GRM). Together with a clear assignment of responsibilities, they provide channels for effective cross-programme management.

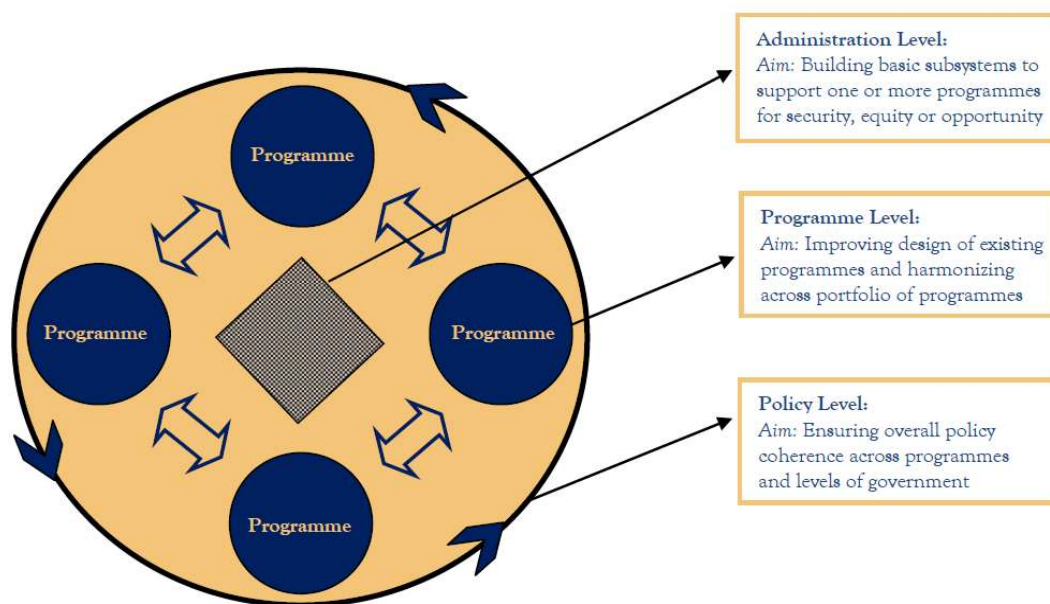


Figure 1. Three levels of social protection.

Source: UNICEF & WB (2013). *Common ground: UNICEF and World Bank Approaches to Building Social Protection Systems*

Finally, to manage expectations, it is important to recognise that the switch towards a systems approach within social protection demands a paradigm shift from government, development partners and donor organisations.²² These institutions and organisations are known for their large bureaucratic apparatus, hierarchical structures of governance, siloed way of working, and resistance to change. However, efforts for systems strengthening should promote new ways of thinking about both the challenge and the solution among these actors. Overall, both government and non-government actors would benefit from shifting to an iterative process of planning, multi-stakeholder approaches, context-specific solutions, better understanding of the local context for solution design, and cross-organisational collaboration.²³ Such a shift would equip actors to recognise the value of experimentation and receive and incorporate feedback continuously in their policymaking and programming, encourage co-creation with local stakeholders, and promote collaboration across departments, ministries, and organisations.

²² (Bowman, Chettleborough, Jeans, Rowlands, & Whitehead, 2015), (Meadows , 1999)

²³ (Bowman, Chettleborough, Jeans, Rowlands, & Whitehead, 2015)

4. Case study: GEG programme

There is no real, systematic review of how system approaches have been applied in social protection and how different approaches perform. So far, most insights into the performance of systems approaches in social protection have been obtained through case studies. Case studies can capture the details of a situation and are better equipped to explain the specific case context. Following this reasoning, this paper relies on the case study of the GEG programme in Kampala, Uganda, to reflect on a dual dynamic:

- How is GEG strengthening the social protection system in Uganda?
- How has the systems approach to social protection in Uganda impacted the success of GEG?

The following sub-sections first briefly introduce the context and objectives for the GEG programme, and afterwards discuss the observations drawn from the structured desk review on system approaches and on efforts towards system strengthening, and the findings from KIIs with GEG programme stakeholders about the GEG programme's contribution to strengthening the social protection system in Uganda. The findings are grouped under the research questions they serve to answer. Furthermore, to better structure the findings, we look at the contribution of GEG across three levels: policy, programme, and administrative, as suggested in the literature.²⁴ All findings are further elaborated below.

4.1. GEG programme overview

The Government of Uganda (GoU), supported by development partners has defined an ambitious goal for itself, i.e. becoming “a modern and prosperous country within 30 years”.²⁵ This vision is formalised in the Uganda Vision 2040 and operationalised through a series of six national development plans (NDP) of which three have been published already in 2010/2011, 2015/2016 and 2020/2021. Social protection consideration are a critical component of the NDPs. In this way, GoU first recognises the contribution of social protection in lifting the population out of poverty, closing the inequality gap and developing human capital, all of which are pre-requisites to its 2040 vision of a modern and prosperous country. At the same time it strengthens the social protection sector's coherence, while maximising linkages between social protection and other development sectors.²⁶

A robust example of such a collaborative approach to system strengthening is the GirlsEmpoweringGirls (GEG) programme, Uganda's first urban social protection programme for

²⁴ (UNICEF & WB, 2013)

²⁵ (Government of Uganda, 2013)

²⁶ (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG-DEVCO), 2015)

adolescent girls. To support the most vulnerable communities in Kampala, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), in partnership with UNICEF, launched GEG, in alignment with the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) and the overall Uganda Vision 2040.

The GEG programme works to ensure that girls transition safely into adulthood, receive education and training, and are empowered to achieve their goals. It does so by supporting in-school and out-of-school adolescent girls living in Kampala, providing avenues to empower girls through a network of peer mentors, engaging them through education, training, and referrals to support services, and enabling them to pursue better opportunities for their future through a small cash transfer. KCCA leads the programme at the central and division levels. At the parish level, the programme is implemented by a network of Lead and Peer Mentors, directly overseen by two civil society partners: Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation (TMF), responsible for supporting in-school girls, and the Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL), responsible for supporting the out-of-school girls.²⁷

The implementation of GEG holds an unprecedented opportunity to expand the institutional capacity for addressing the multiple vulnerabilities in urban Uganda in a sustainable way. Ultimately, the programme seeks to contribute to the strengthening of the social protection system, and efforts are being made to move the programme from pilot to policy through evidence generation, systems strengthening, and improving synergies between social protection and public finance management.²⁸

4.2. Social protection system strengthening through GEG

1. How is GEG strengthening the social protection system in Uganda?

Policy level

Finding 1.1.1. GEG is strengthening the social protection system in Uganda through the provision of social protection, which systemically addresses the needs of adolescents. Several key strategic documents developed and operationalised over the past decade, such as the National Social Protection Policy 2015 (NSPP), NDP II and NDP III, recognise youth as a particularly vulnerable segment of the population, faced with persistent challenges, such as inadequate professional skills, limited access to assets, and limited access to critical health services. These key strategic documents focus on the need for investment in adolescents' human capital development to achieve the promise of the demographic dividend. For example, the Uganda Vision 2040 aims to accelerate the country's socio-economic transformation through education, gender equality, and

²⁷ (UNICEF Uganda, 2019, Uganda's First Urban Social Protection Programme for Adolescent Girls)

²⁸ (EPRI, 2020)

women's empowerment for socio-economic transformation, among others.²⁹ The Second National Development Plan (NDP II), which guided the operationalisation of the Uganda Vision 2040 from 2014/2015 to 2020/2021 prioritised investment in five areas with the most significant multiplier effects on the economy, and identified human capital development as one of the five investment areas.³⁰ Building on the results of NDP II, NDP III, which guides the operationalisation of the Uganda Vision 2040 from 2020/2021 to 2024/2025 continues to promote the development of human capital, as one of Uganda's main competitive advantages.³¹

As Uganda's urban population grows, urgent action is required to ensure that public services, including social protection, education, and health services, meet the needs of urban dwellers. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that adolescents, who constitute one-quarter of the population³² (23.6 per cent), have access to these services so that they may one day contribute to a vibrant economy. Otherwise, without enhanced planning and comprehensive investments, urban poverty may well deepen in the next decades. Ensuring that public services, including social protection, education, and health services, meet urban dwellers' needs and, particularly, adolescent girls in Kampala is exactly what GEG aims to achieve. GEG supports in-school and out-of-school adolescent girls living in Kampala, by providing avenues to empower girls through a network of peer mentors, engaging them through education, training, and referrals to support services, and enabling them to pursue better opportunities for their future through a small cash transfer. This constitutes as a comprehensive social protection response, for ensuring adolescent girls, in the urban environment of Kampala, transition safely into adulthood, receive education and training, and are empowered to achieve their goals.³³ In addition, GEG, the first social protection programme in Uganda directly targeting children, takes a system strengthening approach to not only ensure movement from pilot to policy but also to build upon existing systems scaffolding, and improve services through direct feedback loops.

Finding 1.1.2. UNICEF's commitment to long-term projects empowers the government to develop programmes that meet policy objectives more sustainably. The achievement of policy objectives in the social protection sector can be a long-term process, due to the complex nature of challenges and vulnerabilities these policies normally seek to address. This is particularly relevant for policies that target the transformation of harmful social norms through a focus on child protection, gender equality, or youth empowerment. The process relies on long-term commitment and synchronised actions from the side of governments and development partners alike. However, more often than

²⁹ (Government of Uganda, 2013)

³⁰ (National Planning Authority, 2015)

³¹ (National Planning Authority, 2020)

³² UBOS (2018). *The Uganda National Household survey report 2016/17*. Kampala, Uganda

³³ (UNICEF Uganda, 2019, Uganda's First Urban Social Protection Programme for Adolescent Girls)

not, the government infrastructure for developing and pursuing policies comprises institutions that can plan and deliver on short or medium-term. Moreover, institutions are incentivised for short and medium-term achievements, which are easier to measure and quantify. Understandable, this contradiction in what is necessary for systemic change and how current government institutions are set to act, creates obstacles for the achievement of policy goals and overall for bringing to fruition of any system strengthening efforts. Thus, development partners are in a critical position to balance this contradiction in timeframe and support governments through strategic, long-term commitments.

The GEG programme is a great example of longer-term collaboration with the government of Uganda through the KCCA. The multi-year commitment to technical and financial support from UNICEF for the implementation of the programme has been identified by key informants as a driver of systemic change, allowing KCCA to develop robust plans for the realisation of the programme's objectives. Although for development partners, making multi-year commitments can be challenging as multi-year funding is often not guaranteed, when possible, it is strongly recommended.

Finding 1.1.3. Policy advocacy activities and robust M&E systems are important contributors to policy sensitisation. By capturing evidence on the positive socio-economic changes related to child-sensitive urban social protection policies, stakeholders can gather public and political support and keep the topic high on the agenda of decision-makers. Furthermore, policy advocacy efforts are highly dependent on programme implementers' ability to document programme results, both the positive and negative results, gather evidence of the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned to make the necessary adjustments, and required changes to the programme design.

Within the context of GEG, key informants highlighted the importance of several activities to increase the programme's visibility and impact. Among these, the Urban Social Protection Research Symposium, held in December 2020, stands out as a key event. The Symposium intended to deepen the stakeholders' awareness and understanding of the importance of investment in urban social protection in Uganda and the need and benefits of incorporating gender and child-sensitive considerations in the design of social protection interventions. The Symposium brought together policymakers, government officials, and high-level representatives from various ministries. Both the event and the run-up towards the event were identified as an important opportunity to unify government actors around a subject and spotlight the topic of child-sensitive urban social policies. One of the key informants from KCCA also stressed that the Symposium could be considered a first step to informing government bodies other than KCCA on the programme, as a resource mobilisation effort for programme continuation and expansion.

In preparation for the Symposium, data collected during programme implementation were instrumental for highlighting the most important contributions and challenges, and how they have been overcome. For collecting this data, the GEG programme has developed and implemented a

robust M&E system. M&E tools were developed collaboratively and updated regularly following feedback from those using them in the field. Ultimately, by facilitating high-level policy dialogue through policy advocacy activities and supporting evidence collection during implementation, the GEG programme promotes the strengthening of social protection systems by incorporating urban child-sensitive consideration into national development planning and programming.

Programme level

Finding 1.2.1. Integrating programme management and coordination structures into existing government structures is an opportunity to strengthen the existing systems through increased accountability and ownership. The concept of systems strengthening assumes that there is an existing system in place, with various degrees of functionality, which can be built upon and further supported. Social protection practitioners support systems strengthening by integrating interventions and their related programme management, coordination, and implementation roles and responsibilities within existing government structures, and fostering government leadership over programmes. The existing structures are encouraged to take ownership over programme design, programme outcomes, and accountability for programme processes. For GEG, it was key that the programme management and coordination structures were integrated into the management and coordination structures of KCCA to maximise the sustainability and potential future scalability of the programme. As such, KCCA, with support from UNICEF, is the government structure responsible for the management and coordination of the programme at the central and division level. The programme staff's tasks and responsibilities are in addition to their existing roles and responsibilities within KCCA.

At the central level, the responsibility for steering all major programme activities and representing the programme externally falls with the Director and Deputy Director of Gender, Community Services and Production (GCP) within the KCCA, who act as the GEG Programme Director and Manager, respectively, and are supported by an M&E Specialist. The M&E Specialist is a position funded by UNICEF, and this is the only programme staff member specifically hired for the programme and tasked with supporting the day-to-day activities across all levels of implementation. Furthermore, the Programme Manager and the M&E Specialist are supported in their programme related tasks by five KCCA staff, each with their own expertise, and representing different KCCA departments. Findings from the KIIs with KCCA show that in their view, the programme management and coordination at the central level have been relatively effective. However, the effectiveness and commitment to the programme does vary across the different departments.

At the division level, KCCA probation, education, and public health officers are responsible for the supervision of programme activities. Findings from the KIIs with KCCA show that programme supervision at the division levels has seen some challenges. The following three main root causes

for the challenges were identified: (i) insufficient understanding and appreciation for the programme; (ii) a lack of resources for the additional workload; and (iii) programme targets not being fully included in the KCCA performance review matrix of the division level programme staff. Besides stressing the causes of the challenges, the key informants also mentioned that the challenges could be resolved through comprehensive engagement with high-level KCCA management to further embed and mainstream the GEG programme into KCCA structures.

Finding 1.2.2. Operational support from UNICEF has significantly contributed to successful coordination among implementing partners. The strategic pairing between international technical support and national expertise within government-led social protection structures facilitates skills transfer that eventually strengthens national knowledge and expertise in social protection programming.³⁴ By fostering an environment of close collaboration and operational support, different partners and stakeholders gain technical knowledge but are also equipped with the soft skills for improved communication and coordination. The creation of a pool of national knowledge and expertise is key in systems strengthening.

For the GEG programme, UNICEF is providing both technical and financial support. Particularly from a technical perspective, key informants have identified UNICEF as a highly engaged and collaborative partner, continuously providing hands-on technical assistance and operational support. Throughout the programme's design and implementation phases, UNICEF has been facilitating a sharing of knowledge and expertise with KCCA programme staff, as well as implementing partners TMF and UYDEL. Management and partner meetings are carried out regularly on a weekly basis and sometimes more frequently, to discuss ongoing programme operations, and to identify and solve challenges as a team. Various key informants identified UNICEF's active participation in these meetings as having significantly contributed to the success of the programme; in particular, the hands-on support by UNICEF during the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as crucial in safeguarding programme continuation.

Administrative level

Finding 1.3.1. Integrated management information systems (MIS) hold untapped potential for streamlining programme processes and harmonising processes across programmes. MIS are instrumental for harmonising and integrating programme processes involving the collection, storage, and management of information about programme beneficiaries, such as registration, enrolment, payments, and handling complaints and grievances. MIS can serve to better manage programme data and, depending on the complexity of the system, can potentially automate certain processes, such as verifying the eligibility of beneficiaries, updating beneficiaries'

³⁴ (OECD, 2019)

information, validating enrolment, generating payrolls, and resolving complaints, thereby improving programme efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Furthermore, the potential of strong to link humanitarian and social protection systems MIS, has recently been highlighted in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, by the Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19 - Expert Advice Helpline (SPACE), a consortium of experts belonging to the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ).³⁵

Recognising the added value of collecting and managing programme data, to support the gathering of evidence and to facilitate data-driven decision making, the development of a GEG specific MIS has been a key requirement from the programme design phase. Thus, programme data has been systematically collected through administrative data collection tools specifically developed and centralised in a programme database. The data collection comprises of coordinated Peer and Lead Mentor surveys and monthly and bi-annual reporting surveys for the partner NGOs. GEG relies on Peer Mentors for collecting data using the survey application Kobo Toolbox. The data so collected is then compiled by Lead Mentors and centralised in an Excel dashboard, which is analysed and managed by KCCA.

During consultations, key informants identified ways of further developing the GEG MIS, such as streamlining the data analysis process, identifying lessons learned from the analysis, and communicating data findings as well as moving towards a more technologically flexible solution for better-streamlining programme processes. Furthermore, as Uganda launched the government's National Single Registry for Social Protection, intended to strengthen planning, implementing, and monitoring of social protection programmes, looking for integration points between the GEG MIS and the National Single Registry for Social Protection is highly recommended.

Finding 1.3.2. Assessing programme risks and identifying risk mitigation measures prior to implementation can help safeguard that challenges encountered during implementation are successfully addressed. Due to a better understanding of the components, interactions and boundaries of a system, a characteristic of a systems approach is the ability to identify potential risks and mitigation measures in advance. Identifying the potential categories of risks a programme is susceptible to and including mitigation measures from the design phase of the programme is essential in determining the ability of a programme to respond quickly and effectively to challenges encountered during implementation.

For the GEG programme, one such challenge rose during the identification and registration process of out-of-school girls. The identification of eligible out-of-school beneficiaries proved challenging for the following four reasons: (i) a large number of girls did not have the necessary

³⁵ (Schoenmaker, Barca, Longhurst, & Holmes, 2020)

documentation, and were unable to identify an appropriate caregiver or trustee to serve as the cash recipient; (ii) it was challenging to estimate the amount of time a girl had been out of school, and the likelihood of a girl returning to school to determine eligibility; (iii) the data captured during the identification exercise in many cases did not align with the data provided during the registration activities, and there were, for example, large discrepancies in the given age; and finally, (iv) the transient habitation of many potential out-of-school beneficiaries posed an additional challenge, as in the period between the identification and registration process, many girls no longer resided in the location where they were originally identified. This was further exacerbated by outbreak of the pandemic, which paused ongoing enrolment activities.

As a result, the programme implementers needed to adapt identification, registration, and enrolment procedures to respond to the challenges. Therefore, an intensive verification exercise, often on a case-by-case basis, was put in place to validate the out-of-school girls as programme beneficiaries.

4.3. Social protection system strengthening for GEG

2. How has the systems approach to social protection in Uganda impacted the success of GEG?

Finding 2.1. Empathy played an important role and was present in the partnership approach between KCCA, UNICEF, and implementing partners, and not only generated an equitable partnership approach, but was also crucial in the systems approach to designing and implementing the programme. Within the field of neuroscience, the domain in which empathy has been explored extensively, empathy has shown to enhance the connectedness between individuals through the unconscious sharing of neuropathways that dissolves the barriers between two different entities, encouraging the integration of affective and cognitive consciousness.³⁶ Beyond neuroscience, the role of empathy is only beginning to be explored. However, GEG may be a prime example of how empathy can contribute to public policy.

Within the design and implementation of GEG, empathy and the willingness to work and learn from each other in a way that taps into each other's skills and attributes between different parties was a shared key takeaway from the KIIs. No single entity may carry out all processes single-handedly, and empathy was identified as a key driver of successful coordination. The joint responsibility that each organisation felt for programme success and each organisation's involvement in nearly all programme processes was instrumental. It is only through such close collaboration and direct involvement in all the GEG programme processes that the partners can reach a level of understanding deep enough to enable each one of the partners to build onto each

³⁶ (Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2011)

other's potential and each other's capabilities. Empathy towards each other, and an understanding that all organisations worked within their capacities and limits towards the achievement of the same goal, to the best of their abilities, fostered a culture of cooperation and a willingness to go beyond each organisation's scope of work to assist others in the delivery of theirs; and with that, strengthen the success of the programme overall.

Finding 2.2. A strong communication strategy, both internally across the different GEG stakeholders and towards the public, is critical for directly responding to programme challenges on the ground, including the COVID-19 crisis. Consistent two-way communication between partners and the public throughout programme implementation was also identified as a key factor for programme success. Through a strong communication strategy, programme implementers stay informed and aware of the programme's progress, identify challenges early on and respond quickly, avoid the spread of misinformation, and keep stakeholders and the public engaged.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in unexpected and not yet fully quantified ways. Governments have attempted to limit the spread of the virus through various measures, such as partial to full lockdowns, closing of schools, and imposing limits on public attendance of events or gatherings. Uganda has been no exception, and a lockdown was imposed in the country, which restricted the movement of people to a minimum, particularly during the first few months after the pandemic was declared. For GEG, the lockdown impacted how programme implementers conducted their tasks, and created obstacles in the way certain programme processes could be conducted, such as identification, registration and mentoring. However, there were also several positive outcomes of the lockdown.

For GEG, clear communication and reporting lines and established communication channels between KCCA, UNICEF and implementing partners on the ground, with TMF and UYDEL being key for the management, coordination, and implementation of the programme. The existing communication structure allowed programme management to identify and respond to challenges on the ground in a timely manner, and is therefore a model for systems strengthening approaches. Through consistent email communication, set weekly management meetings and bi-weekly partners meetings, KCCA, UNICEF and the implementing partners have shared information, discussed programme progress, and identified solutions for programme challenges in a collaborative manner. This approach enabled GEG management to identify challenges, such as the difficulties in the targeting process of out-of-school girls, and adapt to obstacles such as those introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 crisis, KCCA and UNICEF introduced direct communication lines between the programme management team and Mentors, in the form of simple and anonymous surveys sent directly to the Mentors' phones to collect first-hand information from implementers and allow Mentors to directly discuss their experiences with the programme, including candidly sharing feedback as KCCA and UNICEF. Moreover, according to key stakeholders, an increase in communication efficiency among the implementing parties could be observed during the crisis.

More specifically, as meetings were moved online, commuting time for programme staff reduced to the minimum, making it more likely that all members could participate and engage with each other. The switch to online meetings was possible due to, among others, the pre-established communication structures. Programme staff and implementing partners had already developed the habit of engaging regularly, sharing information, and collaborating on different activities. As such, switching the means of communication to an online medium could be done rapidly and with minimum disruption.

Finding 2.3. Resolving the challenges faced following the interrupted collaboration with GiveDirectly demonstrated the importance of government ownership and the programme's capacity through a transfer of responsibilities. The international NGO, GiveDirectly, was brought into the programme at the same time as TMF and UYDEL, and they were responsible for the disbursement and follow-up of the cash transfers. In September 2020, the government suspended them for reasons unrelated to the GEG programme, and uncertainty about when they would get re-instated caused a lot of uncertainty and disruptions to the programme. In addition, GiveDirectly cash transfer management platform was also used to host all the registration and enrolment data for programme participants, so when the out-of-school registration activities were resuming, their suspension also affected the enrolment and onboarding plans. After many months of coordination and follow-up, it became clear that the suspension would last for longer than just a few months, so KCCA and UNICEF analysed options for alternative management of user data and enrolment, disbursement of cash transfers, and follow-up mechanisms. Together with TMF and UYDEL, KCCA and UNICEF devised a strategy that would allow the programme to continue operations through support from the implementing partners and the institutionalisation of the cash transfer distribution by KCCA. KCCA made a disbursement of cash transfers from 2020 during the first quarter of 2021, and the first batch of cash transfers for 2021 during the second quarter of the year. The successful management of the cash transfer component by KCCA following the sudden suspension of GiveDirectly attests to KCCA's commitment to and ownership of the programme.

Finding 2.4. Increasing visibility within other government departments and ministries contributes to the future scalability and funding for the programme. GEG is the first urban social protection programme for adolescent girls in Uganda, and it aims to pave the way for scaling up government-led child-sensitive social protection efforts throughout the country. Contingent upon funding and early evaluations of programme results, it is anticipated that following the roll-out of the first cohort of girls, the programme can be scaled-up and delivered in additional parishes and schools across Kampala or Uganda to reach more girls.

The scaling of the GEG programme is also dependent on sustained advocacy efforts. To support these advocacy efforts and increase visibility of the programme, key KCCA stakeholders as well as one of the GEG partner, have been included in the Ugandan delegation to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) International Change Programme (ITP): Social Protection for Sustainable Development, either as participants or member of the steering

committee. Also part of the Ugandan delegation are government officials from ministries, government agencies and departments, and non-governmental organisations who work at a strategic level on reform processes in the social protection sector. As a direct result of the increased visibility of GEG among key government officials, the Ugandan delegation has identified expanding social protection coverage for adolescent girls through GEG as of three key priority area of the five-year Sida ITP change programme for Uganda. Therefore, creating networks of relevant stakeholders and expanding linkages between programmes, policies and initiatives is critical for building comprehensive social protection systems.

5. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to highlight the importance of a system strengthening approach to social protection and, more specifically, to illustrate the contribution of the GEG programme to strengthening the social protection system in Uganda. The GEG programme illustrates how social protection programming design choices and implementation can contribute to long-term investments in systems strengthening. Lessons learnt from the experiences of the GEG programme in the context of urban child-sensitive social protection can help standardise processes, operating procedures, and protocols, also across other policy areas in Kampala and in Uganda in general.

The first research question probes into the lessons learnt from the GEG programme in terms of strengthening the social protection system in Uganda. The lessons learned were reviewed and structured across the three levels of analysis highlighted in the analytical framework, namely policy, programme, and administration. First, from a policy level perspective, the analysis focused on, among others, policy coherence, the common and shared vision among actors, and coordination, among others. The strong policy coherence in the social protection sector in Uganda, UNICEF's commitment to long-term investments, and the GEG programme policy advocacy efforts supported by recognising the importance of an M&E system, have been identified as the main factors enabling GEG to adopt a systems strengthening approach. Secondly, at the programme level, the analysis highlighted coordination and harmonisation - horizontally among programmes and vertically among different levels of programme implementation. The capacity to coordinate and harmonise was illustrated through the integration of GEG programme management and coordination structures into existing government structures. Furthermore, the technical and operational support provided by UNICEF throughout programme implementation has contributed to strengthening the existing government structures and capacities, whilst building the capacity of implementing civil society organisations (TMF and UYDEL). Thirdly, at an administrative level of analysis, this paper has looked at the integration of tools and mechanisms to implement programme processes. A more comprehensive use of MIS for programme processes' streamlining and harmonisation was identified as a point of improvement for systems strengthening. Moreover,

early assessment of risks and identification of mitigation measures prior to implementation have proved efficient in rapidly adapting to programme challenges.

The second research question zoomed in on how the systems approach to social protection in Uganda impacted the success of the GEG programme. The first important finding highlighted the role of empathy in systems building and strengthening. The second finding stressed the importance of a strong communication strategy, both internally and towards the public, which facilitated close synergy between stakeholders and a shared understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations. The need to rapidly respond to challenges on the ground, including those brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the importance of well-functioning protocols and communication channels and their critical role in the strengthening of social protection systems.

The third finding outlined how the unexpected, interrupted collaboration with GiveDirectly created the premisses for strengthening social protection systems, through increased government ownership and institutionalisation. Finally, the fourth finding provides insight into how increasing visibility within other government departments and ministries contributes to future scalability and funding for the programme and for social protection more broadly.

The academic discussion with which this paper started intended to provide the theoretical backdrop of the research paper by clarifying concepts and providing an overview of the academic discussion so far on what a systems approach brings to social protection, the benefits and challenges and how it can be achieved. Afterwards, the findings singled out during GEG stakeholder consultations, intended to ground the discussion in practical examples of systems strengthening in the social protection system of Uganda. In this way, this research paper aims first to remove some of the ambiguity coming from the excessive and indiscriminatory use of concepts such as 'strengthening of social protection systems' or 'integration of social protection systems'. Systems approaches are broad enough to cover a multitude of pathways for achieving strong, integrated systems for social protection. However, it is not sufficient to replicate what has worked somewhere else. Adaptation to context, planning and synchronisation of efforts between stakeholders is key for the strengthening of systems in social protection. Second, this paper aims to synthesis the experiences of the GEG programme in relation to system approaches in Uganda and to add it to the international body of knowledge on the topic. As it was observed in the development of this paper, currently there is limited data on the outcomes of different pathways toward systems strengthening in social protection. While a complete assessment of the GEG programme was outside the scope of this paper, the findings drawn from desk review of documentation and KIIs serve to indicate the advantages of working within a system approach, such as a coherent policy environment, close collaboration among stakeholders, flexibility to change, etc. What constituted as an advantage in the case of GEG can be transformed into an active strategy towards systems strengthening somewhere else, or as an avenue for further research.

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