

OP-ED

G20 talks: South Africa must raise Africa's voice for a social protection Global Fund

By Markus Kaltenborn and Letlhokwa George Mpedi • 19 April 2021



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (right) welcomes Finance Minister of South Africa Tito Mboweni (left) in the Chancellery for the G20 ...

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People living in the world's poorest countries, who are particularly at risk of poverty, cannot wait until it becomes possible to provide stable financing for social protection programmes from domestic resources alone. They need such protection right now, especially in light of the devastation wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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As is well documented, the Covid-19 outbreak has sparked fears of an impending economic crisis and recession of unprecedented proportions.

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The rippling effects are already being felt across various spheres, as restrictions such as physical distancing, self-isolation and travel bans have led to a reduced workforce across economic sectors and job losses. No sector has been left unscathed, and countries across the world are grappling with ways to respond to the scourge.

Wherever lockdown measures have been taken to prevent the spread of the virus, people are no longer able to work, or not work at full capacity.

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The crisis has not only posed huge challenges to health and economic systems around the world. It has also led to a renewed risk of millions of people falling below the poverty line. In the midst of this, well-functioning social protection systems are needed to provide at least partial compensation for the associated loss of income.

Across the globe, governments have made efforts to provide additional social benefits to those parts of their populations most affected by the pandemic. Numerous such measures have also been taken on the African continent. But for some countries, it is extremely difficult to mobilise sufficient domestic resources to help people cope with economic and social hardship, for example through additional or expanded cash transfer and cash-for-work programmes, or the restructuring of school feeding programmes.

For some time now, there has been the idea of setting up an international fund to provide low-income countries with financial assistance that they need in times of crisis, such as the current pandemic, to keep their social protection systems functioning.

The proposal to set up such a fund, put forward by UN Special Rapporteurs Olivier de Schutter and Magdalena Sepulveda almost 10 years ago, has now been taken up by the French government. It will be the subject of this year's discussions at the G20, the group of major industrialised and emerging economies, and the UN Human Rights Council. The Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, an international civil society alliance that includes many African organisations, recently issued an [appeal](http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/civil-society-call/) (<http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/civil-society-call/>) supporting this initiative.

What exactly does the idea of such a new Global Fund stand for? Its main task would be to temporarily contribute to the financing of basic social protection systems ("social protection floors") if low-income countries do not have sufficient financial resources of their own (especially tax revenues) for such systems.

According to the [Social Protection Floor Index](http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/2020/04/social-protection-floor-index-2020/) (<http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/2020/04/social-protection-floor-index-2020/>), it is currently mainly some African countries that would have to devote a particularly large proportion of their GDP to this if they wanted to ensure essential healthcare and basic income security for all their inhabitants.

The fund would also help in special crises (e.g. natural disasters, pandemics or economic crises) in those countries that would otherwise be forced to scale back their social protection programmes due to



It goes without saying that social protection is a task that must, in principle, be funded from the state's resources. Therefore, international support – regardless of whether it would be provided through bilateral or multilateral programmes such as a Global Fund – can only ever be a transitional solution. Insofar, it would also be important that intensive efforts continue to be made to improve domestic resource mobilisation.

But people living in the world's poorest countries, who are particularly at risk of poverty, cannot wait until it becomes possible to provide stable financing for social protection programmes from domestic resources alone. They need such protection right now.

South Africa is the only African country in the G20, so it has the honourable – but also challenging – role of representing the interests of all Africans.

It is therefore crucial that the international community supports these economically weaker countries in their efforts to achieve these objectives. Otherwise, Sustainable Development Goal 1.3 (implement social security systems for all and ensure broad coverage of the poor and vulnerable) can hardly be achieved within the targeted time frame of 2030.

Now, of course, one may well ask: is this yet another attempt by the North to impose its sociopolitical ideas on the Global South? This critical objection comes to mind when one considers that many social protection programmes, especially on the African continent, have come into being in recent years with the help of Western or Western-dominated development organisations.

But international support need not be tantamount to foreign domination. It depends entirely on the design of the new financing institution whether African governments will be able to implement their own ideas on the conception of social protection programmes in cooperation with the fund.

In this context, the principle of country ownership will be of great importance: if this principle becomes a key element of the fund's governance structure and is indeed taken seriously in the practical implementation of its policies, there is a chance of setting up an institution that does not run the risk of perpetuating or even reinforcing neocolonial patterns through external dominance in the allocation of funds and programme design.

Instead, it could then succeed in financially strengthening social protection systems that countries have developed based on their social policy ideas and on the priorities in their national social protection action plans.

Within the African Union, a whole series of concepts and instruments has been developed in recent years that formulate important guidelines in this regard: the Social Policy Framework for Africa published in 2008; the Yaoundé Tripartite Declaration on the implementation of a Social Protection Floor from 2010; the Social Protection Plan for the Informal Economy and Rural Workers adopted the following year; the Agenda 2063 (whose statements on social protection largely correspond to the global consensus, found in the 2012 ILO Social Protection Floor Recommendation); the 2015 Addis Ababa Declaration on Social Protection for Inclusive Development; and last, but not least, the Protocol on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection, an additional protocol to the African Charter on Human

All these documents make it clear how much importance African governments attach to the issue and that they are also working intensively on their concepts. Thus, a strong emphasis on the principle of country ownership in the fund's governance structure would be a prerequisite for actually implementing the ideas of social protection that have been developed on the continent.

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The South African government should seize the opportunity to support the establishment of a Global Fund that will enable the economically weaker countries of the continent to pursue ambitious goals concerning the social protection coverage of their population. Effective poverty reduction through social protection can only be achieved through solidarity – through global solidarity, but also regional solidarity among African countries.

Prior to the writing of this article, we exchanged views on the topic with the Alliance of NPO Networks. The Alliance explicitly supports the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors' call for the establishment of a new Global Fund. The fact that this initiative is strongly backed by civil society should certainly be an important signal to South African political leaders. **DM**

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