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SOCIAL PROTECTION AND URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This discussion paper examines development implications for food and nutrition when cash transfer interventions intersect with food system changes, particularly in urban areas where food is predominantly accessed through the market. South Africa is used as a case study because of its advanced social protection system as well as the rapid food system changes it is experiencing that are similar to those in other cities in the Global South. The authors consider the possible nutritional transition-related consequences for society, as well as the livelihood-related consequences for the poor when cash transfer systems, such as that of the South African social grant, are integrated with formal financial systems. They argue that while social protection and particularly cash transfers offer real benefits to society, certain social protection initiatives, especially those in urbanized environments experiencing food system transitions, could have unintended negative consequences. The authors ask whether specific social protection strategies could unintentionally exclude certain actors. Ultimately, in a rapidly urbanizing context, could certain approaches to social protection constrain the development ambitions embedded in these programs?

Keywords

social protection, cash transfers, food security, food system, nutrition, rapid urbanization

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Introduction

Social protection has been heralded as one of the “success stories of development policy” (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2015: 1). It is often seen as a key development driver, a “development super-good” (Samson 2016) that developing countries are urged to embrace (EC 2010, Spray 2016). Social protection interventions are an essential part of a wider package of food and nutrition support programs (Bastagli et al 2016, Hulme et al 2012). While it is not without its detractors, there is growing recognition that social protection generally, and cash transfers in particular, offer many positive pathways to development (Ellis et al 2009). Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004: 9) highlight the different definitions and conceptual boundaries of social protection, but stress the key elements that encompass the broader concept as (a) social assistance (protection against poverty); (b) social insurance (protection against vulnerability); and (c) addressing social injustice and exclusion (social equity to protect people against social risks such as discrimination or abuse).

While the implementation of social protection is usually associated with desired outcomes, the pathways to such outcomes are often complex. Social safety nets, in the form of social protection interventions, can improve overall economic performance as they can help ease poverty, protect households from collapse, and promote long-term national growth (Conning and Kevane 2002). Social protection interventions are aimed at maintaining household consumption levels and investment in assets, while at the same time strengthening the agency of grant recipients (Barrientos 2011). As far as nutrition and food security is concerned, there is growing consensus that providing individuals with “regular and predictable cash transfers confers upon the recipient greater flexibility to plan expenditures to meet immediate basic consumption needs, while also providing opportunities for investment in productive activities” (Vincent and Cull 2011: 38).

This discussion paper adopts the definition of social protection as “a specific set of actions to address the

vulnerability of people’s life through social insurance, offering protection against risk and adversity throughout life; through social assistance, offering payments and in kind transfers to support and enable the poor; and through inclusion efforts that enhance the capability of the marginalized to access social insurance and assistance” (European Communities 2010: 1). The paper also uses the notion of converging and mutually reinforcing transitions to examine the implications of urbanization, food systems, and food regime transitions for social protection initiatives and programming ((Swilling and Annecke 2012, Haysom 2015, 2017).

The first section of the paper highlights emerging urbanization trends in Sub-Saharan Africa and provides a brief discussion of the food system and urban transitions that are underway. The paper then turns to a case study of the South African social protection system. South Africa has one of the most advanced social protection programs in Africa and its social grant system is often hailed as a success and held out as a model that other African countries could adopt and implement (Samson et al 2002, Taylor 2008). The section includes a critical discussion of the possible unintended consequences associated with the South African experience and its implications for social protection and food security in other contexts. The paper concludes by interrogating the South African “success narrative” and the long-term consequences of developments in social protection disbursement technologies, questioning whether the adoption of these technologies are drivers of new developmental challenges that ultimately increase vulnerability and marginalization, and play a role in reducing livelihoods and educational benefits.

Intersecting and Mutually Reinforcing Change Processes

Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing rapid change on various fronts that is directly impacting its trajectory of development. The youth bulge, climate change, economic shifts, and environmental change all intersect and reinforce one another (IPCC 2014,

MEA 2005, Piketty 2014, UNICEF 2014). The concept of intersecting and mutually reinforcing processes of change is perhaps most evident when two dominant transitions in Africa are considered: (a) rapid demographic change and urbanization; and (b) multi-scalar changes taking place in the food system. Combined, these transitions pose real development challenges. The negative consequences manifest in the form of food and nutrition insecurity.

Africa’s urbanization trajectory differs from past urbanization processes of the Global North and is made even more complex by variations across the continent in terms of the forms, numbers, and pace of growth. Regionally, Africa is urbanizing in different ways (Table 1). Towns and cities of under 300,000 residents are, and will remain, the dominant urban type across Africa (Pieterse et al 2015). This is important because most research focuses on primary cities (Battersby and Watson 2016). The fastest-growing urban centres are “the small and

medium cities with less than one million inhabitants, which account for 59% of the world’s urban population and 62 % of the urban population in Africa” (UN-Habitat 2016: 9) (Figure 1).

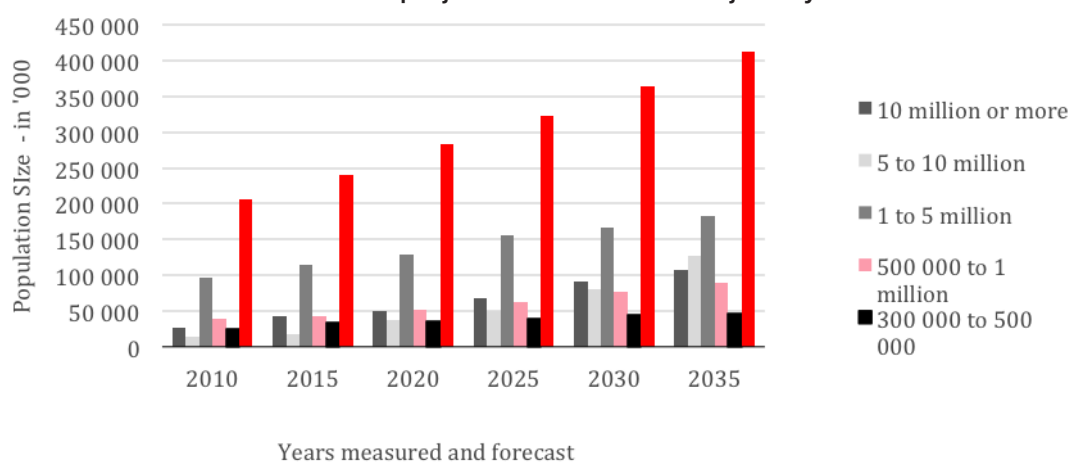
System-wide trends offer helpful insights into long-term changes in local urban food systems as they are increasingly subject to global forces (Clapp and Helleiner 2012, Friedmann and McMichael 1989, Patel and McMichael 2009, Steel 2008). Three food system trends dominate current discussions: (a) the increasing role played by supermarkets; (b) changes in nutrition (particularly those aligned to urbanization), and (c) the so-called “big food” transition. These trends intersect with one another in ways that are not fully understood. Supermarkets, in particular, play a dominant role in the supply chain, and are also changing the food retail landscape of cities (Reardon et al 2003, Reardon et al 2015, Tschirley et al 2013, Peyton et al 2015). In addition, they have become key sites of property transactions, which can undermine other food retail

TABLE 1: African Urban Population by Region, 2018

| Region | % Urban 2018 | Net urban population | % African urban |
|---------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Africa | 43 | 547,602,000 | 43 |
| East Africa | 28 | 121,316,000 | 22 |
| Middle Africa | 50 | 83,484,000 | 15 |
| North Africa | 52 | 123,644,000 | 23 |
| South Africa | 64 | 41,970,000 | 8 |
| West Africa | 46 | 177,189,000 | 32 |

Source: United Nations (2018)

FIGURE 1: Africa’s current and projected urbanization trajectory



Source: UN DESA (2018)

livelihoods in urban areas (Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch 2013). Changes in food consumption are associated with how urban space is used, travel time constraints, and dietary changes, driving a nutrition transition (Kennedy et al 2004, Popkin 1998, 2002). The “big food transition” is linked to these shifts, and to wider agro-food system changes (Igumbor et al 2012, Monteiro and Cannon 2012). Hawkes (2006: 1) describes this as “the convergence towards poor quality obesogenic diets.” The forces of urbanization collide with rapid changes in the food system. The urban poor (who are generally also food insecure) have to navigate these changes. As the market is the primary source of food access, developmental interventions designed to mitigate food insecurity, such as cash transfers, come into direct contact with these rapidly changing systems.

Social Protection, Development and Food Security

One important strand of the social protection debate is the concept of graduation, which means seeking “to provide a sequenced and intensive

package of support to very poor people, with the objective of facilitating their movement out of extreme poverty towards resilient and sustainable livelihoods” (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2015: 1). The argument is that poor households should receive temporary social protection to ride out a time of vulnerability (Devereux 2016). Transitory social protection interventions focus on two areas.

The first is education where the implicit graduation logic is evident in approaches to ensure school attendance, such as the Brazilian conditional grants (Rocha and Lessa 2009) or suitable nutrition during school in the form of school feeding programs. A further area of focus is on rural populations, particularly producers. Here the assistance includes providing support to overcome drought, mitigate climate change, and enhance access to infrastructure. When food security is a focus of social protection, the dominant emphasis tends to be on rural areas. There is a distinct rural bias in how social protection interventions are understood, planned and operationalized; a bias that is evident in how the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security frames social protection (HLPE 2012) (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Social Protection Instruments for Food Security

| Entitlement category | Social protection instrument | Food security objectives |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Production | Input subsidies Crop and livestock insurance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote food production • Protect against harvest failure and livestock mortality |
| Labour | Public works programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide temporary employment • Create useful and necessary infrastructure • Promote agricultural production |
| Trade | Food price stabilization Food subsidies Grain reserves | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain market access to food • Keep food affordable for the poor • Ensure adequate market food supplies |
| Transfers | School feeding Supplementary feeding Conditional cash transfers Unconditional cash transfers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce hunger • Promote access to education • Promote local food production • Enhanced food consumption • Reduce hunger and poverty • Promote children’s access to education and healthcare • Reduce hunger and poverty |

Source HLPE (2012: 31)

The second area is a shift away from the providing services, products or produce to providing cash transfers. Cash transfers are seen as providing far greater autonomy to the recipient, enabling more choices in what is purchased and aligning the benefit of social protection with the recipient's needs. There are a number of reasons for the trend towards cash payments including effective targeting and ease of disbursement. Disbursement is increasingly moving towards more formalized systems as technologies develop. For example, MPesa (in Kenya) is an easily accessible banking system that is used increasingly to facilitate social protection payments, and reduce transaction and program costs.

The quality of the payment mechanism used to deliver social protection cash or related transfer payments can have a direct bearing on the success or failure of programs (ISPA 2015, Pulver 2016). The move to electronic payment systems has seen a significant increase in recent years. Tracking 84 social protection programs in 43 countries covering 74 million beneficiaries, the New America Foundation's Global Savings and Social Protection Initiative found that electronic payments grew from 25% in 2009 to 62% in 2012 (Zimmerman et al 2012: 1). A further argued positive outcome of the formalization of payment delivery is that cash transfer recipients gain improved access to financial services infrastructure (Vincent and Cull 2011, Pulver 2016).

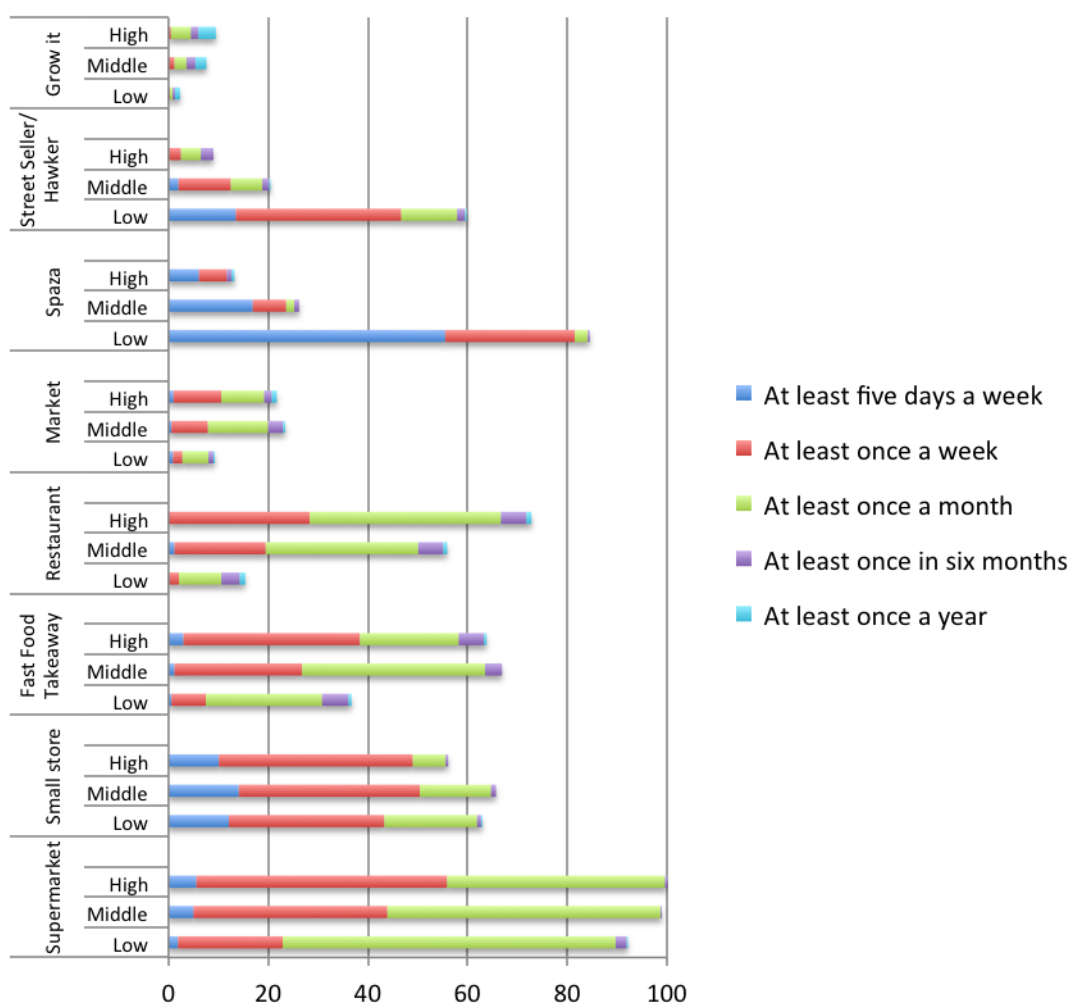
Social Protection and Urban Food Security in South Africa

South Africa's food system is dualistic in the sense that a highly formalized agro-food system intersects with a less formal, smaller-scale food system, particularly food retail (Greenberg 2017). Food retail is far more diverse, although larger players dominate production and capture the bulk of the revenue. The supermarket system dominates the retail sector and is playing an increasing role in the evolution of the South African food system (Peyton et al 2015). Figure 2 highlights two key South African

food system dynamics. The first is the importance of the informal sector to poor South African consumers, specifically for daily and weekly purchases. Second, 67% of the lowest-income tercile used supermarkets at least once per month (and 21% once per week). Poorer consumers are thus actively using the supermarket system for their food purchases but are highly strategic in their engagement in the food system. For poor consumers, generally those eligible to receive social grants, supermarkets are used on a monthly basis with some reporting weekly access. However, the informal sector (spazas and hawkers) is most frequently used on a daily basis. This reflects the type of food system that poor urban residents require and how their wider spatial and housing typologies (for example no refrigeration or limited energy access) intersect with their food system needs.

What role does South Africa's current social grant approach play in determining the nature of food system development in South Africa? And what are the implications of the increasingly dominant role of supermarkets on informal food system actors, their livelihoods, and the nutritional and long-term physical health of grant recipients? In South Africa, access to social assistance and the right to food are constitutionally guaranteed. The country's wide-ranging social assistance programs are offered by various government ministries at different levels, ranging from the Department of Agriculture assisting smallholders and urban food producers; to school feeding programmes run through the Department of Basic Education; to pre- and post-natal support managed by the Department of Health; to housing through the National Department of Human Settlements. In addition, the national Ministry of Social Development administers a social grant system. Social grants cover vulnerable children (Child Support Grant, Foster Child Grant), the elderly (Older Person's Grant), the physically and developmentally disabled (Disability Grant), war veterans (Veteran Grant), and those requiring specialized care (Care Dependency Grant, Grant in Aid), as well as temporary relief (Social Relief of Distress). Other than the Foster Child Grant and the Grant in Aid, social grants are awarded according to a "means test",

FIGURE 2: Household food access by income terciles in Cape Town



Source: Caesar and Crush (2015: 4).

a process requiring an assessment of the value of assets and income. Eligibility for a grant is contingent upon income falling below a certain threshold. Applicants for social grants must be South African citizens, permanent residents or refugees, and all qualifiers must be living in South Africa.

The magnitude of the social grant system is evident when considering South Africa's population of 56 million (StatsSA 2016a: 2). Recipients of social grants increased from an estimated 4 million in 1994 to 16.9 million in September 2015 (SASSA 2015). The social grant process has played a critical role in poverty reduction and in enabling a measure of food access for poor South Africans. In 2014/2015, disbursements of social-protection-related funds were in excess of ZAR120 billion, an increase of over 39% over a five-year period (Table 3). The

number of households receiving at least one form of social grant rose from 30% of the population in 2003, to 44% in 2010, to 46% in 2015 (StatsSA 2016b). The country's social protection system is a vital means of support for a large proportion of society. In 2014, social grants cost the state 3.4% of GDP (Phaahla 2015). In the 2017/2018 national budget consolidated spending forecast, the state allocated ZAR232.6 billion to basic education, ZAR187.5 billion to health, and ZAR180 billion to social protection (National Treasury 2017).

Social grants are administered through the South Africa Social Security Agency (SASSA), which reports to the Social Development ministry in the central government. The scale and technologies of the system demand centralization and control over all social-grant-related processes. As a cash transfer,

the South African social grant can be spent on a multitude of essential items. A large proportion of the social grant spend is directed towards food purchases (Taylor, 2015). Ledger (2016: 77) documents how small producers were originally able to capitalize on social grant pay-out days, selling quality fresh produce to grant recipients at pay-out locations. Subsequently, South Africa migrated the cash payment process to an electronic system. With the introduction of the modern smart card payment system, transactions and payments for goods required access to financial infrastructure. This meant that small farmers and informal traders were effectively excluded from the payment system. The introduction of the smart card (SASSA cards) reduced the risks and administrative costs associated with the system, but effectively eliminated the likelihood of it benefiting small traders and food system actors operating outside the formalized and financial-institution-linked system.

The replacement of the “previous antiquated system” (Dlamini 2013) of cash payouts meant that the formal food sector has been privileged over the less formal sector. The supermarket industry has benefited further by supporting grant payouts through partnerships with the Department of Social Development, redeeming payouts in stores or by allowing free in-store cash withdrawals. The integration of the poor into the formal financial infrastructure of the state and private sector is justified as advancement and modernization. In addition, these technical strategies may reduce leakage from the grant allocations process and could be generally better for development (Pulver 2106, Zimmerman and Bohling 2013, Vincent and Cull 2011).

Is South Africa’s social protection system a “developmental supergood” (Samson 2016)? While the system is laudable in terms of scope and scale, with multiple beneficial outcomes, the long-term consequences of the current strategies are unclear. Viewed through a food lens, South African supermarkets are able to determine the nature and practices of large parts of the food system throughout the value chain. Given the cash that the social grants inject into the economy, some actors are able to benefit disproportionately. The supermarket sector is certainly one such beneficiary.

South Africa has thus reached a tipping point where the livelihood and societal benefits of social protection, including graduation out of the system, are being de-activated. The tipping point means that the benefits offered by social protection measures, such as additional cash injections into the economy, are now recycled back to wealthy food system actors and their shareholders. In the case of South Africa, supermarkets are key beneficiaries of the social grant system. The social protection benefits of small business stimulation, increased savings and reduced vulnerability are no longer evident.

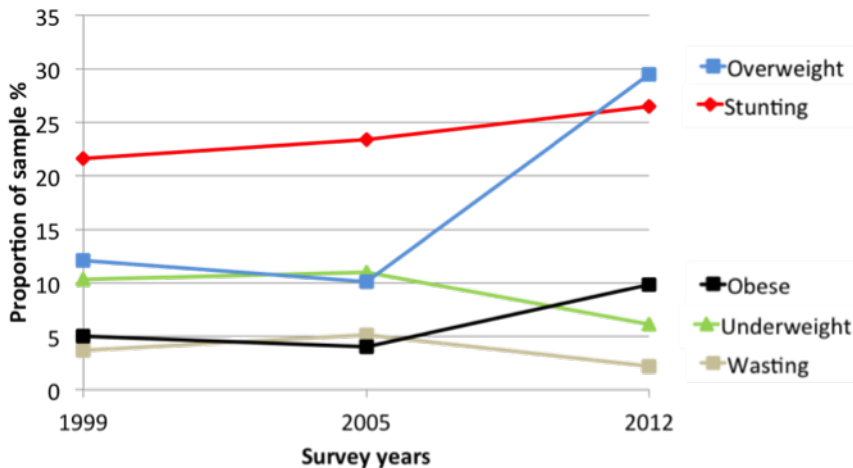
A further question concerns the relationship between social protection and the declining health status of South Africans. The long-term nutritional status of South Africans indicates the beginnings of a nutrition transition. There are increasing levels of obesity, while undernutrition indicators such as child stunting are also on the rise (Figure 3). These trends no longer align with income, with poorer households as prone to obesity as others due to increased consumption of a nutritionally poor diet.

TABLE 3: South African Social Assistance Breakdown

| ZAR million | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | 2014/15 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Family and children | 36,476 | 41,067 | 45,400 | 46,939 | 51,349 |
| Old age and veterans | 33,764 | 37,132 | 40,793 | 44,072 | 50,336 |
| Sickness and disability | 16,840 | 17,256 | 17,240 | 17,769 | 18,743 |
| Social protection (grant in aid, distress relief) | 412 | 509 | 456 | 807 | 827 |
| Total in ZAR | 87,492 | 95,964 | 103,889 | 109,587 | 121,255 |

Source: StatsSA, 2016b

FIGURE 3: Child nutrition outcomes



Source: Shisana (2013)

Many factors could contribute to this situation but the role of supermarkets in the nutrition transition requires interrogation. While the food-deserts literature of the Global North may praise supermarkets for making affordable food available to the poor (Block and Kouba 2006, Wrigley 2002), this is not necessarily the case in South Africa (Battersby 2012). Could wider food system changes, and the proliferation of supermarkets in social protection beneficiary neighbourhoods, precipitate negative dietary changes? Could these combined unintended outcomes constrain wider development ambitions? These questions demand far greater consideration when national social protection programs are planned. There is a strong likelihood that the current South African social grant system, with the mechanisms in place to administer the grants, is stifling entrepreneurial activity while at the same time promoting an obesogenic transition in the country. Both will start to place other burdens on the state, increasing the need for social spending in both health and poverty relief programs.

At the urban scale, municipal managers do little in the social protection environment. There is no strategic consideration of how the grants intersect with local urban development and developmental imperatives. Urban managers, politicians, and development agencies need to recognize the importance of African cities as sites with specific development challenges. Interventions need to be planned accordingly. Pothukuchi (2010) argues that

“inaction in the food planning environment does not have neutral consequences, but rather reflects negative outcomes,” which offers a caution against inaction and assumptions that market mechanisms will self-regulate.

The decentralization of planning and social protection related interventions also requires deeper consideration. Much of the urbanization taking place in Africa is occurring in towns. These are smaller urban centres where poverty is often more pronounced but governance and managerial capacities are lacking. Here, centralized (and financialized) systems may be optimal. If these systems are not aligned with the food system present in these urban areas, the ultimate benefit may be constrained.

Conclusion

Evidence from multiple case studies highlights the efficacy of cash disbursement of social protection in enabling targeted development interventions. In South Africa, social protection interventions for the poor remain critical development tools. However, the system has been perverted, resulting in supermarkets capturing a large proportion of the revenues that the cash grants generate. The process has privileged one class of food system actor, while simultaneously marginalizing others, including the informal traders. Viewed through a food lens, the

South African social grant system has created significant opportunity for certain business interests, but the systems used to disburse the grants have constrained others.

While the South African social grant system may have been ideal, or at least appropriate, at the time of its implementation, the changes that have taken place in the food system and social grant disbursement require a rethinking of how the latter is managed. Does the current form deliver the intended social and economic benefits to the poor? As African countries become increasingly urbanized and food systems transition to a formal retail and urban system, the consequences for social protection programs remain largely unknown.

The South African case highlights the extent to which context remains essential in the implementation of social protection interventions. The case further highlights the importance of constant re-evaluation and the need for clear strategies to avoid capture by entities or interests that could undermine the intended outcomes, specifically in terms of graduation and economic stimulation. The potential unintended consequences emerging from the South African case call for far greater interrogation of social protection systems and how they intersect with urban, food, and health systems.

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