

Research Report: Perceptions
of Challenges and Evidence Needs
for Social Protection Among Policy
Stakeholders in Uganda





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SUMMARY

The Government of Uganda defines social protection (SP) as public and private interventions that address vulnerabilities associated with being or becoming poor, with the aim to promote an adequate standard of living for all citizens throughout their lives. Over the past decade, the country has introduced and expanded SP programs for vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, much of the target population for these programs continues to experience heightened poverty and vulnerability. SP coverage for various eligible groups in the country continues to fall short of expectations, exposing millions of marginalized individuals and households to hardship, suffering, poor health and educational outcomes, and socioeconomic shocks.

This report presents findings from a study on the Ugandan policy and program stakeholders' perspectives of SP policy and landscape in Uganda, the challenges associated with developing and delivering SP initiatives in the country, and the evidence needed to devise effective SP programs. Understanding key policy stakeholders' views in these areas is critical for efforts aimed at improving policy design, promoting evidence-based learning and interventions,

Recommendations that emerged from the study include the following:

identifying evidence and data needs, assisting in the development of practical solutions, and better adapting policies to local realities.

The study findings suggest that Uganda's policy and program stakeholders have a robust understanding of the goal and function of SP and recognize its significance in light of the nation's high rate of poverty, sizable youth and informal labor population, high risk of natural disasters, and its history of conflict and displacement. While they appreciate the country's burgeoning SP sector, stakeholders characterized the sector as marred by poor targeting, siloed efforts, exclusionary program participation requirements, corruption, limited use of evidence in SP work, bureaucratic delays, lack of a consistent or unified SP legal framework, negative public perceptions of SP, poor community engagement, and a lack of funding. Interviewed study participants pointed to a need for evidence-based lessons and insights from the nation's current SP initiatives, accessible evidence products for SP policy stakeholders, and current and reliable data on poor and needy populations of Uganda, their vulnerabilities, and effective strategies for addressing them.

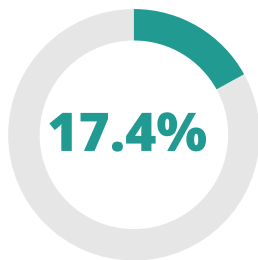
- **Scale up the National Single Registry** and ensure interoperability with other databases.
- **Invest in multi-method local data collection and data-sharing protocols** among government, NGOs, donors, and other actors in the country's SP landscape
- **Regularly update poverty and vulnerability assessments** through nationally representative studies and satellite data
- **Develop and enforce a legal SP framework** and regulatory standards to ensure consistency, coordination, and accountability across all actors
- **Implement life-course, holistic SP programs** that address the intersectional needs of citizens and communities
- **Develop and maintain accessible, user-friendly, centralized, disaggregated, and regularly updated SP data systems**
- **Mainstream SP priorities** in national and sectoral development plans and strengthen integration with grassroots governance structures to ensure ongoing visibility, oversight, and program sustainability
- **Develop accessible, locally translated, and user-friendly data** and evidence products that are tailored for policy actors and stakeholders as well as communities and the general public.

INTRODUCTION

Social protection (SP)—the policies and initiatives that safeguard individuals and households from poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion—has emerged as a cornerstone of global development policy and a key component of international poverty reduction strategies.¹ In Africa, the past two decades have seen an explosion of SP programs aimed at improving health, social, economic, and food security outcomes. However, coverage remains low in the continent, with most countries spending less than 5% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on SP and, as of 2020, with only 17.4% of eligible populations receiving at least one SP benefit compared to a global average of about 47%.² SP systems in these contexts are also typically characterized by fragmented donor-driven programs, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient data infrastructure.^{3,4,5}



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Uganda's experience reflects these broader continental trends. SP implementation in the country remains hampered by fragmented delivery, limited legal enforceability, and a lack of gender-sensitive design.⁶ The majority of vulnerable people, including women in rural areas, people in informal employment, or those living with disabilities, remain at the margins of formal SP systems. Considering Uganda's commitment to global, regional, and national frameworks, as well as the imperative for current development frameworks to include objectives that guarantee all deserving groups are included in SP programs, there is need for ongoing learning and adaptation to create SP policies that are effective and fair for all.

The study on which this report is based responds to the growing demand for more evidence to support the design and delivery of effective SP programs. The report summarizes the results of the study, which examined SP policy and program stakeholders' views and understanding of the challenges and evidence needs related to the design and implementation of SP programs. The sections that follow describe the Ugandan SP context as well as the study's objectives, methodologies, findings, and policy implications.

1 <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/social-protection#:~:text=Social%20protection%2C%20or%20social%20security,general%20poverty%20and%20social%20exclusion>

2 International Labor Office (2022). World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Regional companion report for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. ILO: Geneva.

3 Holmes, R., and Lwanga-Ntale, C. (2012). Social protection in Africa: A review of social protection issues in research. Policy and programming trends and key governance issues in social protection. Nairobi: Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) & Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

4 Del Ninno, C., et al. (2016). Social Protection Programs for Africa's Drylands. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

5 Devereux, S. (2020). Policy Pollination: A Brief History of Social Protection's Brief History in Africa. IDS Working Paper 543, Centre for Social Protection Working Paper 018. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

6 INCLUDE Platform. (2019). Uganda Social Protection Sector Review 2019. INCLUDE Knowledge Platform.



2024

Uganda's National Development Plans (NDPs), five-year plans produced as part of the Vision 2040 strategy, also commit to ensuring that SP is in place and implemented across all sectors.

2023

Third National Development Plan (NDPIII 2020/21–2024/25), with provisions to expand the coverage of social assistance to 50% of the vulnerable population by 2030.

Other key frameworks include

National Social Protection Policy (NSPP-2015), which maps out the framework for establishing a comprehensive and coordinated SP system

Social protection in Uganda

The Government of Uganda defines SP as public and private interventions that address vulnerabilities associated with being or becoming poor, with the aim to promote an adequate standard of living for all citizens throughout their lives.⁷ Over the past decade, the country has introduced and expanded SP programs for vulnerable groups to secure their livelihoods, reduce poverty, and enhance their well-being. The right to SP for all Ugandans is set out in the 1995 Constitution, specifically under Objectives VII, XI (i) and XIV (b). In the country, SP has also been a crucial component of development initiatives. For example, Uganda's Vision 2040 emphasizes the relevance of SP in addressing risks and vulnerabilities based on age, socioeconomic class, gender, climate disaster exposure, and cultural norms. Uganda's National Development Plans (NDPs), five-year plans produced as part of the Vision 2040 strategy, also commit to ensuring that SP is in place and implemented across all sectors. The most recent iteration, the NDP IV (2025/2026–2029/30), calls for increased attention to the needs of women and other vulnerable groups to alleviate poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. This right is reflected in the Third National Development Plan (NDPIII 2020/21–2024/25), with provisions to expand the coverage of social assistance to 50% of the vulnerable population by 2030. Other key frameworks include the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP-2015), which maps out the framework for establishing a comprehensive and coordinated SP system covering social insurance and social assistance; the National Social Protection Strategy (2023–2028); and stipulations on income support for vulnerable population groups outlined in the Uganda Vision 2040. In addition, Uganda's SP efforts have continued to align with regional and global development agendas, including the Ouagadougou Declaration and Plan of Action on Employment and Poverty Alleviation in Africa (2004), the African Union Social Policy Framework (2008), and the UN Post-2015 Agenda.

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) coordinates social protection in Uganda, while the mandate for SP delivery falls to national ministries and local authorities.^{3,7} The Office of the Prime Minister has both an oversight and coordination function, as well as responsibility for implementing the labor-intensive public works programs. Development partners have also played an important role in the development of the SP sector in the country. SP is currently structured along two main pillars according to the National Social Protection Policy: social security (including non-contributory programs and contributory programs), and social care and support services. Uganda's flagship social assistance programs include the Senior Citizens' Grant, the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, and the Development Response to

⁷ Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2015). The National Social Protection Policy, MGLSD, Uganda.

Displacement Impacts Project,⁸ as well as a number of smaller direct income support programs such as:



- Social Care and Support Services for resettlement of abandoned street children, care and protection of children in conflict with the law, and care and support to disabled persons, older persons, and survivors of gender-based violence
- Initiatives that address vulnerabilities facing the unemployed, women, youth, and disabled (Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Program, Youth Livelihood Program, Universal Primary Education, Universal Secondary Education), and 60 days of paid maternity leave for women in formal employment.



In 2020, an estimated 21.9% of the population lived on less than \$1 a day; yet by 2022, only 6.2% of the population received at least one SP benefit.



Currently, expenditure on SP in the country stands at 0.15% of GDP, well below the sub-Saharan African average and the lower-middle-income group benchmark of 1.5% of GDP.

Considerable progress has been made in Uganda to reduce levels of extreme poverty and improve the well-being and survival of children and other vulnerable people. Between 1992 and 2017, sustained economic growth was matched by an unprecedented reduction in the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line. Yet, coverage of direct income support programs in Uganda is extremely low by regional and global standards. In 2020, an estimated 21.9% of the population lived on less than \$1 a day;⁹ yet by 2022, only 6.2% of the population received at least one SP benefit.¹⁰ Currently, expenditure on SP in the country stands at 0.15% of GDP, well below the sub-Saharan African average and the lower-middle-income group benchmark of 1.5% of GDP.¹¹ In addition, the effectiveness of available SP programs is compromised and eroded by factors related to institutional weakness (lack of legal redress structures and accountability mechanisms, bureaucratic fragmentation), fiscal constraints, and limited political will.¹⁰ Other key gaps include the absence of explicit provisions for youth and female-headed households, poor integration of formal and indigenous support systems, and a lack of mandates for gender-responsive budgeting or participation quotas.^{12,13}

Several social insurance programs operate in Uganda, but participation remains low, with only about 5% of the working-

8 Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2019). Uganda Social Protection Sector Review 2019. Kampala: MGLSD.

9 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2025). Key Highlights of the Uganda National Household Survey 2023/24. Kampala: UBOS <https://www.ubos.org/key-highlights-of-the-uganda-national-household-survey-2023-24/>

10 Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2024). The Annual Report on the State of Social Protection in Uganda for the Financial Year 2023/2024. Kampala: MGLSD.

11 United Nations Children's Fund (2017). Investment Case for Social Protection in Uganda. UNICEF.

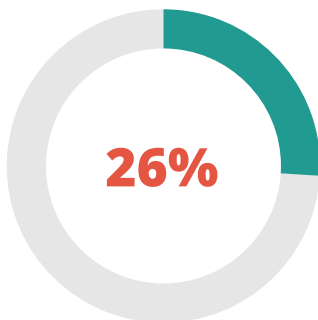
12 Grebe, E. and Mubiru, B. (2014). Development and Social Policy Reform in Uganda: The Slow Emergence of a Social Protection Agenda (1986-2014).

13 Guloba, M., et al. (2017). A pathway to social protection development in Uganda: a synthesis report. Kampala: Economic Policy Research Centre.



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The National Social Security Fund (NSSF), Uganda's primary social security program, has limited reach with just 1.2 million active contributors out of its labor force of 22.8 million



The report further notes that despite improvements, 26% of children under five suffer from stunting due to malnutrition. Access to quality education also remains a concern, with only 41% of children completing primary school.

age population making contributions to these schemes.⁸ The Public Service Pensions Scheme, which is funded through government tax revenues, provides retirement benefits exclusively to civil servants and does not require employee contributions. The National Social Security Fund (NSSF), Uganda's primary social security program, has limited reach with just 1.2 million active contributors out of its labor force of 22.8 million.¹⁴ Efforts are underway to reform the NSSF by shifting it from a provident fund to a broader social insurance scheme, with proposed changes currently under parliamentary review. Additionally, although the Cabinet approved a National Health Insurance Scheme bill in 2019, it is still under parliamentary consideration and has not yet become law or a formal policy.¹⁵

With this mixed picture of progress, a significant proportion of Uganda's vulnerable populations continue to confront high rates of poverty and precarity. For instance, evidence indicates that SP coverage for women falls short particularly in contexts of poverty and vulnerable employment, where women are over-represented in informal and low-wage employment with minimal or non-existent SP coverage for health insurance, maternity benefits, and pensions.¹⁶ In addition, access to formal credit, land, and productive resources remains lower for women, constraining their ability to benefit from economic growth and social programs. Evidence further points to women's heightened vulnerability due to unpaid care burdens; and gender norms and patriarchal structures further constrain their ability to benefit from existing SP programs.¹⁷

Data from a 2019 survey by UNICEF and the Government of Uganda suggest that children aged 0-17 years constitute half of Uganda's 45.9 million population.¹⁸ The report further notes that despite improvements, 26% of children under five suffer from stunting due to malnutrition. Access to quality education also remains a concern, with only 41% of children completing primary school. Also, 65% of Uganda's children do not have their own bed and 59% live in households unable to afford to put money aside for emergencies. About 80% of households in the country have insufficient resources to meet their children's basic clothing needs. The report observed that 48% of the

14 World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=UG>

15 Guloba, M., et al. (2017). A pathway to social protection development in Uganda: a synthesis report. Kampala: Economic Policy Research Centre.

16 Wandera N., et al. (2021). Expanding Social Protection to Informal Women Workers for Better COVID-19 Recovery in Uganda. Nairobi: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

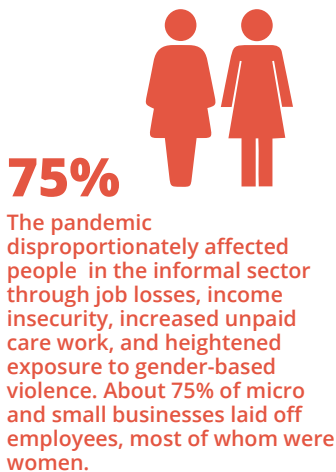
17 Devereux, S., and Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2004). Transformative Social Protection. IDS Working Paper 232. Institute of Development Studies.

18 UNICEF and the Government of Uganda (2019) Situation Analysis Of Children In Uganda – 2019: <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/5181/file/Situation%20Analysis%20of%20Children%20in%20Uganda%202019-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁹Suubi, K., Yegon E., Ajema, C., Wandera, N., Afifu, C., and Mugenyi, C. (2022). Impact of COVID-19 on women workers in the urban informal economy in Uganda and Kenya: Secondary Data Review. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Kampala, Uganda and Nairobi, Kenya.

country's children do not get three meals a day and about 20% of children aged 6-16 years with a disability have never attended school. Additionally, as noted in the report, while more than half of Ugandan households with a disabled member were aware of economic assistance programs, only 4% had received external economic support.

The structural disadvantages facing the Ugandan poor such as concentration in informal work, limited access to assets, and entrenched gender norms leave them particularly exposed during times of crisis. This underlying vulnerability was pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified existing inequalities and further marginalized women who were already excluded from formal SP mechanisms.^{19,20} The pandemic disproportionately affected people in the informal sector through job losses, income insecurity, increased unpaid care work, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence. About 75% of micro and small businesses laid off employees, most of whom were women. Yet, government COVID-19 responses and stimulus packages primarily benefited formal sector workers, while informal workers were often excluded from support, credit, and business recovery programs.



Purpose of this brief

In light of the above issues, urgent calls have been made for evidence on the experiences and challenges of designing and executing SP activities to reach and address the different needs and challenges of Uganda's marginalized populations. This report presents findings from a study that aims to start building the evidence base by investigating the views, experiences, and challenges of policy and program stakeholders in the planning and execution of SP initiatives in Uganda. Understanding these stakeholders' views and experiences with developing and implementing SP programs in Uganda is crucial for improving policy design, promoting evidence-based learning, identifying evidence and data needs, assisting in the development of practical solutions, and strengthening policy adaptation to local realities.²¹

19 Suubi, K., Yegon E., Ajema, C., Wandera, N., Afifu, C., and Mugenyi, C. (2022). Impact of COVID-19 on women workers in the urban informal economy in Uganda and Kenya: Secondary Data Review. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Kampala, Uganda and Nairobi, Kenya.

20 International Labour Organization (2021). Building Forward Fairer: Women's Rights to Work and at Work at the Core of the COVID-19 Recovery. Geneva: ILO.

21 Kwon, Huck-ju. "Global social policy in a development context: ideas, actors and implementation." Handbook of Social Policy and Development. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019. 89-110.

**19%**

For the study, 19 key informants were purposefully selected from a variety of organizations and institutions that engage in SP-related policy and program work in Uganda.

RESEARCH STUDY AND METHODS

This research study sought to explore policy and program stakeholders' experiences with developing and implementing SP programs in Uganda. The study had four main objectives: 1) clarify policy and program actors' understandings of SP, 2) elicit views on key successes, challenges, and opportunities in designing and implementing SP initiatives in Uganda, 3) investigate policy and program actors' data/evidence needs for SP design and implementation, and 4) synthesize lessons from the respondents' experiences with SP work in Uganda.

For the study, 19 key informants were purposefully selected from a variety of organizations and institutions that engage in SP-related policy and program work in Uganda. The respondents were drawn from relevant government agencies, universities, funding agencies, advocacy groups, corporate organizations, international and local development organizations, and SP program implementing organizations. Data were gathered using key informant interviews conducted in a language that the participants felt most comfortable using. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Field notes were incorporated to capture key insights. Using NVivo, transcripts were coded and analyzed thematically with both deductive (based on study objectives) and inductive (emerging from participant narratives) approaches. The coding framework was refined collaboratively to ensure findings accurately reflected respondents' perspectives and recurring themes. Study approval was obtained from The AIDS Support Organization Research Ethics Committee, and a research permit was secured from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology.



The urgency of SP is not just about assisting the poor in overcoming adversity and poverty, but also about avoiding future crises and political instability that could result from having a large army of poor and alienated citizens.”

The need to base SP activities on evidence was also widely highlighted during the interviews. Respondents noted that SP initiatives that are not informed by evidence miss their mark, may not be adequately financed, respond poorly to context, and may have adverse effects.

FINDINGS

Conceptions of social protection

Study participants generally viewed SP as a collection of policies and initiatives to decrease poverty, minimize vulnerability, and foster social participation. They frequently characterized it as a basic human right and a tool for achieving fairness, progress, and dignity. Narratives stressed that for SP to be effective, it must be a long-term, state-led responsibility that is integrated into national development frameworks and funded through budget allocations. In many of the interviews, stakeholders acknowledged the importance of SP in Uganda, citing the country's high level of poverty, large population of informal workers, high risk for environmental disasters, and years of war and conflict in some areas. The country's large young population and limited employment options were also cited as reasons for SP measures. As one government official put it, *“the urgency of SP is not just about assisting the poor in overcoming adversity and poverty, but also about avoiding future crises and political instability that could result from having a large army of poor and alienated citizens.”* Many respondents noted Uganda's recognition of social protection as a constitutional right, its mainstreaming of SP in development initiatives, and its sustained collaborative work with other development partners to implement SP programs as evidence of the government's commitment.

Many respondents emphasized that short-term poverty or hardship alleviation measures have been ineffective in the country because they provide only temporary assistance and do not help beneficiaries to develop long-term skills and competencies or to be sustainably buffered against unanticipated shocks. On the other hand, many did describe SP as focused on long-term assistance and impact to enhance citizens' social and economic resilience over time. The need to base SP activities on evidence was also widely highlighted during the interviews. Respondents noted that SP initiatives that are not informed by evidence miss their mark, may not be adequately financed, respond poorly to context, and may have adverse effects.

Many participants agreed that Uganda's SP landscape consists of numerous programs supported by various stakeholders and aimed at a variety of vulnerable groups, including poor women, the elderly, pregnant women, people without health insurance, small and informal business operators, war-affected communities or those hosting refugee populations, people with disabilities, and children. These programs also included a variety of support, such as food and cash transfers, free health care, free education, assistance for farmers, and training in skills and competencies. Frequently identified initiatives were the Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises (GROW) program, the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Program, the Parish Development Model, and the Free Primary Education program. Other commonly mentioned initiatives were the



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He observed that to benefit from the initiative, participants were expected to have “planted at least 20 trees within their homestead” or “built a pit latrine.

CARE International Women Empowerment & Livelihoods Program, the Child-Sensitive Social Protection Program, the World Bank-supported Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, the Youth Livelihood Program, the World Food Programme-supported Cash and Food Assistance (targeted at refugee-hosting districts in Northern and Western Uganda), the Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (targeted at the elderly), and the BRAC Uganda program on microfinance, education, health, and social empowerment that targets the ultra-poor households, especially women and youth. There were also occasional mentions of public works initiatives (pay for work), particularly by government officials. Development agencies, NGOs, private sector groups, multilateral institutions, and the Ugandan government were identified as key implementers and financiers of SP programs in the country.

Challenges of SP initiatives

While appreciating the current work of the country’s SP sector, interviewed stakeholders identified some challenges in SP policymaking and program execution in Uganda. These challenges include accessibility, reach, informality, siloed efforts, the lack of a consistent legal framework for SP, politics, and local attitudes toward SP projects.

Accessibility ranked among the most prominent challenges that respondents cited in relation to SP in Uganda. Narratives generally suggested that challenges including poor targeting, exclusionary requirements, and limited use of evidence to inform SP programs meant that several Ugandans who are eligible for SP support do not get it. Particular groups they cited as being excluded due to accessibility issues were older women, people with disability, persons with limited literacy, people residing in remote and hard-to-reach areas, and children. One government employee discussed how certain individuals are excluded from the NUSAF II (Northern Uganda Social Action Fund) program due to its qualifying requirements. He observed that to benefit from the initiative, participants were expected to have “planted at least 20 trees within their homestead” or “built a pit latrine.” He further pointed out, *“Tell me, which elderly person who lives alone and has been abandoned will be able to construct a pit latrine or plant 20 trees? Yet, they are the most deserving, because they are elderly and disabled.”* Informal workers and people without formal education were other groups reportedly excluded from SP programs, which respondents believed was due to poor data and exclusionary procedures and documentation requirements. In the words of one government ministry staff, *“The issue is that the informality...prevents them from accessing any opportunities.... When things come, like Parish Development Model, they say we want registered businesses.... Now, when you say register or documents, people run away. They say ‘aaaah e ya abasoma’ [that’s for the educated].”*

Respondents also identified bureaucratic delays in program

enrollment and disbursement as a major driver of limited SP participation. Several discussed the time-consuming, frequently lengthy bureaucratic processes that surround participation in several programs that discourage participation, with exclusionary consequences on SP initiatives. For instance, in SP programs that need group formation to access benefits, it was observed that *“the process sometimes takes longer...by the time you get to the conclusion of the procedure, you discover that the group has fragmented and is no longer interested.”* Another respondent described how cumbersome bureaucratic processes, as well as poor logistics and coordination, frequently delay the distribution of agricultural inputs to poor and rural farmers, resulting in low yields and increased household food insecurity among target beneficiaries.

Respondents also highlighted the lack of a consistent or unified legal framework and approach as a significant challenge for SP efforts in Uganda. While interviewees frequently extolled the country’s constitutional recognition and support for SP, they also often noted that policies and programs remained fragmented, siloed, and poorly coordinated, offering nothing in the way of a comprehensive approach to SP. Due to the absence of a unified legal framework for SP in the country, initiatives continue to rely on what development agencies, political leaders, and implementers deem crucial and significant, rather than being based on a holistic evidence-based strategy. For example, the absence of a comprehensive SP law or policy was viewed as responsible for the country’s lack of universal health insurance. Clarifying this point, a respondent noted:



“If you want to improve social protection... there must be a policy; a legal and policy shift... because without a proper legal framework, we are wasting time. We shall keep talking. Some are saying, ‘we are helping persons with disabilities.’ Others are saying ‘we are helping poor farmers.’ Some are focusing on drought-prone communities. People are doing different things in their spaces, whatever they like... So, a legal framework and comprehensive strategy will help streamline things.”

Another respondent said, *“We don’t have a specific law or approach on social protection—it’s fragmented here and there...for instance, no universal health insurance exists in this country. So, people just die, you die for yourself because you can’t afford health care.”*

And another observed:



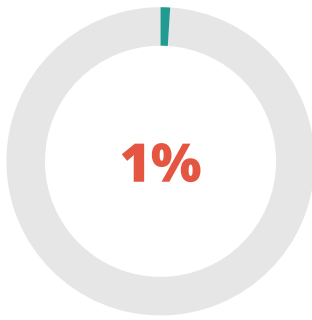
“The only opportunity some people have for free medical care is during childbirth. Health insurance for the poor is not supported by any law in the country. So, if the public health facility that you want to attend is dysfunctional or not working, you must pay at the private hospital or travel to the next public facility, if it is near. You see how many of them are dying because of that....”

Respondents blamed fragmented and poorly coordinated program implementation and siloed efforts for the failure of existing initiatives to respond to the interconnected vulnerabilities facing many who would benefit from SP programs. One explained, *“...these intersecting vulnerabilities, especially for women, are not provided for in the law... or any current SP program, and this has had adverse effects on attempts to create social protection programs that work well for these marginalized groups.”* In the words of another respondent:



“...many of these programs are not coordinated and do not have a linkage with the community... We don't know who is getting what and from where... you've heard of how many women are still paying loans which they got and are suffering, dying under the pressure of those loans. Sometimes, they get loans and use it to solve other problems... or the man takes the money given to his wife to do other things The man will say 'you give it to me, I'll instead open a small ka duka' [kiosk]. Now the plan has changed and maybe they don't even have training on running a duka.”

Corruption was also commonly mentioned as a long-standing issue undermining SP project in Uganda. *“There's so much corruption in the country...especially in that pension and social protection sector...and corruption takes away what should rightfully come to the people in need...”* asserted one NGO leader. Respondents mentioned and described instances in which resources intended for disadvantaged people, such as stipends, building materials, and food, vanished before reaching their intended recipients. In one reported case, funds meant for crucial immunizations and disease treatment were diverted through government departments. Another respondent recalled an instance in which government officials diverted food and building materials intended for a disadvantaged community. In general,



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respondents agreed that the country regularly experiences large SP fund losses due to corruption. Respondents also noted ghost beneficiaries in cash transfers, food transfers, education, and health programs to be widespread and systematic across various programs. Respondents also noted that high-level prosecutions for malfeasance are uncommon and frequently target lower-level employees. In one instance, pressure from a donor SP program was reported to have led to some refunds, but the senior officials involved in the scandal avoided prosecution.

Additional challenges facing SP in Uganda according to the respondents were negative public perceptions of SP, poor community engagement, a dearth of data to support strong initiatives, the country's high poverty rate, and lack of funding. According to the narratives, public attitudes around certain SP benefits such as cash transfers, grants, and loans are that these constitute support that should be spent frivolously or, in the case of loans, never be repaid. One respondent recalled her recent field visit to Gulu where people referred to the Parish Development Model (PDM) as "Personal Drinking Money" and told her: *"No, when will we ever benefit from the government for free? This government does nothing for us. So, we register, get their money, don't pay."*

Several SP initiatives were said to have been designed and rolled out without strong guiding evidence and data or enough community engagement or participation. For example, SP initiatives aimed at women in the country were said to be delivering below expectations largely because of inadequate engagement of men and poor understanding of community contexts. The practice of ongoing evaluation and continuous learning was commonly reported as a missing component of many SP initiatives, resulting in an insufficient evidence base to evaluate progress, improve design and implementation, and respond adequately to emerging realities. Further, weak funding in a country with high poverty rates was identified as a primary driver of SP coverage challenges, as well as the small size of assistance often provided to beneficiaries. One respondent stated, *"We need to cover the entire country, yet the SP resource envelope is less than 1% of their budget. The ministry is significantly underfunded, accounting for less than 1%. It becomes challenging to reach more people in need or to improve the amount of assistance that they receive."*

Evidence needs on social protection in Uganda

With respect to evidence needs for SP in Uganda, respondents emphasized the need for on going data collection for many elements of SP in the country. The lack of sufficient data to guide policy and program development, focus interventions, improve coverage, evaluate progress, identify issues and leakages, and troubleshoot in real time was viewed as a major hurdle to meeting SP goals. In the view of one respondent, *"There is*

simply no investment in data to hold anybody accountable or to do anything that will work well in SP in the country.”

One particular area of weakness that respondents identified is the paucity of carefully disaggregated and reliable evidence on the country's poor and needy populations, their many vulnerabilities, and effective measures for addressing their challenges. Many respondents noted that despite years of SP programming in the country, there is still a lack of understanding of the dynamics pertaining to the socioeconomic needs of numerous underprivileged individuals and communities. Overall, respondents viewed data gaps on the country's poor and needy population as contributing to the country's inability to establish a strong understanding of people in need, the ramifications of their needs and vulnerabilities, what works to improve their situations, how it works, and for whom and where. The lack of current and comprehensive socioeconomic statistics on people living in the country's informal urban settlements and the size of the population with disabilities, their location, the types of disabilities they have, etc., were cited as examples of critical evidence gaps. Respondents also pointed to the lack of robust national statistics on young mothers, female- and child-headed households, out-of-school young people, and unemployed rural residents, among others. Driving these points home, one respondent noted:



“When you go to the relevant ministries ... you will not be able to get data that is specifically disaggregated...so it gets hard if you want to sit and maybe do a review on trends, changes over time on social protection, on progress, specifically for some groups, say children, women, or particular communities, that wouldn't be easy. So, we don't even know if what we are doing is working well or not.”

Another evidence gap cited by respondents was the absence of accessible, systematically generated and integrated lessons and insights from the country's current SP initiatives. Emerging data indicated that formal evaluations of existing SP initiatives in the country were either absent or unavailable to key policy and program stakeholders. One interviewee stated that the country cannot precisely determine how many people have been pulled out of poverty by SP programs over the last decade. Another observed that several initiatives have been implemented in the same manner for the past five years, despite numerous obvious, but corrigible limitations. Other narratives suggested that some SP efforts across the country have continued to run for many years without any systematic evaluation of their effectiveness in delivering expected results. And yet, in interview after interview, respondents stated that a thorough and rigorous evaluation of existing SP initiatives



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is critical for generating lessons and insights to improve SP intervention design and delivery. Respondents felt that insights were needed from existing interventions on an array of issues, including cost effectiveness, return on investment, and impact of SP efforts; contextual determinants of SP outcomes at individual, household, and community levels; shifts in social norms and family structures in relation to SP; opportunities for the integration of different SP efforts and systems; and the unintended and gendered impacts of various types of SP interventions. One participant captured the widespread frustration with the lack of outcome data that could guide efforts to build on and improve SP efforts, asking, *"For example, how many women benefit from the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) programme? Where are they located? What has happened in their lives? How have their lives changed compared to other women, and why? What can we learn from SAGE's impact, or lack of it, on their lives... that information might not be easily accessed anywhere in this country."*

Respondents also identified the need for easily understood and accessible evidence on issues related to SP. Much of the existing evidence on SP in the country was considered difficult to use, and in formats that policy stakeholders and communities may not easily understand or be able to access. Respondents mentioned having seen reports on SP-related issues that were long and difficult to read. One explained, *"There's a lot of research that has been done on SP. Some people are writing about these programs...but they [reports] are not being read. Some are very long and just kept within offices. Some of them are very academic and rot away in shelves."* Another respondent noted that policy stakeholders do not use data products tailored to end users, but rather require well-packaged policy briefs that are not voluminous. *"You know policymakers can be busy; they may not have time to do lots of reading,"* the respondent noted. Some respondents also called for the translation of existing evidence into local languages, especially for grassroots implementers. *"We are fond of giving implementers unfriendly products in languages which they cannot understand. We need to be able to translate some of these products so that they can be able to understand and use them in the field,"* one respondent stated. It was also widely noted that policy stakeholders need to hear more voices of beneficiaries through evidence products, and that statistical data and figures frequently fail to do justice to the lived experiences of the poor. *"Some policy people need to hear the poor peoples' voices on these issues. You must bring out their suffering, their cries, their everyday struggles, the ways they feel, to move policy and change programs,"* observed a respondent.



Uganda's policy and program stakeholders have a good understanding of the goal and function of SP and recognize its significance in light of the nation's high rate of poverty, sizable youth and informal labor population, high risk of natural disasters, and years of conflict and forced displacement.

Stakeholders characterized the sector as being inherently flawed with poor targeting, siloed efforts, exclusionary requirements, corruption, limited use of evidence to inform initiatives, bureaucratic delays, lack of a consistent or unified legal framework, poor community engagement, and the lack of funding

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To protect vulnerable groups' livelihoods, alleviate poverty, and improve their well-being, Uganda has implemented and broadened its SP programs over the past few years. Nonetheless, several groups in the country—women, children, girls, informal workers, residents of urban informal settlements, rural residents, people with disabilities—continue to experience vulnerability and poverty. This report presents findings from a study on the perspectives of SP policy and program stakeholders on the SP landscape in Uganda, eliciting their perceptions on the challenges associated with developing and delivering SP initiatives in the country, and the country's evidence requirements to improve SP programs and outcomes. Policy actors' and stakeholders' views can inform efforts to improve policy design, promote evidence-based learning, identify evidence and data needs, assist in the development of practical solutions, and strengthen policy adaptation to local realities.

Going by the study's evidence, Uganda's policy and program stakeholders have a good understanding of the goal and function of SP and recognize its significance in light of the nation's high rate of poverty, sizable youth and informal labor population, high risk of natural disasters, and years of conflict and forced displacement. The stakeholders are also well-informed about the country's current SP landscape. Stakeholders' understanding of national social priorities is vital for various evidence-based reasons.²² Effective policymaking, accountability, and the sustainability of development initiatives rely on national policy stakeholders having a solid grasp of development priorities.²³ Knowledgeable stakeholders can guarantee cogent development that reflects public values and concerns. Policy stakeholders who have a solid understanding of national goals can advance strategic and informed decisions for addressing complex societal priorities.

While they appreciate the efforts underway in the country's SP sector, stakeholders characterized the sector as being inherently flawed with poor targeting, siloed efforts, exclusionary requirements, corruption, limited use of evidence to inform initiatives, bureaucratic delays, lack of a consistent or unified legal framework, poor community engagement, and the lack of funding, all of which contribute to continuing negative public perceptions of SP and the country's persistently high poverty rate. Existing research supports the challenges outlined by the stakeholders. For instance, Oketch has described the difficulties posed by Uganda's social security programs' inadequate funding against the backdrop of prevalent poverty in the coun-

22 Nabyonga Orem, J., et al. (2013). Perspectives on the role of stakeholders in knowledge translation in health policy development in Uganda. *BMC health services research*, 13(1), 324.

23 Onwujekwe, O., et al. (2022). Examining the roles of stakeholders and evidence in policymaking for inclusive urban development in Nigeria: findings from a policy analysis. In *Urban forum* (Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 505-535). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.



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try.²⁴ According to the Auditor General's 2019 report, each year, corruption costs Uganda over US\$9.144 trillion (\$2.4 billion, or 44% of the country's total revenue).²⁵ Research by the Local Development Partners Group also shows that Uganda's SP sector is plagued by fragmented, uncoordinated SP activities that lead to waste and redundancy and restrict the sector's scalability and shock-responsiveness.²⁶

The stakeholders identified evidence gaps for SP in Uganda, which included a lack of up-to-date and robust data on the country's poor and needy populations, their vulnerabilities, and effective measures for addressing them; an absence of robust lessons and insights from the country's existing SP initiatives; and the need for evidence products that are easily understood by SP policy stakeholders. Good evidence is a foundational asset for developing effective social protection interventions. SP programs risk being ineffective due to inadvertent exclusion, leakage, and duplication in the absence of robust, up-to-date, and integrated data and data systems. The World Bank estimates that only 3% of Uganda's population is covered by the country's major SP programs, due in part to inadequate data targeting.²⁷ Lack of data, particularly on informal laborers, caused widespread exclusion of eligible populations from relief supplies and grants provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸ Lessons and insights from rigorous impact evaluations, process evaluations, and cost-benefit analyses can provide evidence-based insights into what does and does not work, providing critical tools for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and credibility of Uganda's SP efforts.

24 Oketch, Martin L. (2022). Underfunding still hinders social protection programmes. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/business/prosper/underfunding-still-hinders-social-protection-programmes-3841074?utm_source=chatgpt.com

25 Wadero, AA. (2024) *Uganda loses Shs9 trillion to corruption in one year, says IGG*. The Monitor. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/uganda-loses-shs9-trillion-to-corruption-in-one-year-says-igg-4787298#story>

26 Local Development Partners Group. (2025.) Social protection DPG. https://www.ldpg.or.ug/groups/social-protection-dpg/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

27 World Bank. (2020). Uganda Economic Update: Strengthening Social Protection to Reduce Vulnerability and Promote Inclusive Growth. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/571011581515307951/pdf/Uganda-Economic-Update-14th-Edition-Strengthening-Social-Protection-to-Reduce-Vulnerability-and-Promote-Inclusive-Growth.pdf>

28 Suubi, K., et al. (2022). Impact of COVID-19 on women workers in the urban informal economy in Uganda and Kenya: secondary data review. International Center for Research on Women. <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Women-Workers-in-the-Urban-Informal-Economy-in-Uganda-and-Kenya-Secondary-Data-Review.pdf>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While Uganda has made progress on SP interventions in recent years, these efforts have also been hampered by poor and fragmented implementation, corruption, a limited use of evidence to inform initiatives, and weak and insufficient evidence base for and on SP. The current study raises some key policy implications, such as the necessity to:



- Scale up the National Single Registry and ensure interoperability with other databases.
- Invest in multimethod local data collection and data-sharing protocols among government, NGOs, and donors
- Regularly update poverty and vulnerability assessments through nationally representative studies and satellite data
- Develop and enforce a legal SP framework and regulatory standards to ensure consistency, coordination, and accountability across all actors
- Implement life-course, holistic SP programs that address the intersectional needs of citizens and communities
- Develop and maintain accessible, user-friendly, centralized, disaggregated, and regularly updated data systems with evidence to strengthen SP programming
- Mainstream SP priorities in national and sectoral development plans and strengthen integration with grassroots governance structures to ensure ongoing visibility, oversight, and program sustainability
- Develop accessible, locally translated, and user-friendly data and evidence products, including evidence products that are tailored for policy actors and stakeholders as well as communities and the public.



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