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Social Protection and Coloniality: Learning from the Past and Present

Framework Paper

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Abbreviations

BIL	bilateral partner representative
CFA	West African CFA franc / Communauté Financière Africaine
CMU	universal health insurance / Couverture Maladie Universelle (Côte d'Ivoire)
CSO	civil society organisation
EXP	expert
GDP	gross domestic product
IC	Côte d'Ivoire representative/interviewee
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INT	international representative/interviewee
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
NAPSA	National Pension Scheme Authority (Zambia)
NSSF	National Social Security Fund (Kenya and Uganda)
NVivo	qualitative data analysis software
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSSN	Productive Social Safety Net (Tanzania)
RSTI	informal sector workers' insurance scheme / Régime Sociale des Travailleurs Indépendants (Côte d'Ivoire)
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
TA	Tanzania representative/interviewee
TASAF	Tanzania Social Action Fund
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Executive summary

The historical influence of colonial powers and the continued, deep-rooted engagement of international development actors in shaping social protection systems is widely recognised across academic and policy arenas. Nevertheless, evidence of the role of coloniality in social protection remains limited. This Discussion Paper explores the enduring impact of colonialism on contemporary social protection systems by considering the overall question: **What is the role of coloniality in social protection in the Global South?**

It does so by employing a three-fold methodology, namely (i) an examination of empirical and theoretical literature, including scholarship on coloniality, policy transfers and political settlements in the realm of social protection, among other topics; (ii) semi-structured interviews with international and regional stakeholders from academia, civil society and international organisations; and (iii) country case studies in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania. The study adopts a regional focus, zooming in on sub-Saharan Africa, with wider relevance across the Global South.

The paper proposes a “**social protection and coloniality**” analytical framework to allow for analysing and unpacking the role of coloniality in social protection. It zooms in on three key components through which coloniality in social protection is manifested, resisted or countered: (i) colonial legacies, (ii) postcolonial influences and (iii) domestic political economy factors. This framework provides a novel lens to examine historical path dependencies and pathways that have shaped and continue to influence contemporary social protection systems across sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South. It enables the identification of context- and country-specific issues, bringing them to the forefront while emphasising enduring colonial footprints and their interplay with domestic factors. At the same time, the framework acknowledges the significant diversity across countries, recognising that shared colonial histories or ongoing colonial influences alone are insufficient to fully explain the complexities of social protection arrangements within individual countries.

The study leads to several key findings.

First, the footprint of colonial legacies – that is, the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times – remains visible across contemporary social protection, albeit in a highly contextual manner. Economic dependency persists and is most obviously visible in Francophone West Africa through the influence of the CFA franc on monetary policy, which continues to constrain these countries' economic autonomy and reinforce their reliance on external politics. Across sub-Saharan Africa, institutional and legislative frameworks established during the colonial era remain deeply embedded in current social protection systems, often reflecting the priorities of colonial administrations rather than the needs of local populations. Furthermore, social protection instruments established during colonial times, such as social insurance schemes, continue to characterise present-day policy systems but exclude large segments of the population who do not have formal employment. Moreover, traditional informal support networks and anticolonial social compacts have been consistently marginalised in favour of foreign models, resulting in a disconnect between formal social protection systems and the lived experiences and needs of the local populations. That said, it is important to note that there is considerable variation across countries, with some displaying significant divergence from social protection as established in their colonial pasts.

Second, postcolonial influences – that is, continued patterns of power imbalances – have a sizeable impact on social protection arrangements across the region and, on balance, are considered more important than colonial legacies. Postcolonial influence manifests in various ways. Global economic structures perpetuate patterns of economic exploitation and dependency, limiting the capacity of countries to design and implement autonomous and context-specific social policy solutions. Donor priorities and international development agendas have promoted more narrowly targeted social protection measures and support consumption

over production, particularly through an emphasis on cash transfers rather than production subsidies. Funding modalities and aid conditionalities serve as powerful policy levers to push approaches preferred by the Global North. In addition, models of and ideas for social protection that originate from the Global North – promoted through trainings and technical assistance – continue to dominate the design and implementation of social protection systems, frequently overlooking local knowledge and context-specific solutions that may be better suited to address the unique challenges faced by each country.

Third, domestic political economy factors – and how they counteract or reinforce colonial legacies and postcolonial influences – are vital in shaping social protection. Factors include domestic resistance and political ideology; elites and governance; and civil society engagement and workers' movements. The study underscores the complex interplay between domestic political actors and external influences in determining the trajectory of social protection systems across Africa. Although some governments align with international donor preferences, there are many examples of resistance, with governments ultimately prioritising domestic interests and ideological preferences. Political elites – sometimes influenced by historical ties to former colonial powers or international institutions – often steer the direction of these policies, leading to concerns over elite capture and solutions that favour a small but powerful segment of society. These political elites play a crucial role in policy adoption and implementation. Civil society and workers' movements have historically played a significant role in advocating for welfare reforms, particularly during the colonial era and early independence movements, and they continue to be vital actors in shaping systems that better address the needs of local populations.

Box 1: Social protection and coloniality: key findings

- (1) The **footprint of colonial legacies** – that is, the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times – remains visible across contemporary social protection, albeit in a highly contextual manner. We identify four elements that play into this:
 - a. Economic disadvantage and dependency
 - b. Institutional and legislative arrangements
 - c. Hegemony of Western ideals and models
 - d. Colonial models of social protection
- (2) **Postcolonial influences** – that is, continued patterns of power imbalances – have a sizeable impact on social protection arrangements across the region and, on balance, are considered more important than colonial legacies. We identify four mechanisms through which this plays out:
 - a. Maintaining unfavourable global economic structures
 - b. Narrowing of the global social protection agenda by prioritising (i) consumption over production, and (ii) cash transfers over other forms of social protection
 - c. Imposing aid and funding conditionalities
 - d. Exporting ideas and knowledge
- (3) **Domestic political economy factors** – and how they counteract or reinforce colonial legacies and postcolonial influences – are vital in shaping social protection. Three elements emerge as particularly relevant:
 - a. Resistance and political ideology
 - b. Elites and governance
 - c. Civil society and workers' movements

The paper suggests several strategies to disrupt patterns of coloniality, especially in terms of continued postcolonial influence. These include:

- *Reflecting more critically on the enduring role of coloniality* in the design of social protection systems and policies, which is essential for developing more equitable and effective solutions. International organisations are encouraged to critically evaluate their approaches and the impacts of their interventions, promoting more reflective and context-specific practices.
- *Paying greater attention to knowledge and ideas from the Global South*, both in terms of historical knowledge that has been largely overlooked and ignored, and new knowledge production to inform social protection in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world.
- *Engaging national governments more meaningfully in global platforms* is vital to enhance the ownership and sustainability of national social protection systems, such as through the provision of adequate resources, a clear articulation of the benefits to partner countries and more accessible use of language.
- *Building on and furthering South-South learning* in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western ideas and knowledge, rather than reinforces it.
- *Firmly placing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and across the Global South in the driver's seat* when choosing, developing and implementing social protection arrangements, with international organisations following their lead rather than the other way around.
- *Strengthening domestic financing capacity* to decrease reliance on and counter external influences, and enhance domestic ownership of social protection.

In conclusion, the paper argues that colonial legacies and postcolonial influences continue to shape social protection across sub-Saharan Africa, as moderated by domestic political economy factors. It advocates for more equitable partnerships and critical reflection among international actors. The paper also calls for stronger integration of local knowledge to support country-driven social protection frameworks. By addressing these challenges and promoting context-specific solutions, it is possible to develop social protection systems that are more home-grown and less reliant upon external influences.

1 Introduction

The modern map of Africa and its boundaries can be traced back to the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, when European powers sought to take full political, economic and military control over the continent under European colonisation (Paine, Qiu, & Ricart-Huguet, 2024). Today, decades after African countries' independence, the imprints of colonial powers and pasts remain visible, including in social protection. In addition, postcolonial influences continue to shape social protection design and agendas across Africa.

The historical influence of colonial powers and the continued, deep-rooted engagement of international development actors (including bilateral donors from previous colonial administrations) in shaping social protection systems has been recognised across social and policy research (e.g. Adésinà, 2020; Mkandawire, 2016b; Schmitt, 2015), giving rise to questions about the extent to which the agendas of development agencies are aligned or in conflict with national priorities (Devereux, 2020).

At the same time, domestic ideological, political and socio-economic dynamics are core to decision-making in relation to national social protection policies and systems (e.g. Hickey, Lavers, Niño-Zarazúa, & Seekings, 2019). Although some countries may have been colonised by the same European country, their welfare systems have developed in different ways, adopting ideas and adapting them to local contexts (Seekings, 2020).

Notwithstanding the existing research in this area, the current evidence base on the role of coloniality in social protection remains limited. As global and national efforts to expand social protection systems continue (ILO [International Labour Organization], 2024a), it is vital to trace and unpack the role of coloniality. It is equally relevant to interrogate whether, and in what ways, coloniality features in the current policymaking dynamics around social protection, and to explore examples and future opportunities to strengthen country ownership while moving towards mature social protection systems. Or – in the words of Rutazibwa (2021) in relation to processes of decoloniality – to decide what to mourn and what to celebrate in carving a path forward.

The overall research question that this study seeks to answer is: **What is the role of coloniality in social protection in the Global South?**

We understand coloniality as the long-term patterns of power and oppression that resulted from colonialism and continue to exist long after the dissolution of colonial administrations. This is in line with the “colonial matrix of power” by Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and necessitates a reflection of how imperialism, evolving global power structures as well as historic and contemporary domestic struggles continue to influence African social protection systems. Unlike colonialism, which describes the direct political and economic domination of a colony by an empire, coloniality highlights how these power dynamics continue to influence culture, knowledge production and socio-economic systems, even after formal colonial rule has ended (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Therefore, the concept of coloniality foregrounds how the legacy of colonialism remains embedded within states that are assumed to be independent. The use of other terms is clarified in Box 2 and elaborated in Section 2.1.2.

Box 2: Glossary of definitions as adopted in this paper

Coloniality: The long-term patterns of power and oppression that resulted from colonialism and continue to exist long after the dissolution of colonial administrations.¹

Colonialism: Direct political and economic domination of a colony by an empire.²

Postcolonialism: The “creation of new transcultural forms (cultural, political and linguistic) within zones of contact produced by colonialism”,³ or the enduring economic, social, cultural and political consequences of colonialism and imperialism.

Decolonialism: “Ceasing to be subject to the rules and hierarchies imposed by a colonizing entity in the face of a country from which inferior behaviour is demanded.”⁴

Colonial legacy: Colonial legacy refers to the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times, that were maintained post-independence and that are still in place – in part or in full – at present.⁵

Postcolonial influence: Persistent power imbalances between Western countries and former colonies, which continue to shape social protection arrangements in African countries and across the Global South, even decades after independence.⁶

What is understood as social protection and what falls into its remit is contested and varies across countries and institutions. Moreover, there is a variety of (possible) synonyms commonly in use, including terms such as welfare, social security and social safety nets. Throughout this paper, we use the term “social protection” to refer to a sub-set of the broader area of social policy that spans the welfare, productive, redistributive and transformative functions of the state (Adésinà, 2007; Mkandawire, 2004). We adhere to a commonly used framing that separates formal, state-organised social protection along the lines of non-contributory and contributory interventions, and further divides these into social assistance, social care, social insurance (including health insurance), and labour market policies and interventions (see Carter, Roelen, Enfield, & Avis, 2019). When a different understanding of social protection emerges from the literature, interviews or case studies, this is clearly flagged.

To answer the study’s overarching research question, we present new evidence from a literature review, interviews with international (global and regional) stakeholders, and case studies from Côte d’Ivoire and Tanzania. These two countries were chosen given the relative dearth of information regarding the colonial influence on social policies in Côte d’Ivoire and Tanzania, and to counteract the bias towards Anglophone countries in the existing literature on the topic. This evidence is presented against the backdrop of a new analytical framework for understanding and engaging with how coloniality has – and continues to play – a role in shaping social protection arrangements in Africa and across the Global South. As such, this study offers both empirical and conceptual contributions to the field of social protection.

The focus of this study is on sub-Saharan Africa. A regional lens allows for in-depth analysis in relation to the region’s colonial past and current socio-economic realities, while at the same time acknowledging heterogeneity in and between countries across sub-Saharan Africa. This study’s

1 Based on Maldonado-Torres (2007).

2 Based on Kohn and Reddy (2024).

3 AI-generated definition based on International Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2020).

4 AI-generated definition based on Reference Module in Social Sciences (2024).

5 Based on MacLean (2002, 2017), Mlambo, Masuku and Mthembu (2024).

6 Based on Plange and Mumtaz (2023).

empirical findings and analytical framework serve to better understand colonial path dependencies, continued postcolonial influence and the broader systems-level implications of coloniality within current social protection arrangements across the Global South.

A focus on sub-Saharan Africa is especially pertinent given the low levels of coverage. The most recent “World Social Protection Report” published by the International Labour Organization shows that, for the first time, more than half of the world’s population (52.4 per cent) was covered by at least one social protection benefit in 2023 (ILO, 2024a). In sub-Saharan Africa, however, coverage was only 19.1 per cent in 2023. This divides into 10.3 per cent of the population covered by at least one contributory benefit, and 8.7 per cent of the population covered by at least one non-contributory benefit (ILO, 2024a). It should be noted that these figures only include national policies enshrined in law and do not take into account temporary schemes, pilot interventions, non-governmental support or informal social protection arrangements.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we describe the methodological approach, data sources and justification for selected country case studies. Section 3 presents the “social protection and coloniality” analytical framework. Section 4 discusses findings from the literature, semi-structured interviews with international stakeholders and the case studies in Tanzania and Côte d’Ivoire in relation to the role of coloniality in social protection, while Section 5 includes reflections on the ways forward as provided by research participants. Finally, in Section 6, we offer concluding remarks, reflect on the research questions and offer recommendations.

2 Methodological approach and study components

The methodological approach for undertaking this framework paper is three-fold.⁷

2.1 Literature review

We conducted a literature review, drawing on both empirical and conceptual/theoretical literature, including academic publications; working- and policy papers by research and development organisations; and – where relevant – documents by multinational and bilateral development organisations. In doing so, we drew on literature and documentation from across disciplines, fields of study and policy areas. This includes, but is not limited to, scholarship and documentation on (i) coloniality, decolonisation and post-colonialism, (ii) policy transfers and (iii) political settlements, especially within the realm of social protection. We also used Undermind, a generative AI tool, to complement our manual literature search and to generate an overview of social protection models and policies established by colonial powers, as presented in Section 4.1.3.

The examined bodies of scholarship all relate to the politics, power dynamics and the political economy of social policymaking, involving external actors as well as domestic stakeholders. This is important given the highly political nature of social protection that interacts with power dynamics, access to resources and political preferences (Gumede, 2018). In African countries, and notably sub-Saharan Africa, such power relations, access to resources and hegemonic policy ideas have long been skewed in favour of donors and international organisations largely led by policy experts and ideas from the Global North. At the same time, different governments

⁷ This research was undertaken with a favourable opinion of the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), reference number 2024-0494-2 and the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology, permit number CST00000690-2024-2024-00880. No separate ethics approval was required for research in Côte d’Ivoire.

in Africa have adopted distinct development ideologies throughout history, while actively advocating for their own policy preferences – pointing to the pivotal role of domestic actors and factors in the evolution of public policy.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews with international and regional stakeholders

Second, we undertook semi-structured interviews with social protection stakeholders across academia, civil society and international organisations globally. These offer insights into how historical and current influences play out in the sphere of international policymaking on social protection and beyond, through both multilateral and bilateral relationships. Interviewees were selected based on their expertise in their respective fields and organisations, and their experience from working in different country contexts (including Africa), areas of social protection and social policy, and from their scholarship in relation to coloniality and decolonisation. Deliberate efforts were made to include social protection experts of African origin.

A total of 16 interviews were completed by 30 November 2024 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of semi-structured interviews at the international level

Interview category	Number of interviewees	Code
International/UN organisations	4	INT
Bilateral partners/ donor agencies	6	BIL
Civil society	1	CSO
Academic or independent experts/scholars	5	EXP

Note: One of the international/ United Nations (UN) agency respondents and one of the civil society representatives were also counted in the Côte d'Ivoire case study, as they were working as international representatives in the country.

Source: Authors

The majority of interviewees offered consent under the condition they remained anonymous. Given the small size of the international social protection community, this means we refrain from attributing quotes to individuals or organisations unless consent has been explicitly provided. We use the codes as provided in Table 1 when including quotes to illustrate the analysis.

All interviews were recorded (with permission), transcribed and uploaded in NVivo software for coding. A first reading and preliminary analysis of the first set of 12 interviews led to the development of a common coding framework. All transcripts were coded using this framework to support thematic analysis of the interview material.

2.3 Country case studies

Third, we conducted case studies in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire to gain in-depth understanding of the historical trajectories and current dynamics in shaping social protection, and the role of coloniality within those. These involve a documentary analysis of the relevant national development strategies, social protection policies and legislation; a review of existing literature on social policy and coloniality in the two countries; and interviews with domestic and international stakeholders on the ground.

Although both mainland Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire are situated in sub-Saharan Africa, they constitute distinct case studies given their different colonial histories, donor landscapes and

influence, and state of social protection (see Table 2). Both countries face significant but distinct development challenges. Whereas Tanzania, with a large rural population, struggles to overcome wide-scale poverty, Côte d'Ivoire has a strong and growing economy tainted by deep inequalities, as it relies on a rentier and export-oriented economy, in which “the wealth and income generated get appropriated, accumulated, and consolidated at the top” (Combaz, 2020).

The inclusion of mainland Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire as case studies allows for insights from a Francophone West African country with significant historical and contemporary French influence, and an Anglophone East African country with a unique historical political identity rooted in African socialism and a donor landscape dominated by Anglophone and Northern European countries.

Table 2: Overview of semi-structured interviews at the international level

	Tanzania	Côte d'Ivoire
Colonial past	UK (1919-1961) Germany (1880s-1919)	France (1893-1960)
Civil war (independence era)	-	2002-2007; 2011
LMIC category (World Bank)	Lower-middle-income country	Lower-middle-income country
Population size	67.7 million (2023)	28.9 million (2023)
GDP per capita	US\$1,192.77 (2022)	US\$2,486.41 (2022)
Human Development Index	0.55 (2021)	0.55 (2021)
Gini index*	40.5 (2023)	35.3 (2023)
Poverty (international poverty line of US\$2.15/day; 2017 PPP**)	43.5% (2023)	9.7% (2023)
Share of the population with health insurance	15% (2021)	51.1% (2024)
Public expenditure on social protection	1.7% (2019)	1.2% (2018)

Note: * Measure of income inequality; ** purchasing power parity

Source: Authors

In Tanzania, the government increased its budget allocation for social protection over recent years and introduced a number of new social insurance schemes for the informal sector – including the 2021 National Informal Sector Scheme. In the 2021/22 financial year, the budget represented 8.7 per cent of the total government budget. However, the social welfare budget is dominated by external development funds, which represented 89 per cent of the social welfare budget for social protection in the financial year 2021/22. Seventy-nine per cent of this was directed to the World Bank-funded Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN) (UNICEF, 2022), which was established in 2012. The draft Tanzania Mainland National Social Protection Policy 2022 focuses on four pillars of social protection, namely contributory, non-contributory, social welfare and productive inclusion. This is in alignment with the government's productivist development vision.

Côte d'Ivoire has been running a World Bank-led Productive Safety Net Programme (Programme Filets Sociaux Productifs) since 2015. Yet, the most recent World Bank Country Partnership Framework for Côte d'Ivoire (2023-2027) highlights that “the system in place is still limited” and that “the priorities are to make the safety nets system more inclusive and adaptive” (World Bank, 2022). Overall, the country has more heavily focused on domestically driven contributory schemes through the launch of the universal health insurance (Couverture Maladie

Universelle, CMU) and a social insurance scheme to the informal sector in 2020⁸ (Régime Sociale des Travailleurs Indépendants, RSTI). A social protection strategy was launched in 2023, promising an expansion of pro-poor social protection. Nevertheless, current arrangements remain limited in reach.

In both Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire, we traced the development of social protection from colonial times through to the present and analysed current social protection arrangements against this historical understanding. This was done through a literature review and interviews with key stakeholders on the ground, which included 10 interviewees in Côte d'Ivoire and 15 interviewees in Tanzania. Interviews were conducted both in English and in local official languages (i.e. French and Swahili) and transcribed for analysis on NVivo. Detailed analyses for both country case studies are presented in separate case study papers (see Lambin & Bado, 2025; Lambin & Muangi, 2025). In this framework paper, we draw on these case study papers in order to offer analysis and contribute towards answering the research questions as well as feed into the development of our analytical framework.

3 Social protection and coloniality – analytical framework

Based on the literature review and the preliminary analysis of international interviews and country case study material, we developed a new analytical framework for understanding and interrogating coloniality in social protection across the Global South, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular.

A range of existing studies have considered the factors shaping social protection across low- and middle-income countries. In a quantitative study of 91 countries, Schmitt explores the role of colonial influence on countries' social security systems and finds that "colonial heritage is a crucial factor in explaining the adoption and form of social security programs in countries outside OECD-world" (Schmitt, 2015, p. 332). Mkandawire reaches a similar conclusion in relation to social protection in Africa, indicating "that welfare regimes in Africa have been strongly determined by the ways in which different countries were incorporated into the colonial economy" (Mkandawire, 2016b, p. iii). These studies point to the enduring footprint of policies and systems that were put in place during colonial times.

Other studies have highlighted country-level political and socio-economic factors, albeit in interplay with global dynamics. In an analysis of key aspects relevant for shaping social protection, Hickey (2008) zooms in on (i) political institutions, (ii) political actors and agencies, (iii) socio-economic forces and (iv) global dimensions. Similarly, in their analysis of the factors that feed into social protection at the country level, Niño-Zarazúa, Barrientos, Hickey and Hulme (2012) identify (i) politics and the policy process; (ii) financial viability and (iii) institutional capacity as key determinants of social protection systems.

More recently, studies point to the interplay of colonial legacy, domestic factors and global dimensions, with the understanding of the latter being more explicitly rooted in notions of postcolonial influence. For example, based on a systematic review, Niño-Zarazúa, Horigoshi, Santillán Hernández and Tiburcio (2022) identify six broad categories of explanatory factors for the development of social protection systems across LMICs, including historical legacies and path dependencies; the role of external actors and institutions; economic and demographic factors; international and domestic ideas; and covariate shocks.

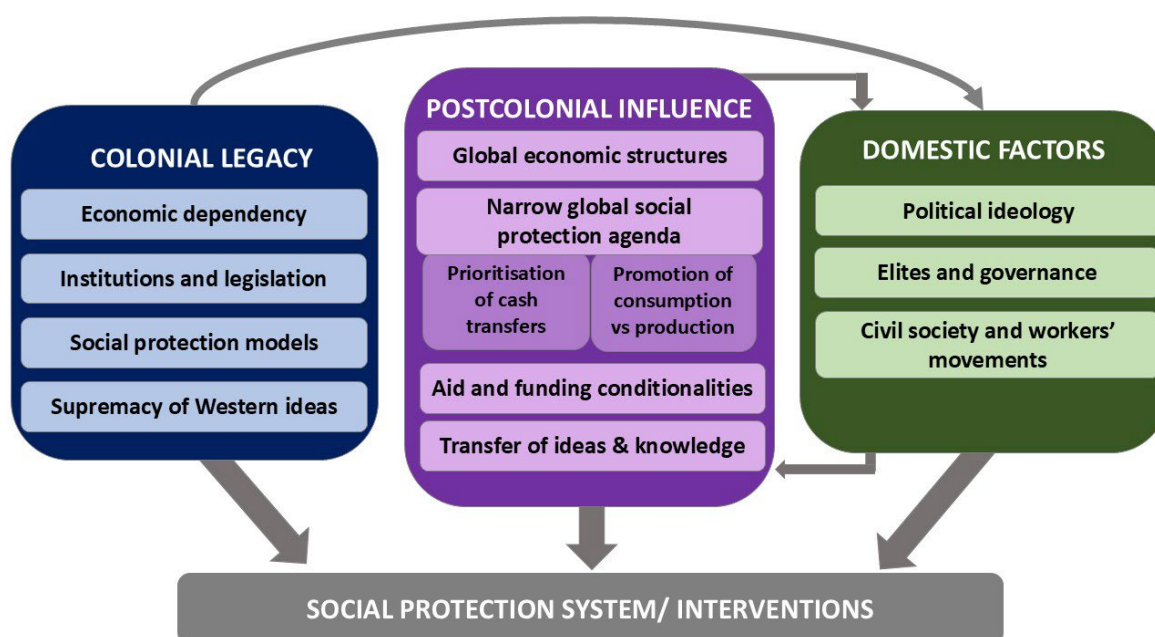
8 See PNUD and Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances (2022) for social protection investments by external agencies across different programmes.

A preliminary analysis of the interview material and case study data surfaced three pathways that influence social protection arrangements and systems, namely (i) colonial legacy, (ii) postcolonial influence and (iii) domestic factors.

- **Colonial legacy** refers to arrangements that were put in place during colonial times and are still in place today in their original form, or more likely, in adapted or scaled forms. This pertains to institutional or legislative setups, or to specific social protection policies. Social pensions in Southern Africa, for example, are an example of interventions that were established during colonial times – especially in former British Colonies – that are still in place today (EXP-3; EXP-4).
- **Postcolonial influence** pertains to the ongoing influence and power exerted by Western and European stakeholders in shaping social protection. This includes, but is not limited to, the ascendancy and persistence of neoliberalism as the dominant global ideology. It is commonly identified as the frame of reference against which international actors push and promote their models of social protection (EXP-2; EXP-5), which can be in line with or in contrast to domestic ideologies (EXP-4).
- **Domestic factors** refer to in-country political and socio-economic factors, especially as they interact with colonial legacy and postcolonial influence. This includes the ways in which certain governments resist external pressure to adopt limited forms of social protection or champion their own priorities, such as universal health coverage in Côte d'Ivoire (BIL-5).

These three pathways form the foundation of the “social protection and coloniality” framework for understanding the role of coloniality in social protection in sub-Saharan Africa, and other contexts with similar history. Combining insights from the literature review and a preliminary analysis of the interview material and case study data, we identified components within each of the pathways (see Figure 1). These are especially fine-grained for the colonial legacy and postcolonial influence pathways, given the study’s aim to surface the role of coloniality in social protection.

Figure 1: “Social protection and coloniality” framework



Source: Authors

This framework allows us to break down the overall research question – **What is the role of coloniality in social protection?** – to facilitate a more fine-grained analysis. The sub-research questions guiding the analysis in this paper are therefore as follows:

- 1) What is the **colonial legacy** in social protection, that is, what are the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times, that were maintained post-independence, and that are still in place – in part or in full – at present?
- 2) What are the **postcolonial influences** in social protection, that is, what are the continued patterns of power imbalances that shape social protection arrangements in countries in Africa and across the Global South, even decades after independence?
- 3) What are the **political economy factors at the domestic level** that play into country-level social protection arrangements?

As shown in the diagram in Figure 1 representing the analytical framework – and as will be evident from the discussion of findings throughout this paper – these three factors cannot be considered in isolation. A critical assessment of the role of coloniality in social protection requires a consideration of how colonial legacies and continued external influences interact with domestic dynamics in the shaping of social protection. The limited fiscal space for social protection is a case in point. It has been estimated that creating nationally appropriate social protection systems in developing economies by 2030 will cost US\$1.4 trillion, or 3.3 per cent of their gross domestic products (GDPs) (United Nations, 2024). Yet, the total external public debt in Africa has nearly tripled since 2009, reaching US\$655 billion in 2022 (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). Tanzania had a GDP of US\$79.16 billion in 2023, and the public debt amounted to 45.7 per cent of GDP at the end of fiscal year 2022/23 (International Monetary Fund, 2024). In Côte d'Ivoire, GDP reached US\$78.79 billion in 2023, with public debt at 56.8 per cent of GDP at the end of 2022 (International Monetary Fund, African Dept., 2023). This creates a restricted domestic fiscal space for social protection expenditures, and can exacerbate donor dependence. At the same time, African countries need a viable economic and trade context to increase (tax) revenue for wealth redistribution in the form of social protection. However, global economic structures mean their position in the market system remains highly disadvantaged. Sub-Saharan Africa countries – like LMICs more generally – are also on unequal footing on financial markets, as “the cost of private capital in low- and middle-income countries can be up to seven times higher than that in Europe and the UK”, partially due to currency risk (UK International Development, 2023).

Aiming to adopt a forward-looking approach and contribute to a constructive debate of how harmful patterns of coloniality might be disrupted, we also consider a fourth question:

- 4) What are **ways forward** to support countries in Africa and the Global South in shaping social protection arrangements in line with their own priorities?

4 Colonial legacy, postcolonial influence and domestic factors in social protection

In this section, we discuss findings from the literature, semi-structured interviews and case studies in relation to the first three sub-research questions, in turn.

4.1 Colonial legacy

In this section, we consider: What is the **colonial legacy** in social protection, that is, what are the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times, that were maintained post-independence, and that are still in place – in part or in full – at present?

As evidenced by MacLean (2002, 2017), for example, colonial legacies in West Africa have translated into different types of implementation of policy reform under Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), different approaches to decentralisation, different state–community relations as well as different levels of informal social security (MacLean, 2002, 2017). Any analysis of such a legacy needs to be framed against an understanding of colonialism and imperialism as deeply extractive and exploitative. In an attempt to put a monetary value on the pervasiveness of the Global North’s appropriation of raw materials, land, energy and labour, Hickel, Dorninger, Wieland and Suwandi (2022) find that US\$242 trillion were extracted from the Global South between 1990 and 2015 alone. As noted by Mlambo: “Post-colonial Africa has never recovered from colonialism, let alone let go of its socio-economic and political frameworks” (Mlambo, Masuku, & Mthembu, 2024, p. 4).

It is against this backdrop that a reading of the literature and thematic analysis led to the identification of four aspects of colonial legacy that have influenced current social protection systems across sub-Saharan Africa, namely (i) economic dependency, (ii) institutional and legislative arrangements, (iii) colonial models of social protection and (iv) hegemony of Western ideas and models.

4.1.1 Economic disadvantage and dependency

Patterns of economic extraction and exploitation set up during colonial times have left a legacy of deeply unequal economic ties, placing countries across sub-Saharan Africa in a position of economic disadvantage and dependence that constrains – or at the very least shapes – their economic policies. Post-independence, trade agreements and foreign investment policies continued to favour former colonial powers and multinational corporations, perpetuating unequal exchange (Amin, 1976; Bamba, 2016). African states remain primary exporters of raw materials while facing barriers to industrialisation and value-added production. At the same time, capital flight, often facilitated by multinational corporations, depletes national resources (e.g. Ndikumana & Boyce, 2011).

The cases of Tanzania and Côte d’Ivoire offer pertinent examples. Experiences in these countries patently show how colonial administrations installed deeply extractive economic models in Tanzania (then Tanganyika) and Côte d’Ivoire. These models were characterised by the predominance of low-value cash crops for export, a dependence on imports for manufactured goods and the disproportionate economic development of major urban centres at the expense of impoverished inner lands. The trends set in colonial times have continued into contemporary times, locking both countries in subordinate positions within the global economy with important internal structural inequalities (without omitting the “economic miracle” of Côte d’Ivoire in the early dependence era; see Lambin & Bado, 2025). Country-level stakeholders

highlighted the implications of these economic dependencies for the government's fiscal space and ability to independently implement and expand social policy initiatives.

African economies are still heavily dependent on the export of raw materials, and this limited resources available for social protection. So if we have that economic dependency on the Global North, it undermines the capacity of our economies to generate sufficient revenue for people – right to finance social protection, for example. (CSO-1)

A colonial legacy that remains especially important in Francophone West Africa is the way in which the CFA franc (Communauté Financière Africaine / West African CFA franc) ties countries' hands in terms of their monetary policy. The CFA franc was introduced in 1945 and is still used by eight countries, including Côte d'Ivoire. The value of the currency is guaranteed by France, on the condition that countries hold at least half of their foreign reserves in the French Treasury. As noted by one respondent from a regional civil society group:

If the French treasury holds a significant portion of the foreign exchange reserves of the CFA franc zone, what is left for these economies? What liberty do they have [...] on their own economies? (CSO-1)

The economic constraints imposed on countries in the CFA economic zone was also recognised by an international expert, who noted that countries

can't invest into their, or their fiscal space is extremely constrained and always adjusted to inflation. They cannot invest more than a certain amount in their social and public domain. (EXP-5)

These views are equally reflected in the current publications and debates on the topic, calling for the dismantling of "Africa's last colonial currency" (e.g. Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021).

Another dimension of the economic disadvantage stemming from colonial economic and administrative models is the persistence of ethnic disparities. The colonial ordering of who (or which ethnic group) has access to resources and power led to economic disparities and inter-ethnic dependencies in many African countries. Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, has pursued ethnic-tribal politics since independence and went through two civil wars in the 2000s. Both the literature and empirical evidence on this country underscore the deep internal economic divisions caused by French colonial powers (Chauveau & Dozon, 1988).

This colonial legacy influences social protection in two indirect ways. First, it dictates who participates in policymaking processes and deliberations around social protection, with a tendency for them to be members of the dominant ethnic group in government. Second, it affects who benefits from, or is entitled to, existing social protection programmes. Ethnic groups – particularly those that were more integrated into colonial economies – had better access to waged employment and formal social protection systems, such as pensions and labour benefits (Boone, 2003). This is exacerbated by social protection programmes since, in many African countries, programmes are concentrated in urban centres, where formal employment is more prevalent. Ethnic groups that are historically more urbanised – often due to colonial policies – tend to have better access to these programmes (Hickey, 2008). In turn, ethnic groups that are underrepresented in formal employment in the private and government sectors (including due to deliberate exclusion during colonial times) remain poorly covered by formal social insurance arrangements and depend on social safety net programmes and informal social security.

4.1.2 Institutional and legislative arrangements

The colonial legacy remains visible in current institutional and legislative arrangements in countries across sub-Saharan Africa. One bilateral partner noted:

In social protection, we encounter the colonial legacy every day because like the legal environment in many countries is [a] direct colonial legacy. And we have in so many countries still that the laws are there which were enacted maybe in the 1920s. And this is still a legal basis. (BIL-3)

Yet, they note, this colonial legacy is often overlooked and ignored, which is problematic in understanding and developing current social protection arrangements.

Indeed, in former French colonies, the influence of the French system in legislative arrangements remains visible, including in constitutional law, civil and commercial codes, and labour regulations that were introduced initially by France. British colonial rule in Africa established legal systems that were based on English common law. By comparison, these systems were more flexible than those initiated by the French and incorporated customary and indigenous laws to varying degrees (Mamdani, 2018).

In terms of social protection, many former British colonies inherited contributory pension schemes and institutional arrangements modelled after British civil service pensions, for example the National Pension Scheme Authority (NAPSA) in Zambia; the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) in Kenya and Uganda. Similarly, most previous French colonies retained legal frameworks, while labour codes and pension systems remain structurally similar to French models – albeit with domestically driven adaptations, notably regarding informal sector workers. In Côte d'Ivoire, interviewees made direct references to social protection legislation being heavily influenced by the French system:

Our social protection, like even our legal arsenal, is copied from France. It's copied from France. [...] We remain within the framework, but in the implementation tools, we integrate the documents, the tools used in the English-speaking systems, otherwise we copy from France. (IC-8)

An international example of a framework of which the historical context is commonly overlooked is the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention No. 102. Ratified in 1952, the convention put forward minimum standards across nine branches of social security, including medical care, unemployment benefits, family benefits and old-age benefits, among other items, and countries were able to ratify the convention if they had at least three of these nine branches (Myers, 1952). To date, 48 countries have ratified the convention (ILO, 2024b). As noted by ILO itself, it is “the flagship of all ILO social security Conventions, as it is the only international instrument, based on basic social security principles, that establishes worldwide-agreed minimum standards for all nine branches of social security” (ILO, 2012).

Former colonies, including those in Africa, only began ratifying the convention after gaining independence – for example, Togo signed in 2013 and Côte d'Ivoire in 2023. However, the fact that the convention was originally established by European powers prior to independence – yet continues to serve as a global blueprint for national social protection systems – suggests that it may also be viewed as a colonial legacy. The convention's minimum standards across nine branches, as defined in 1952, were reaffirmed in 2012 by ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation No. 202. One international respondent pointed out:

I have serious reservations about whether 1952 really reflects the reality of self-determined states' view of things right now. Whether you would want to go back and renegotiate that, probably not because it's very difficult to get international agreement. But 1952 was still at the height of colonialism, or perhaps the beginnings of the end of colonialism. So I think we have to be aware of that. (INT-3)

Respondents from Tanzania frequently noted that external actors, such as the ILO, continue to leverage the country's commitments to international soft law as a means of pressuring the government to expand and reform its social protection policies.

Some of the [colonial] issues did not benefit us in our environment. Some did, but we have to ensure that they align with international standards. For example, we have the ILO convention that prescribes the main benefits. Since 1952, we have been paying almost eight benefits that were not available during the colonial era. (TA-6)

[The key actor is] the government, which includes ministries, departments and government agencies. These entities have gone further to influence [social protection] institutions. International standards, such as ILO conventions, also play a role to some extent, as we follow some of the standards outlined in these conventions. (TA-6)

Respondents in both Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire highlighted the lasting influences of colonial administrations on system-level governance structures, particularly the entrenchment of centralised power. Some interviewees noted that these inherited systems fail to account for local forms of social organisation and culturally relevant approaches to social protection (e.g. those that place families and communities, rather than individuals, at the centre of policy design). At the same time, participants acknowledged that “re-imagining” social protection systems along these lines is challenging, given how deeply rooted existing models have become.

Before colonisation, social protection and social security existed at the family level through partnerships between families. However, during colonisation, there was no formal social protection system. At the state level, those who were formerly employed and officially recognised were often forced to establish social security schemes – not to protect the broader population, but rather to safeguard the jobs of workers in the fields and colonial production sectors. (TA-14)

And all of our systems are kind of captured, modelled on this way. So, it is difficult to think more deeply about our traditional systems of solidarity, which exist, in order to perhaps feel something more specific. (IC-1)

4.1.3 Colonial models of social protection

Midgley and Piachaud (2011) argue that it is impossible to understand social protection in the developing world without examining how welfare policies inherited from colonial times have influenced contemporary policymaking. In this section, we take a closer look at social protection models according to countries' colonial pasts as well as the variation within colonial groupings.

When tracing the colonial footprint in social protection across sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to recognise the diversity of experiences across the continent (EXP-2), not least because of their different colonial histories. One academic respondent (EXP-3) proposed that Africa can be broadly divided into regions according to former colonial powers, namely Francophone West and Central Africa, and Anglophone West, Eastern and Southern Africa. Although not mentioned explicitly by this respondent, a logical extension of this line of reasoning would also point to the specificities of Lusophone Africa.

An interviewee in Tanzania also highlighted key differences between former French and British colonies, emphasising that the extent to which local populations were included in social protection schemes varied significantly depending on the colonial administration:

There is a big difference between those who were under German or British rule compared to those under French rule. Under the French policy of assimilation, efforts were made to extend social protection to the local population. However, under German and British rule, external social protection during the colonial era was very minimal, benefiting only a small number of workers in the colonial administration, while the majority of Tanzanians remained excluded from social protection. (TA-11)

In a similar vein, the existing literature on British versus French influence on social protection models in Africa asserts that the British approach of indirect rule later led to the introduction of social protection policies when compared to colonies that were considered France's overseas territories or departments (see Devereux & Lund, 2010; Kangas, 2012; Kpessa & Béland, 2013; Luiz, 2013).

Moreover, when examining the composition of social protection systems, particularly the balance between (non-contributory) social assistance and (contributory) social insurance, there is evidence of a lasting influence from former colonial powers. Drawing on data from the World Bank's ASPIRE database, Walsham, Kuper, Morgan Banks and Blanchet (2019) found that, as of 2019, contributory schemes accounted for a significantly larger proportion of social protection schemes in Francophone Africa when compared to non-Francophone Africa; 9 out of 10 programmes in Francophone Africa were contributory, compared to 4 out of 10 in non-Francophone Africa.

An AI-generated overview of the characteristics of social protection systems in British-, French- or Portuguese-administered colonies equally points to distinctively different colonial "approaches" to social protection governance, administration and provisions (see Table 3). For example, social insurance was a more prominent feature in French colonies – in line with the discussion above – whereas the provision of basic health and education services was more common in British colonies. French and Portuguese administrations were highly centralised, whereas the British adopted a more decentralised administration model.

Table 3: Social protection systems (social insurance, social assistance, and social services) implemented in French, British and Portuguese colonies in Africa

Category	British administration	French administration	Portuguese administration
1. Administrative approach	- Decentralised model relying on indirect rule and local tribal structures for welfare administration (Grischow, 2013; MacLean, 2002; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023)	- Centralised system directly managed by colonial bureaucracies, often modelled on metropolitan France (Grischow, 2013)	- Weak centralised governance with highly exploitative systems focused on settler dominance (Jerónimo, 2023)
2. Target population	- Settlers, urban elites and labourers engaged in colonial economic systems (e.g. agricultural workers in settler zones) (Grischow, 2013; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023; Veit, Schlichte, & Karadag, 2017)	- Urban elites (“ <i>évolués</i> ”) and formal-sector workers, particularly in colonial civil service and industry (Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié, Delpy, & Ballet, 2024)	- Urban settler populations; tiny African elite after the late 1960s (Jerónimo, 2023)
3. Coverage	- Fragmented and limited, often regionally biased; minimal provisions for rural populations and informal sectors (Grischow, 2013; MacLean, 2002; Veit et al., 2017)	- Selective; included urban elites and formal-sector workers but excluded rural populations and informal labourers (Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié et al. 2024)	- Nearly non-existent for Africans during most of the colonial period; settler populations received the most benefits (Jerónimo, 2023)
4. Main mechanisms	- Community-level welfare through traditional structures; “work-for-welfare” principles (Grischow, 2013; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023; Veit et al., 2017)	- Labor-focused welfare tied to industrial productivity (e.g. <i>Code du Travail</i>); social insurance for formal workers (Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié et al., 2024)	- Minimal investment until the late 1960s; enforced labour (“ <i>chibalo</i> ”) operated as a substitute for welfare (Jerónimo, 2023)
5. Usual benefits provided	- Basic health and education services; occasional housing and food aid (Grischow, 2013; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023; Veit et al., 2017)	- Family allowances, health insurance in urban areas and industrial labour protections (Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié et al., 2024)	- Rudimentary health and education services for settlers; significant welfare absent for most Africans (Jerónimo, 2023)
6. Rural and informal workers	- Largely neglected except where tied to settler agricultural production (Grischow, 2013; Veit et al., 2017)	- Excluded from labour protections or formal welfare systems (Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié et al., 2024)	- Exploited through forced labour systems; minimal or no access to welfare (Jerónimo, 2023)

Category	British administration	French administration	Portuguese administration
7. Key late-colonial reforms	<p>- Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940s-50s) expanded welfare modestly (e.g. settler economies, urban aid)</p> <p>(Grischow, 2013; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023)</p>	<p>- Post-WWII investments (family allowances, health systems) central to expanded urban welfare programmes</p> <p>(Olié et al., 2024)</p>	<p>- Late reactionary reforms (1960s) aimed at placating independence movements, limited in scope and implementation</p> <p>(Jerónimo, 2023)</p>
8. Labour-centric framework	<p>- Measures tied to enhancing labour productivity in settler economies</p> <p>(Grischow, 2013; Schmitt & Shriwise, 2023)</p>	<p>- Social protections such as labour codes heavily tied to industrial labour and economic needs</p> <p>(Nguema-Eyegue, 1990; Olié et al., 2024)</p>	<p>- Welfare systems largely absent except weak late-colonial attempts to regulate labour policies for settlers</p> <p>(Jerónimo, 2023)</p>
9. Administrative capacity	<p>- Limited administrative reach and reliance on local structures impeded effective welfare expansion</p> <p>(Grischow, 2013; MacLean, 2002; Veit et al., 2017)</p>	<p>- Centralised governance saw stronger administrative coherence but limited implementation in rural areas</p> <p>(Olié et al., 2024)</p>	<p>- Weak administrative systems left post-colonial states struggling to institutionalise welfare</p> <p>(Jerónimo, 2023)</p>

However, an econometric analysis of determinants on the expansion of social protection across LMICs in the last two decades, including Africa, suggests that – if considered in combination with other factors such as economic conditions, foreign aid, donor influence and institutions – whether a country was colonised by the United Kingdom or France played no significant role, particularly in Africa (Niño-Zarazúa & Santillán Hernández, 2023).

Indeed, interviewees pointed to the important differences between the social protection among countries that were colonised by the same country. For instance, Tanzania saw less interest and investment from the British colonial administration than neighbouring Kenya, which was considered a more important colonial territory economically (Künzler, 2020), and Kenya's formal social protection arrangements today remain more extensive than those in Tanzania (Hickey, et al., 2019). Moreover, Southern Africa was highlighted by interviewees as the region with the strongest colonial imprint and “mirroring of European welfare models” (EXP-3), attributed to white settlers in countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. Nevertheless, despite a shared colonial power, their histories were very different. South Africa was a settler economy with a social protection system predicated on white supremacy and served to “uphold a racial hierarchy”. Botswana, by contrast, was “probably the lightest touch colonialism that I’m aware of anywhere in the British Empire” (EXP-4), and yet ended up with a very similar social protection system. At the same time, Zimbabwe was noted as an outlier within the region, as the ZANU-PF government decided not to maintain the old age pension system that was put in place by the British colonial administration (EXP-4). These reflections underscore the pertinence of country-specific factors in shaping social protection trajectories, beyond the colonial country grouping.

Mkandawire (2016b) offers an alternative comparative perspective that moves beyond the conventional emphasis on colonial groupings. Instead, he categorises African countries' social policy regimes based on how European colonial powers pursued access to cheap raw materials, labour and new markets. The first category is *cash crop economies*, primarily located in West Africa, where colonial administration encouraged a degree of local leadership and introduced minimal protections for those excluded from income through direct participation in commodity markets. Social protection in these contexts was largely informal and community-based, relying on local leadership, self-help and voluntary efforts to complement traditional forms of support (Mkandawire, 2016b).

The second category is *labour reserve economies*, notably in East and Southern Africa, where colonial policies coerced African populations into a settler-dominated capitalist labour market. This gave rise to highly targeted forms of social assistance, often aimed at the “urban indigent” (Mkandawire, 2016b, p. 6). Although initially highly racialised and largely inaccessible to indigenous populations, these schemes laid the foundation for post-independence – and, in the case of South Africa, post-Apartheid – policy expansion to the broader population. The third category comprises *concession economies*, most notably exemplified by the Congo Basin, where resource extraction was primarily undertaken by private companies. Mkandawire (2016b) offers a limited analysis of social protection in these settings, apart from highlighting the brutality of these regimes, with the central role being played by private corporate actors while managing vast natural resources.

Further insights into the enduring influence of colonial models of social protection can be gained by examining different types of policies in greater detail. Social insurance arrangements appear to have particularly strong historical roots in policies introduced during colonial times. Several international stakeholders noted that colonial administrations commonly established social insurance schemes for colonial officials and civil servants, many of which were maintained – albeit sometimes with modifications – after independence. As observed by one academic respondent:

Social insurance probably started earlier than social welfare or social assistance. [...] Social insurance was very big among civil servants and administrators, particularly

pensions, unemployment benefits and so on. And some of that was carried over. I'd say probably most of it was inherited, was a sort of a legacy of colonialism that post-colonial governments inherited and mostly maintained. (EXP-3)

These insights were largely corroborated by findings from Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire. Country-level interviewees systematically stressed the role of colonial administrations in initiating the first legislation on social insurance and in launching the first insurance funds – notably for civil servants – many of which have been continued (albeit with alterations). These forms of contributory social protection were viewed, in both countries, as constituting a fundamental feature of the social protection models today, and one of the only provisions with full legislative guarantees.

In fact, our system is derived from the colonial era, before independence. If you recall, before independence, certain groups received pensions, while others did not. Over time, we have developed and improved upon the colonial system to create the current structure. During the colonial period, there were pensionable and non-pensionable employees, but now, we believe there is no need to separate employees into these two categories. All employees are now pensionable, unless they fail to meet the specified eligibility conditions. (TA-6)

I believe that our model, the heir to the French model with [...] improved working conditions for workers, family allowances, the provision for pregnant women, the provision for retirement, all of that – these are social insurance mechanisms that we did not necessarily create here, that we inherited from older systems, but that we tried to strengthen here. (IC-9)

At the same time, it is important to note that over the past two decades, governments across sub-Saharan Africa have significantly expanded social protection legislation to include informal workers. This has involved the development of new social insurance schemes targeting individuals in the informal economy, as well as the introduction of legal frameworks and programmes aimed at achieving universal health coverage (see Cashin & Dossou, 2021; Lambin & Nyssölä, 2024). While this expansion may be seen as partly aligned with the colonial legacy of contributory social insurance, it also reflects a domestic re-orientation that acknowledges the centrality of the informal sector for African economies.

Box 3 offers an overview of explanations for differences in colonial legacy in social protection across Africa.

Box 3: Colonial legacy of social protection across Africa

Patterns established during the **colonial era** can help explain differences in the social protection arrangements adopted and still present across Africa.

1. *Differences in colonial administration* (e.g. British versus French) partially explains greater occurrence of contributory instruments in Francophone countries.
2. *Economic models* adopted in each colony explain the variations in social protection arrangements among cash crop, labour reserve and concession economies (Mkandawire, 2016b).
3. *Country-specific political and economic contexts* explain differences in coverage and timings of social protection arrangements in countries with shared colonial pasts (e.g. Tanzania versus Kenya).

Overall, an analysis of the literature and the interview material suggests that, although social protection models put in place during colonial times have left their mark, their footprint should

not be overestimated at the expense of other factors – both within and beyond the remit of coloniality.

4.1.4 Hegemony of Western ideas and models

Understanding colonial legacies in social protection requires acknowledging and investigating indigenous forms of social protection that have been, and remain, overlooked by hegemonic Western ideologies and policy models. This includes traditional informal systems of support as well as models for socio-economic organisation, as envisaged by liberation movements leading up to and immediately post-independence.

Having rejected market economies – as they represented an extension of colonialist systems – many African leaders pursued alternative socio-economic models. One idea that flowed from anticolonial thought in Africa was the “anticolonial social compact”. As explained by a regional scholar, the compact encompassed a vision for improving people’s lives post-independence through comprehensive social policy, including education, health and forms of social protection. It offered a more universal understanding of social policy, rather than a targeted approach to support vulnerable groups. Ideas for this compact were developed prior to independence and formed part of the liberation struggle and nation-building efforts in countries across Africa, including Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia (EXP-2). Another idea was the “affection economy”, which represented an indigenous form of social and economic organisation and constituted a constellation of support linked to blood, kin, community and village (Gumede, 2023).

Alternative models of social protection, especially when based on informal support and community-based models, tend to be contested based on their feasibility, fairness and effectiveness. This scepticism is not new, and history provides examples of longstanding informal mechanisms being undermined by their replacement with formal structures. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, the French colonial administration introduced mandatory subscription to Provident Societies aimed at local farmers (for background, see Lambin & Bado, 2025). These served to replace informal “tontines”, or rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), which the colonisers viewed as rife with cheating and inevitably dysfunctional (see French National Archives 1911 in MacLean, 2002).

A regional expert mentioned the long-standing existence of community-based support mechanisms, but emphasised limited knowledge about their effectiveness and the extent of their support, especially during the colonial era. While acknowledging the significance of these networks, the respondent also indicated that informal social protection is often romanticised, and the focus on solidarity over-emphasised (EXP-4) – thereby drawing into question whether they are appropriate models to be pursued.

However, whether indigenous or “home-grown” forms of social protection are more or less desirable is beyond the point here. What matters for comprehending the colonial legacy is that ideas such as the “anticolonial social compact” or “affection economy” went against the grain of Western-imposed models for socio-economic development (Gumede, 2023). Anticolonial thought, which underpinned resistance to imperialism by critiquing empires and envisioning a new future post-independence, “offered views of society from the ground up, in the dark underside of empire” (Go, 2023, p. 281), and were subsequently suppressed, ignored and overlooked.

4.2 Postcolonial influences

In this section, we tackle the second research question: What are the **postcolonial influences** in social protection, that is, what are the continued patterns of power imbalances that shape

social protection arrangements in countries in Africa and across the Global South, even decades after independence?

Postcolonial influence refers to how patterns of power imbalances continue to shape social protection arrangements in countries in Africa and across the Global South, even decades after independence. Postcolonialism can be defined as the “creation of new transcultural forms (cultural, political, and linguistic) within zones of contact produced by colonialism”.⁹ In relation to social policy, Plange and Alam highlight that

despite efforts to decolonize social policy, the basic logic of imperialism remains profoundly embedded in many institutions and behaviours [arguing that] in this context, it is vital to reconsider colonialism and social policy and critically scrutinise how imperialist logic continues to impact modern social programmes. (Plange & Alam, 2023, p. 1)

Like postcolonial literature and debate, decolonial scholarship acknowledges that political independence did not amount to genuine decolonisation. The concept of decolonisation can be understood as “ceasing to be subject to the rules and hierarchies imposed by a colonizing entity in the face of a country from which inferior behaviour is demanded”.¹⁰ Foundational principles of decolonisation are reflected in the “spirit of Bandung”, which guided the independence movement in Africa (and Asia) through a shared vision of development as a “liberatory human aspiration to attain freedom from political, economic, ideological, epistemological, and social domination that was installed by colonialism and coloniality” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012, p. 2). The concept of decolonisation emerged from Latin America, a region that experienced independence movements a century before the African liberation. Observing that formal independence does not eradicate colonial legacies, Latin American intellectuals expressed scepticism towards legalistic approaches to “decolonisation”. Instead, they argued that genuine decolonisation requires a comprehensive re-evaluation and restructuring of existing institutions and knowledge systems (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 120).

The analysis presented in this section shows that social protection has not been “decolonised”, and postcolonial influence – soon after independence and to this day – remains a significant determinant of countries’ social policy frameworks, including in the realm of social protection. This influence, as evidenced in the literature and reported by respondents, is manifested through mechanisms such as the maintenance of unfavourable global economic structures, a reduction in the scope of social policies towards targeted social protection, the prioritisation of poverty-targeted social assistance over more comprehensive policies, an emphasis on production rather than consumption, the imposition of aid and funding conditionalities, and the exportation of specific ideas and knowledge to former colonies.

4.2.1 Maintaining unfavourable global economic structures

True “decolonisation” of social policy and social protection arguably constitutes “independent” policy processes and structures whereby governments define the ideological foundations, design the policy agendas and lead the implementation of policies and interventions. However, the realisation of independent policymaking in the African context – including in social protection – is bound by ongoing economic dependence rooted in unequal global market structures, which perpetuate the patterns of exploitative economic relationships stemming from colonial rule. As Gumede (2018, p. 132) argues: “the idea that political freedom would translate to total emancipation and progress for the people has become a mere illusion as foreign powers and their representatives still hold the lever of the state in terms of economic domination”.

9 AI-generated definition based on International Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2020).

10 AI-generated definition based on Reference Module in Social Sciences (2024).

Africa's unfavourable position in trade, finance, technology and investment within the global economic order – as first exposed by anticolonial scholars such as Amin (1997) and Ake (1996) – continues to be true today. Aid-receiving countries have long been dependent on the United States, the EU and the Bretton Woods institutions for aid as well as trade, foreign direct investment and even security (Dobbin, Simmons, & Garret, 2007). In the Francophone CFA community, this is exacerbated by France's ongoing monetary control (e.g. Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021), also discussed in Section 3.1.1.

A representative from a regional civil society organisation highlighted the persistent patterns of extraction and exploitation of natural resources – reminiscent of the colonial era – and referred to sophisticated schemes of transfer pricing and profit-shifting:

This represents a continuation of colonial economic patterns where wealth is extracted. From the Global South to benefit the Global North. (CSO-1)

Trade liberalisation and concurrent trade and investment policies were marked as especially disadvantageous for African countries, undermining local agricultural industries and resulting in the loss of livelihoods. Representatives from the regional civil society organisation poignantly questioned: How is it that “two countries in Africa that produce close to 70 per cent of the world's cocoa” have the poorest farmers on the planet? (CSO-1).

Continued economic dependence of African countries on the Global North and the unfavourable conditions underpinning, for example, the export of raw materials, is one of the factors that respondents noted as hampering the ability to develop or expand social protection, as “it undermines the capacity of our economies to generate sufficient income” to finance social protection (CSO-1). These insights were echoed by stakeholders in Tanzania, in a context where around 26 million people live below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day (World Bank, 2020), while the only social assistance programme, the PSSN, reaches only about five million people. Interviewees from Tanzania highlighted that the lack of domestic resources limits the expansion of population coverage under the PSSN programme and hinders the introduction of new schemes:

TASAF [Tanzania Social Action Fund] uses targeted cash transfers because universal programmes would require resources we do not have. (TA-6)

The government evaluates the feasibility of programmes carefully. [...] Research on cash transfers for young women showed strong results, it's an expensive model. It's understandable that the government didn't adopt it, as funding such a programme within their schemes is challenging. (TA-4)

Various respondents stressed that high levels of indebtedness were constraining the fiscal space available for social protection and other social services. As one international expert noted:

Especially post-COVID, you have lots of debt servicing that's happening at the moment because of the crisis that has happened. So they have to invest heavily into debt servicing rather than into their education, social protection or any aspect of social policy. (EXP-5)

Similarly, respondents from a regional civil society organisation expressed concerns about governments cutting funds for social service provision, essentially being forced to introduce austerity measures to pay for debt servicing (CSO-1).

In other words, the perpetuation of profoundly unfavourable conditions under which African countries participate in global markets arguably has a dual negative effect on social protection. Firstly, it maintains high levels of poverty and economic insecurity, thereby increasing the

demand for social protection. Secondly, it decreases the capacities of these nations to establish and finance such structures.

4.2.2 Narrowing of the global social protection agenda

In the first few decades after independence, many African leaders conceptualised social policy as a broad policy area (see Section 4.1.4) and used it as a nation-building tool. Wide-scale efforts to build capacity and provision across areas of education, health care and housing were a key component of the nationalist project. They constituted both important rights for the newly independent African populations – and key instruments under a transformative strategy to build solidarity and a national identity – and sought to bolster population wellbeing and economic activity for the purposes of full emancipation from colonial powers (e.g. Aina, 2004; Ouma, 2020).

In Côte d'Ivoire, government expenditure on education and health grew from 28 per cent in 1965 to 33 per cent in 1975. This coincided with significant increases in education enrolment. Primary school enrolment among school-aged children rose from 33 per cent at independence to 55 per cent in 1975. Secondary school enrolment expanded from 15,000 pupils in 1960 to around 90,000 in 1975, while the University of Abidjan also experienced substantial growth, reaching 6,000 students in the mid-1970s – a notable expansion from the initial enrolment of 1,000 students during its establishment in 1959 (den Tuinder, 1978).

Similarly, in Tanzania, Julius Nyerere's early independence government invested heavily in social policy. Between 1963 and 1967, the housing sector expanded by 38 per cent per year to provide housing for the growing urban workforce, and government spending on education increased on average by 7.6 per cent per annum (Mchomvu, 1998; Stabler, 1979; Tungaraza, 1990). Investments in health care were also significant, and by 1978, 90 per cent of Tanzanians were no further than 10 kilometres away from a health clinic (Thomas, 1983).

However, there was a considerable U-turn taken in social policy framing and provision in African countries in the 1980s, whereby universalist social policy provision based on citizens' rights was dismantled and replaced by fee-based provisions and ideals of individual responsibility – as spurred on by international financial institutions (see Adésinà, 2007; Aina, Chachage, & Annan-Yao, 2004). Significant investments in social policy by the new independent governments in the 1960s were reversed, rather than built upon or expanded. This rupture in the mid-1980s in social policymaking across the African continent is strongly related to the ascendancy of neoliberalism, with its ideas of free market, service privatisation and fiscal consolidation (Bayliss, Fine, & Robertson, 2016; Mkandawire, 2011; Saad-Filho, 2010). This ideology was spearheaded by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan, and it was justified by Western economists such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek.

An important contributor to the interruption in the expansion of social policy were SAPs, whereby international financial institutions (i.e. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank) required cutbacks in public and social policy delivery, the introduction of co-payments (i.e. fees) for access to services, and general austerity policies (including reductions in the number of civil servants) as conditions to access loans amid the important budget crises afflicting the region. As Ouma states, "the rollback on social provisions reversed models instituted by governments after independence" (Ouma, 2020, p. 824).

In a similar vein, one respondent from a bilateral donor noted that SAPs were "a missed opportunity" in terms of rethinking social policy and public service provision in many countries, as

on the one hand, economically it's been a success. It's following such an adjustment that most of the countries got back into a pattern of economic growth. But as we know very well, it has also been a shock on social services that have been cut. (BIL-5)

There has been a considerable knock-on effect in terms of broad provisioning of social policy, with the same respondent suggesting it was “a bizarre approach” to not only stop hiring workers into the civil service but also to stop training them, and “we are still paying the price now” (BIL-5).

The case of Tanzania highlights the overwhelming impact of SAPs in reversing even strong development ideologies and policy strategies such as those implemented by the Nyerere government under the Ujamaa project. As noted by a policy respondent from Tanzania:

Governments not spending so much on the social sectors [...] has had a huge impact in terms of schooling, university. [...] Education was free. Now education is not so free. There was food in schools. Now there are very few children at schools [with] food. [...] You start increasing the poverty circle of the haves and have-nots. (TA-1)

In Côte d'Ivoire, as in Tanzania, stakeholders stressed the significance of the impacts of SAP-induced austerity policies for the population regarding their wellbeing as well as inequality:

And in the days of the IMF, in the years '80, '90 to '95 and what is in mind, it was necessary to reduce social services under the pretext of development. But hey, we have reviewed all the subsidies in terms of health and education. And on a social level, we saw what happened. And today, these same Bretton Woods actors are going back to say that the development indicator is that health, social issues and education must be taken into account. [...] Thank God, because they realised they were wrong. (IC-2)

As noted in the citation above, the World Bank and IMF altered their position after the drastic impacts of SAPs on poverty and human suffering were recognised and called out. This occurred partially thanks to pressures from other key development organisations. The UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) pushed back against the SAPs' devastating effects and sought to offer an antidote, as conveyed in their 1985 publication “Adjustment with a Human Face”. In a bid to put a stop to and reverse severe human costs, it argued for the removal of service user fees and investment in public services (Jolly, 1991).

However, the change in the World Bank's policy orientation from the 1990s onwards has only been partial. Fiscal consolidation and an emphasis on narrowly targeted social safety nets became the new normal (Adésinà, 2011; Mkandawire, 2016a). Various scholars have argued that the “new” approach of social safety nets devised by international actors in the 1990s reflected British Poor Law from the 19th century, with a heavy focus on targeting the most deprived populations with limited social protection mechanisms – especially cash transfers. This was a far cry from the universalist, nation-building social policies pursued by the early independent governments (Adésinà, 2020; Mkandawire, 2016a). At the same time, this more targeted approach has also been endorsed by government actors across sub-Saharan Africa, as discussed in more detail in Section 4.3.

The ILO, in turn, underwent extensive debates in the run-up to the 2012 Social Protection Floor Recommendation No. 202, particularly between those promoting a rights-based approach, which frames social protection as a fundamental human right, and those in favour of a needs-based approach, which targets assistance to the most vulnerable populations (Engström, 2019). Although Recommendation No. 202 is rooted in the human rights discourse, it illustrates a more minimalist view of universalism. Whereas in the 1950s, the ILO advocated for universalism across a wide range of social services, including education and housing, its Social Protection

Floors Recommendation¹¹ does not spell out the need for publicly and universally provided social services (Lavinás, 2017; Martínez Franzoni & Sanchez-Ancochea, 2016).

The influence of “universalist” global agendas can also be detected in relation to universal health coverage, promoted by the World Health Organization and included in target 3.8 of the Sustainable Development Goals. In Côte d’Ivoire, the CMU was launched in 2019/2020 and constitutes one of the leading government social protection agendas with a mandatory universal health insurance design. In Tanzania, the 2023 law on universal health coverage is pursuing similar lines of action, pointing to the pertinence of this global agenda for domestic policy landscapes in Africa. However, as criticised in the extant literature, the universal health coverage agenda has been distilled into implementation through universal health insurance, rather than universal, national health systems (such as in Botswana) – highlighting once again the narrow views of universalism that dominate global policy circles (e.g. Giovanella et al., 2018; Smithers & Waitzkin, 2022).

Interviewees also pointed to the role of international agencies in narrowing the scope, moving the focus away from supporting the social policy landscape from a holistic perspective to promoting a more confined set of welfare-type policies in the shape of social protection. As noted by one regional scholar:

Governments have been increasingly pushed into this space where they’re promoting, they’re investing more in cash transfers rather than broader social policy. (EXP-1)

One expert pointed to the hypocrisy inherent in the push towards a narrow policy orientation by actors from the Global North. Whereas countries in the Global North established their own broad-based social policies in support of human capital and wellbeing in the first half of the 20th century, they did not allow African countries to do the same in the 1960s and 1970s during the early stages of the post-colonial period at the time when a new liberal period was emerging. Instead of

creating a systematic process of enabling socio-economic environment for people to flourish, to become more productive, [it was a] minimalist approach, which is usually shaped by the logics of the market and the financial interest. (EXP-5)

As various scholars have argued, that narrow focus can still be observed today, with international actors giving greater attention to and making greater investment in social protection or single policy areas compared to investments in social policy systems broadly (such as health and education systems with free service provision). Fischer highlights that “social protection has received most of the recent attention as a narrower view of social policy, whereas it is properly understood as a subset of social policy” (Fischer, 2018, p. 227). Similarly, Adésinà (2011) stresses that since the 1980s, the “policy focus has turned from a wider vision of social policy to narrow social protection concerns”, pleading for a return to an understanding of social policy that recognises its transformative character and its multiple roles in fostering social development in Africa. Similarly, Ouma (2020) highlights that the World Bank “has inextricably linked the idea

11 The ILO constituents agreed on a framework that defines Social Protection Floors as comprising at least four essential guarantees:

- Access to essential health care, including maternity care.
- Basic income security for children, ensuring access to nutrition, education, care and other necessary goods and services.
- Basic income security for persons of working age who are unable to earn sufficient income, particularly in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability.
- Basic income security for older persons.

of social protection to safety nets”, implying a rigid targeting of labour-constrained households, deemed “deserving”.

4.2.2.1 Prioritising cash transfers over other interventions

The narrowing of focus – as observed in moving from broader social policy towards a narrower set of interventions as encompassed by social protection – can also be observed *within* the field of social protection itself.

Despite the multiple strands of social protection (see Section 1), in practice much focus and international investment has concentrated on social assistance, and cash transfers in particular. Within the international development discourse, cash transfers receive disproportionate attention, oftentimes considered the “the primary – and sometimes the only – social protection instrument addressing poverty and vulnerability” (Barrientos, 2011, p. 243). Gentilini (2022) notes that nearly 1.3 million papers about cash transfers were produced in the last three decades, representing a 26-fold increase since the 1980s.

Garcia and Moore inculcate that “the increase in social protection and CT [cash transfer] programs in Sub-Saharan Africa has occurred partly in response to intense pressures faced by the continent’s poor and vulnerable populations” (Garcia & Moore, 2012, p. 34). These pressures include the 2008/2009 financial crisis, acute food shortages and the HIV epidemic (BIL-6). Indeed, many of the African countries with large donor-driven social assistance programmes in 2010 were East African countries with food emergencies (Garcia & Moore, 2012, p. 46).

Various interviewees pointed to the importance of economic ideology in promoting cash transfers, and especially poverty-targeted interventions. One regional scholar noted:

Much of this has to do with the global ideological shift initiated with the rise of new liberalism. (EXP-2)

Indeed, a number of respondents pointed to the dominant role of the World Bank in promoting targeted cash transfers and safety-net-type interventions. It was noted that while bilateral donors supported such interventions, they were not the ones pushing them (BIL-6), and that poverty-targeted transfers would not be in place if it had not been for their influence:

The World Bank went in [...] under poverty reduction [and] was starting to build up these social assistance systems, first in Latin America and [...] then Asia and latest Africa. And now we find a lot of countries having these kind of social assistance systems and [...] I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t exist in that way if the World Bank was not supporting that in heavily. (BIL-2)

Findings from Tanzania and Côte d’Ivoire also point to the particularly important role of the World Bank in shaping social protection arrangements due to the largesse of the funds it brings to the table and role as the primary institution of development finance:

Different agencies have different powers depending on their role in that particular region [...] the World Bank, IMF have very, very strong tools to pressure a government to act in a certain way, sometimes cutting social programmes if the debt level is too high [...]. (TA-4)

The other fundamental difference is in the funding of the various programmes. We usually do not have the financial capacity to do programmes on a very large scale. A partner like the World Bank has the possibility, as in Côte d’Ivoire, of injecting \$200 million into a cash transfer programme. It’s the truth. (IC-6)

Some international respondents referred to conditional cash transfers and public works programmes to denote highly targeted and conditional forms of social assistance, and linked this to colonial history. In the words of an interviewee from an international organisation:

I still feel that [public works] is a super colonial thing. Like, if you look at the colonial history of forced labour, it's not that far from public works like the way UK operated in India, and things like that, in the colonial times. [...] We're forcing people that are ill, very low in calories, dealing with multiple deprivations to do quite hard work. (INT-3)

That said, public works schemes and poverty-targeted interventions have also been pursued by domestic elites across the region. One respondent contested the simple suggestion that limited and conditional forms of social assistance have grown so rapidly across Africa because the World Bank pushed for it or imposed their neoliberal model. Instead, they noted, it might be due to a fortuitous ideological overlap between institutions such as the World Bank and African policy-making elites that makes them “all very happy to have to make transfers conditional” (EXP-4).

Findings from Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania point to similar dynamics, whereby governments currently in power are driven by a productivist development ideology and remain reticent towards “free hand-outs” (the role of in-country political economy is further discussed in Section 4.3). Moreover, the recent and planned future expansion of cash transfer programmes, such as the PSSN in Tanzania and the Programme de Filets Sociaux Productifs in Côte d'Ivoire, draw attention to the ongoing expansionism of this narrower approach to social protection. At the other end of the spectrum, countries in Southern Africa with unconditional schemes have longstanding, institutionalised and government-driven programmes, such as social pensions in Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, that – at least in part – pre-dated the push for more targeted and conditional forms of social assistance, and cash transfers in particular, post-SAPs.

Finally, it should be noted that cash transfer programmes are increasingly deployed as a basis for the introduction of further social protection interventions, especially in promoting household resilience against increasing and intensifying climate impacts (see Bowen et al., 2020). Respondents in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania discussed future trajectories of cash transfer programmes as evolving into much needed adaptive social protection systems (BIL-5, IC-9, TA-13).

You know, the social protection system is a system that can be improved. [...] It is always a perpetual work since social needs themselves are moving and they evolve. And so, the challenge for us is to have an adaptive social protection system which can therefore allow the government to deal with the different situations, the different shocks that populations may be faced with. (IC-9)

4.2.2.2 Promoting consumption over production

The promotion of support that boosts consumption as opposed to production among poor populations emerged as another aspect of how global social protection agendas narrowed the scope for social protection.

Various respondents pointed to African countries' policy initiatives to support production rather than consumption, and how these were not supported or sometimes actively opposed by international agencies and donors. An international expert spoke of African governments' preference to support subsidies and food subsidies, as they

were their way of trying to ensure food security, either by supporting consumption consumers with lower food prices or by supporting production with input subsidies, fertiliser and seeds. (EXP-3)

Rather than supporting poor populations by providing social welfare along the lines of European schemes, which promote consumption, African governments preferred using their limited resources to support production, growing food and making food more affordable (EXP-3).

However, as one respondent from a bilateral partner indicated, such policies were seen to distort the markets, fell out of fashion and were not supported by international agencies and partners.

African governments said we'd rather give farmers food, agricultural subsidies and we'd rather give consumers price subsidies supporting this sector rather than supporting individuals, you know, because if you target, say, 10 per cent to 20 per cent of the poor, you're going to have a lot of exclusion and you're going to have a lot of resentment and social stigma around that. It creates all kinds of problems which we don't want. But as we know, subsidies and, supporting production, interfering in the markets became very unfashionable in the post-colonial period. (BIL-2)

A regional expert pointed to the example of Kenya, where the IMF and World Bank stipulated that governments cut back on the provision of fertiliser subsidies and increase investment in cash transfers instead (EXP-2). Malawi was mentioned as another example, with the international community pushing for resources to be reallocated from farming input subsidies to social assistance, most notably cash transfers (INT-1).

A respondent working for an international organisation in Côte d'Ivoire pointed out how this difference in priorities – between production and consumption – feeds into African governments' resistance to social protection. Given the focus on consumption support, some question social protection's long-term benefits:

You are giving money to help people, but you are not sure that in one year or two years or five years, they will become active in the national economy. [...] This is the problem of a national strategy of social protection. (IC-7)

Indeed, in Tanzania, some interviewees referred to government subsidies as an important productive investment that was partially implemented as a reaction against public austerity measures during the time of SAPs.

Tanzania has been implementing a general subsidy programme for a very long period of time. This is actually a non-contributory programme that tends to subsidise the price of certain goods, particularly for the general population. In the 1960s and 70s, these subsidies extended to all members of the civil service in Tanzania. Price controls, especially between 1961 and 1995, counted as one form of social protection instrument because they ensured access to low-cost or free education, health services, electricity and agricultural transport subsidies. (TA-2)

4.2.3 Imposing aid and funding conditionalities

The ways in which aid and funding are provided, and the conditions inherent to them, emerged as especially powerful mechanisms through which former colonial powers and actors from the Global North continue to exert their influence. These mechanisms can be considered coercive policy transfers, as they pressure countries into adopting certain policies or programmes. They include loan and funding conditionalities (known as “inducement” – Collier, Guillaumont, & Guillaumont, 1997); aid suspension and withdrawal occurring in instances of undesired political conduct (Langan, 2017; Portela, 2007); tied aid, which directs the use of aid resources to goods and services of their preference, such as produce manufactured by the donor country (termed also as “paternalism” by Collier et al. (1997); as well as recipient selectivity – delivering aid to countries with a favoured policy environment (e.g. Collier et al., 1997). In the African context,

the imposition of SAPs is an often-cited example of a coercive policy transfer (e.g. Adejumobi, 2004; Adésinà, 2011; Tambulasi, 2013).

Coercive policy transfers through aid and funding modalities can also be observed in relation to social protection. As noted by various interviewees associated with international organisations and bilateral donors:

They used their financial power very explicitly as a way of coercing, governments to take on policies that didn't necessarily agree with. (EXP-3)

This is corroborated by interviewees working for bilateral donors, with one respondent referring to “financial support to governments and public investments, and that can be in different forms of grants, loans or guarantees” (BIL-5) as one of a range of instruments to influence policy in partner countries. Adésinà (2020), in turn, argues that international donors continue “within an imperial deployment of power” to ensure the local adoption of donor-prescribed social assistance policies in Africa.

Indeed, stakeholders in Tanzania referred to development cooperation as a “new colonialism” that creates financial dependencies, allowing donors to override domestic preferences. As noted by a Tanzanian civil society actor:

We often find ourselves implementing donor-designed frameworks that do not fully reflect the realities on the ground. (TA-9)

A social protection policymaker said:

This is a form of new colonialism [...] donors rule us in another way by making us dependent on their funding. (TA-15)

An international social protection advisor working in Tanzania added,

Donors bring financing, but ensuring [government] alignment with our policies and goals remains a challenge. (TA-4)

In other words, cooperation may come with predefined frameworks that limit government autonomy in policy design and implementation. The reliance on external funding fosters dependency, making it difficult for governments to sustain programmes without continued donor support. Hence, long-term social protection strategies remain influenced by external actors, challenging efforts to achieve full national ownership and financial independence.

In Côte d'Ivoire, views were more mixed. Some respondents stressed that the political influence of the government increased when it had a relatively strong economic footing (and a much smaller number of people in poverty compared to Tanzania). It was also highlighted that although policy processes and deliberations around social protection policies and programmes systematically involved development partners, everything was led by the government (INT-2, IC-9, IC-5). At the same time, some suggested that whatever the World Bank says, the government will do (IC-6, IC-7), and the Bank's influence was generally considered more important than that of other partners. As noted poignantly by a respondent working for an international organisation in Côte d'Ivoire:

Today the example is that the World Bank said that they will give cash transfer when the government does not refuse. Yes. They did not receive the cash transfer. If tomorrow the World Bank said, no, it is not cash transfer, we will try to give to build gardens for children and mothers in all the villages. The government will say yes. (IC-7)

In the context of limited fiscal space, policies that are funded by external partners inevitably take precedence over those that might be preferred by governments themselves, but for which no

domestic funding is available. An international respondent offered a pertinent example from Malawi and noted:

Now we have a situation where in the 28 districts of Malawi, the cash transfer is there in all 28 districts, but it's funded by the agencies in 27. Of those 28 districts, the government is only paying for one district because they have resisted adopting it. (EXP-3)

By contrast, in contexts where countries have greater domestic resources, the dependence on and leverage of international agencies is much lower. A respondent working for an international organisation in Côte d'Ivoire reflects on the need for international partners to come together and

speak with the same voice to try and maybe push for some priorities that may not be on the government agenda. [...] If you have a resource-poor government they are more keen on, you know, taking on the resources and maybe priorities suggested by external partners. But this is not the case in Côte d'Ivoire, as the country has sufficient national resources to invest in national priorities. (INT-2)

4.2.4 Exporting ideas and knowledge

The export of ideas and knowledge in terms of what social protection is and what it should look like – often based on Western models – is imperative in understanding the postcolonial influence on social protection arrangements across Africa today. As noted by Devereux regarding social protection approaches brought ashore first by colonial powers, and then by international actors (including humanitarian agencies), is that

attempts to graft these imported models onto domestic policy agendas have failed to recognise that the economic and social structures of African countries are fundamentally different from those of Europe, resulting in grossly inadequate coverage and programmatic responses that fail to meet the actual social protection needs of local populations. (Devereux, 2013, p. 13)

Exporting ideas and knowledge is a form of policy transfer, taking on different degrees of “voluntary”. For instance, “policy learning” or “lesson-drawing” (Hall, 1993; Rose, 1991) is typically considered as a voluntary policy transfer mechanism, notably in the context of South-South cooperation. Others have examined mechanisms of deliberate “persuasion” through storytelling, narrative-building and even organised “policy tourism” (e.g. Montero, 2019; Soremi, 2019), which can involve some form of forcefulness. Dominant development agencies use scientific or expert knowledge – or “hegemonic knowledge” – to justify their engagement in policy advocacy and dissemination. Western bilateral donors typically have their own research departments and engage with various epistemic communities, seeking to advance their “scientific validity” (Babb, 2013; Stone, 2004). Edwards (1997) posits that the World Bank’s scientific evidence and intellectual authority outplayed its aid conditionalities in initiating policy transfer in the context of SAPs. In a similar vein, Adésinà has argued that “ideas may serve the function of seizing control of the policy terrain, undermining policy learning, generating policy atrophy in the host local context, distorting local realities, and undermining long-term sustainable development” (Adésinà, 2011, p. 456).

The export of ideas and knowledge in social protection works through two mechanisms: (i) training and education of African policymakers, and (ii) technical assistance and involvement of international consultants and development partners in establishing national development strategies and social protection policies.

The training and education of African policymakers can be achieved by having them complete a university degree in the Global North or participate in more tailored social protection courses delivered by international experts in Africa. One might argue that this increases domestic

capacity to push back against approaches promoted by international partners. Yet, it also has the effect of further entrenching such approaches, with curriculums often being dominated by expectations about and policies for social protection in the Global South originating from the Global North. As noted by a respondent from one bilateral donor, the funding of study visits and trainings that promote global models of social protection can be understood as a form of colonial legacy (BIL-6). One respondent refers to this not as a voluntary mechanism of policy transfer, but as a type of “coercive learning”,

which is where a lot of training courses were offered to governments, either in country or internationally. (EXP-3)

Similarly, an international expert noted that many policymakers in Africa are trained at mainstream higher education institutions, often in Western universities or influenced by Western scholarships, leading to a reproduction of Western ideas:

So even the orientation, the perspective of African knowledge producers, experts, is extremely colonial, just serving the colonial mentality. So you would be extremely lucky to have African economic analysis, African economic experts in the Ministry of Social Law, labour issues, who would give strong and relevant value to the history of coloniality and the current manifestations of it. (EXP-5)

Yet, even when such national opportunities exist, the perceived deep-rooted superiority of Western expertise renders such initiatives less credible or desirable compared to international training initiatives. A regional social protection expert highlighted how African policymakers have been ignored and remain overlooked, including in their own countries:

The African voice is not, I think, also in terms of policymaking, the African voice [...] remains unheard. Yeah, it remains unheard. Or, even if it's there, I think it's easily dismissed here. It's easily dismissed and ignored. (EXP-1)

Respondents from Côte d'Ivoire highlighted the widespread external influences through trainings in France or provided by French or other international organisations that was aimed at professionals ranging from social protection officials to social workers and trade unionists. This dynamic was noted by an Ivorian civil society stakeholder:

But the first impact is that until today, we, the social security [read: social insurance] executives, have been trained in France. When they do the training here, they go to do the advanced training course for the last part of the training in France. (IC-3)

A respondent from an international organisation in Côte d'Ivoire added:

We try to go step by step to negotiate with them and try to, to train [...] the national admins and the public administration workers so that they can set up very and did a very, impactful project for communities. (IC-7)

A respondent from a bilateral partner in Tanzania also pointed to the potential of in-country training programmes to positively influence social protection:

We are trying to influence governments with our training programmes, like the international training programme [...] where we are trying to ask the governments to come up with change programmes that they would like to invest time and resources in. (TA-4)

The technical assistance and involvement of international consultants in national social protection documents, policies and strategies are other pertinent mechanism through which ideas and knowledge that originate in the Global North are spread. Devereux (2020) refers to this process as “policy pollination”.

The rapid proliferation of national social protection strategies across sub-Saharan Africa is the most far-reaching example of how technical assistance impacts social protection arrangements. It was facilitated by international agencies commissioning a small group of international consultants writing such strategies, often based on similar templates or ideas, which commonly feed off European models or Western ideas of what social protection in Africa should look like. As explained by one of the interviewees:

In 2010, there were only four countries in Africa that had a social protection, a national social protection policy. By 2018, there were 30. So in eight years, 26 countries, that's half of Africa, suddenly decided to get themselves a national social protection policy, which is quite a coincidence. Except it's not a coincidence at all. It's because the donors heavily invested in sending consultants around Africa, basically doing a cut and paste and designing very similar social protection policies for all these different countries and [...] to follow the same model that they brought over from Western Europe and then how they adapted it to African realities. (EXP-3)

A social protection-specific example can be drawn from the widespread promotion of conditional cash transfers, such as the promotion based on the Brazilian Bolsa Familia programme. Although often framed as South-South policy learning, the rapid introduction of cash transfer programmes across Africa can be argued as signalling vertical imposition (Ouma & Adésinà, 2019). This example is particularly pertinent, given that rather than constituting a “home-grown” social policy innovation in Latin America, much of the ideational and financial origins of cash transfers can be traced back to the World Bank (Heimo & Syväterä, 2022). UN agencies, including UNICEF and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization as well as bilateral donors such as the British Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) (formerly known as DFID) heavily invested in producing reports, providing technical assistance and organising study tours to promote cash transfers (see Hickey, 2008, in Adésinà, 2011), often citing the success of conditional cash transfers in Latin America. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that one international expert pointed out:

There's been no recognition of African social protection systems or mechanisms in any of these policies that have been introduced in the last 15 years. (EXP-3)

Several respondents framed the international push for Western- or European-style models a continuation of the trend that was started during colonialism:

Because colonial models were supposedly carried over to the post-colonial period, and then when social protection became part of the development policy agenda in the late 1990s, they continued to replicate those European-style social welfare models and social insurance models. And so the [...] late 1990s has been about extending coverage of those programmes and schemes without questioning whether they are appropriate or [...] the most important priority. (EXP-3)

As noted by another scholar, each international expert and stakeholder brings with them their own national traditions and uses them as a frame of reference for their ideas about what social protection could or should look like in other countries (EXP-4).

A respondent working for a bilateral agency reflects on this in more detail for the case of Rwanda. Although the realisation that poverty was not decreasing in line with economic progress was recognised by the government and the push for new interventions was government-driven, the proposed shape of the policy to respond to this lack of progress in poverty reduction was led by donors and external partners. International consultants were brought in to develop a social assistance programme and many ideas were gleaned from Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme. While this might be framed as South-South learning, the fact that the programme was heavily shaped by international partners – and the very same consultants who were also asked to develop Rwanda's Vision 2020 Umurenge

Programme – meant there was limited government ownership of how the programme was designed at the time:

It's sort of, you know, here you go. Here you've got six documents to implement your programme. Off you go. And sort of isn't felt very much more likely at that point, like it was the consultants programme and less owned by the government staff. (BIL-6)

Similarly, a respondent from Côte d'Ivoire pointed to extensive donor engagement in processes of policy development:

It should be remembered that the government has a national development plan. And obviously, the plan, at the time of its elaboration, is with its multilateral development partners. Development partners, of course, work with them. (IC-8)

4.3 Domestic political economy factors

In this section, we discuss findings in relation to the third research question: How do **political economy factors** at the domestic level play into country-level social protection arrangements? We consider this question in relation to the role of colonial legacy and postcolonial influence on social protection.

Political economy analyses of social protection – or research that looks at the constellation of domestic factors – has grown extensively in the last decade. As the international community started to put its weight (and money) behind social protection as a promising mechanism for poverty reduction and economic development at the turn of the century, there was growing interest as to why some countries were quick to adopt and expand this policy area while others “lagged behind”. Similarly, there were questions about how systems and interventions came to take shape (see Lavers & Hickey, 2020).

The interaction between domestic political dynamics and external influences is well-recognised. Following empirical work across Africa, Lavers and Hickey (2020) argue the importance of looking at how transnational processes combine with domestic political dynamics:

The evolution of social transfers requires analysis of how transnational processes combine with domestic political dynamics. For example, focusing on the role of transnational actors provides no insights as to why comparable donor efforts to promote social transfers in different countries have produced contrasting outcomes. Nor does a focus on democratisation provide an explanation as to why governments with questionable democratic credentials, such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Tanzania, have significant social transfers programmes. (Lavers & Hickey, 2020, p. 4)

An analysis of colonial influences on social protection arrangements in Botswana and South Africa by Seekings (2020) posits that, despite external pressures to either expand or restrict social policy investments, both countries sat in the driver's seat in developing domestic welfare systems.

In this section, we discuss domestic political economy factors and their influence on social protection – as discovered during the literature review and in interviews – in relation to notions of coloniality, colonial legacy and postcolonial influence. As such, the factors that emerged are (i) resistance and political ideology, (ii) elites and governance and (iii) civil society and workers' movements.

4.3.1 Resistance and political ideology

Although social protection arrangements continue to be heavily shaped by external forces and international agencies' priorities, as discussed in Section 4.2, countries also offer resistance and successfully push back against proposals that are not in line with domestic actors' priorities and interests.

A regional expert refers to Kenya, Uganda and Zambia as countries where there was resistance (EXP-1). Malawi offers another pertinent example, with one respondent characterising the case as follows:

So the donors as a group have been frustrated by Malawi for a very long time because Malawi never accepted the model of targeted cash transfers that was being pushed on them by the [...] agencies. So what you have now in Malawi [...] 20 years of trying to push cash transfers, which they started in one district with a cash transfer pilot project and then try to get the government to take it over and scale it up. The government has never done that in 20 years. Despite all the investment of the agencies in the programme itself and in evaluations that prove that if it was an effective programme, et cetera, government never was interested in taking it on. (EXP-3)

Indeed, interviewees, especially at the country level, highlighted that – regardless of external influences – governments are ultimately responsible for social protection policies. One international expert referred to the example of Ethiopia to illustrate the role of ideological orientation of African elites, and the importance of them committing to a vision of social protection.

I can give the case of Ethiopia with this regard. And you would see that the government has been extremely assertive in kind of protecting its policymaking space and shaping the dominant narrative of social policymaking processes. (EXP-5)

Another international expert also highlighted Ethiopia as an example of a country that successfully pushed back against requests and conditions from donors and resisted pressures to give in to certain demands:

And in 2004, when the international community wanted to introduce the Productive Safety Net Programme – the biggest social protection programme in Africa outside South Africa – the donors had a very strong set of, what they called red lines that they wanted the government to adhere to. And the government didn't agree with most of these conditions. And so they kept the donor agencies waiting and waiting and waiting until eventually the donors gave in and said, okay, we'll go ahead and fund this programme on your terms. So the government got what it wanted. (EXP-3)

Although Côte d'Ivoire lacks a strong ideological stance, it has demonstrated some leadership in pushing certain forms of social protection, given that priorities are clearly set and collaboratively developed (IC-9, INT-2). A respondent from a bilateral partner explained this to be a way of appealing to voters:

In Côte d'Ivoire, clearly there is a government lead. Particularly since the current president, Alassane Ouattara, came to power. Universal health coverage was at the heart of his political platform. (BIL-5)

Respondents also considered the current government to be committed to expanding its social insurance scheme for informal sector workers (i.e. RSTI), and for collaboration and negotiations between the government and development partners to happen under an open dialogue, rather than from opposing positions.

In Tanzania, in turn, the strong productivist development ideology – notably under the late President John Magufuli’s government – resulted in significant pushback regarding the cash transfer component of the PSSN programme, given the domestic preference for embedding productive dimensions into social protection provision, as with public works. Additionally, empirical evidence presented by Ulriksen, Myamba and George (2023) shows that the Magufuli government systematically resisted increasing the government’s share in overall programme financing. As noted by a civil service respondent from Tanzania, national governments take the final decision, regardless of external advice or influences:

Because the government is the institution. We are looking at our requirements: Are the actors within our requirements? If they are not within our requirements, we cannot do it. So, the social protection policy is driven by the country and development of the country.
(TA-6)

As already noted in Section 3.2.3, one regional scholar queried the extent to which there is a division between what external agencies push for and what African governments prioritise. In their view, many African governments are relatively conservative, and their ideology overlaps with – rather than diverges from – influential agencies such as the World Bank, as they prefer targeted and conditional policies (EXP-4).

Indeed, given that many political elites within African governments often have close ties to the Western world (or Russia in Mali’s case, for example; Crisis Group, 2023) through their education and professional experience, for instance, it is important to recognise the ongoing blending of “indigenous” and “exogenous” ideologies and ways of thinking. This was also highlighted in the context of Côte d’Ivoire:

Alassane Ouattara is installed by France. [...] Before being president, he is serving the IMF; before working for the IMF, he has been working in one of the central banks of the France economic zone. So the personality, the orientation, the perspective, the structure, everything is France-oriented and also European-oriented. (EXP-6)

Similarly, the country’s first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, was a significant ally of the French within the CFA monetary zone (see e.g. Bamba, 2020). Other governments, such as Burkina Faso, are currently being led by nationalist and anti-imperialist presidents (i.e. Ibrahim Traoré), inspired by early independence leaders such as Thomas Sankara (Norton, 2023). Similarly in Tanzania, the spirit of Ujamaa continues to motivate different domestic actors in the realm of social protection. It follows that, in understanding current social protection arrangements, greater heed needs to be paid to ideologies and preferences of the ruling political elites, and indeed the legacies of liberatory early independence movements.

4.3.2 Elites and governance

The political elite play a crucial role in shaping social protection, both for international actors to push their own agendas and the domestic ruling classes to shape policies in line with their ideologies and interests.

Internationally led “policy merchandising” of social protection across Africa has become increasingly reliant on tapping into domestic political actors’ interests using methods that appeal to incumbent governments through the promise of potential electoral success, thereby deploying “the instrumentality of clientelism — within an imperial deployment of power” (Adésinà, 2020). This clientelist approach involves the incremental promotion of cash transfers through fully donor-funded pilot programmes, the mobilisation of domestic civil society to advocate for the expansion of such social protection measures, and coalition-building with domestic “gate-keepers” and powerful public personalities (Adésinà, 2020). Some of these strategies have also been identified in the context of transnational philanthropic aid (Lambin & Surender, 2021).

Following their analysis of the political economy underpinning social protection across Africa, Lavers and Hickey (2020) posit that the narrower the ruling elite is in any given country, the more likely it is to commit to the implementation of reforms, but also to hold pre-existing visions of development. Strong development ideologies would, in turn, necessitate a match with donor policy preferences for full reform to occur, otherwise the adopted policies and programmes may remain donor-driven (Lavers & Hickey, 2020).

The role of elites – and how it may undermine the governance of social protection – was a concern mentioned by international and regional respondents in terms of the development and implementation of sound government-owned and -driven social protection. Elite capture is a common concern, as pointed out by one respondent:

Many say that if the elite would act more in the interest of the of the whole country, then we would have another situation in Africa. (BIL-2)

Another representative of a bilateral partner indicated:

The ongoing point in which we feel that progress is slow, is this question of capture of public spending by the richest groups. Which is the huge issue in social protection. [...] Its social protection systems are supposed to redress that to some extent. And the question is that in many cases, the development of social protection systems leads to expansion of benefits still for the elite. (BIL-5)

Respondents from a regional civil society organisation also pointed to the importance of breaking the cycle of corruption, including preventing illicit financial flows and capital flight. The Stop the Bleeding Consortium campaign is a collaboration of African non-state actors to reverse “the illicit financial flows through tax dodging, tax avoidance, tax evasion” (CSO-1).

4.3.3 Civil society and workers’ movements

Believing that local populations subjugated under colonial rule were passive regarding their rights to public welfare provisions would be false. The existing literature expounds that, as urbanisation intensified – notably towards the latter decades of the colonial era – so did the self-organisation of Africans. This resulted in the establishment of new associations – including those leading independence movements – that have and continue to shape social protection across the region.

In British colonies, trade unions emerged as significant platforms for African workers to demand better wages, reasonable working hours and safer working conditions – becoming centres for political mobilisation and resistance against colonial policies. In Sierra Leone, as one such example, the Railway Workers’ Union became a prominent example of a labour organisation advocating for workers’ rights. Initially focused on labour issues, the union expanded its activities to address broader social and political concerns, challenging colonial authority and contributing to the nationalist movement (Mulugeta, s.a.).

In French West Africa, the “Syndicat Africain des Cheminots” represented railway workers and was instrumental in advocating for better wages and working conditions. The union’s activities extended beyond labour issues, contributing to the political mobilisation against colonial rule (Orr, 1966). In addition, the Senegalese strike in 1946 – calling for social rights and work conditions that were as equal as those in France – led to improved provisions, and the Second World War veterans returning from military service in Europe added to this pressure to expand public welfare systems to local populations (Luiz, 2013).

The past and present role of trade unions is also evident from learnings in Tanzania and Côte d’Ivoire. An expert from Tanzania highlighted the important role of trade unions in promoting workers’ rights in the 1960s and 1970s:

We also have to credit the rise of trade union, the trade union movement in Tanzania, specifically between 1961 and 1970, which very much forced, which was quite keen in, in driving the agenda towards greater and better protection for workers in Tanzania. (TA-2)

They explained that this organisation can – at least in part – be explained by the lack of opportunities for Africans in the colonial civil service (TA-5). Trade unions also constituted an important actor group in Côte d'Ivoire, helping to further abolish forced labour during the colonial era (see Shriwise & Schmitt, 2023) and actively promote the expansion of social insurance (including for informal sector workers) in the contemporary context – as expounded by interviewees (IC-1, IC-3).

Civil society can also play an important role in advocating for social protection and resisting models promoted by international agencies or institutionalised by government. One pertinent example is the coalition of trade unions, social media and lawyers that formed during Hosni Mubarak's presidency in Egypt, seeking to prevent pension reform (which was, however, later implemented under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) (Loewe & Westemeier, 2018). Another example can be drawn from Tanzania, where one respondent explained how a feminist domestic organisation opposed oppressive donor practices. It collaborated with women's rights and feminist networks to transform policies that failed to align with gender frameworks – sometimes employing activism and direct protests such as demonstrations and sleeping in the streets – to express resistance against harmful social protection approaches furthered by donors:

We focused on improving aspects that aligned with a gender framework and modifying those that did not. This involved a significant amount of work reviewing government policies to ensure they were gender responsive. Additionally, there were strategies that came from external sources; at some point, we even resorted to protests, including sleeping in the streets to express our rejection of oppressive practices. (TA-9)

5 Ways forward

In this section, we reflect on the fourth sub-research question, namely: What are **ways forward** to support countries in Africa and the Global South in shaping social protection arrangements in line with their own priorities?

Respondents offered various reflections of how patterns of coloniality might be disrupted and how the global social protection agenda and social protection arrangements in sub-Saharan Africa and across the Global South may become more equitable and country-driven. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are different views on the persistence of colonial influence – depending on the respondent – and what should be done to disrupt these patterns. We present the suggestions put forward by respondents in response to the question about ways forward.

5.1 Integrating a coloniality perspective

Generally, there was acknowledgement among international and national stakeholders that, even if not framed as a colonial legacy or postcolonial influence, social protection has been and continues to be highly influenced by international actors. As noted by one respondent working for a bilateral donor:

The World Bank or the US, they [...] never had their colonies. It is not colonial, but it is another kind of path dependency. Yeah. It is the influence of the external development partners, which you can see there. (BIL-2)

Despite this acknowledgement of continued postcolonial influence, some respondents felt that the issue of coloniality in social protection – either in those words or discussed in relation to the role of international stakeholders – does not receive adequate attention, and that adopting the lens of coloniality could be one way to open the door for frank discussions about the continued role of coloniality and how to disrupt it.

One respondent working for an international organisation indicated that the degree of acknowledgement of, and engagement with, the notion of coloniality often depends on individuals and their own interests and education backgrounds:

Is there a risk that we're still continuing colonialism? I think even in [my organisation], I know colleagues that would be shocked by this suggestion. For me, it's almost like those colleagues that did at least one module on colonialism and postcolonialism at university are the ones more likely to just be aware of this as a concept. But I think there are some that just study pure economics and wouldn't even think about this. And I think that would apply in many organisations and bilateral organisations. I think a lot of it's to do with your exposure. (INT-3)

Other international stakeholders expressed the view that a focus on coloniality and continued colonial influences is unhelpful in moving forward. In their opinion, it detracts from domestic factors that may be more important in shaping social protection trajectories and effective implementation, notably the quality of institutional arrangements and elite capture. The engagements with African governments intent on moving social protection agendas forward should therefore focus on building state capacity and strengthening national and local governance. In considering the challenges in the expansion and implementation of social protection across Africa, they noted:

There is [...] an internal factor which has to do with the governance of these societies, right? And if we do not look at the governance issues of these societies, just by blaming the colonial set up again and again after how many years of independence – 60 years now – that will not bring us further. We have to look more at the governance issue of these societies. (BIL-2)

Regional experts also pointed to the limits of understanding social protection through the lens of colonial legacy or path dependence. One respondent noted that a desire to trace the history of social protection and understand its current shape and form entirely through the lens of coloniality might overlook other important factors, including domestic politics:

The colonial legacy takes you only [...] so far. There's a need to be aware of reforms and changes that have happened, particularly in terms of [...] reforms in countries like Ghana and Nigeria [...] and Kenya. (EXP-2)

Another suggested that

the path dependence doesn't, can't explain everything because sometimes governments decide not to stay on the same path. (EXP-4)

These responses mirror Mkandawire's analysis of colonial legacies in social welfare in Africa, as discussed in Section 4.1.3:

Not all aspects of the colonial legacy are simple replications of what has been bequeathed by the past but also of contestation through resistance to the colonial order and the imagining of alternative futures. Colonialism impacted on nationalist agendas

and forms of mobilisation and resistance, and on the ideological progression and the “social pacts” that emerged. (Mkandawire, 2016b, p. 3)

It should also be noted that many national respondents from Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania preferred not to speak about the notion of coloniality, or how social protection is influenced by colonial legacy or postcolonial influence. When asked why, respondents indicated that it limits the discussion of social protection in their country and the trajectories it has taken. The very framing of this discussion through the lens of coloniality can be deemed part of postcolonial influence itself, as it foregrounds the role of colonial power – in the past and present – rather than emphasise the domestic or wider set of factors that influences social protection arrangements in Africa.

5.2 Being more critically reflective

Various respondents pointed to the need for international organisations and bilateral donors to be more critically reflective of the models of social protection they promote and push for. Various respondents indicated this currently happens far less often than is needed. They suggested that greater critical engagement with the arrangements they promote – and understanding why – are prerequisites for creating a more level playing field. As noted by one scholar:

Most of the international agencies based in the Global North have a conceited view of their own expertise. [...] To put it bluntly, almost all international agencies have an unwarrantedly evangelical self-confidence that their preferred models are the best and most appropriate models. I think they'll all benefit from being rather more open to conversations about what the goals and the mechanisms are in in different parts of the world. (EXP-4)

The most far-reaching suggestion to disrupt postcolonial influence in social protection would be to upend the current ways of working by dismantling international development. One regional expert highlighted that international development is dominated by a superiority complex from international organisations, especially those in the West, and a saviour mentality. It leads to a dynamic whereby those organisations

say we think we know what's best for you and therefore [...] this is what you need to do. (EXP-1)

Following this line of thinking, making tweaks to the international development apparatus will not suffice to make social protection more government-led and informed by national priorities; instead, what is needed is an overhaul of the entire *modus operandi*. Although many respondents hinted at the need for such a drastic change in order to truly shift deeply engrained patterns of international power differentials and policy decision-making, few suggested this would be an actionable way forward.

One – more actionable – mechanism mentioned for increasing critical engagement on the issue of coloniality in social protection was staff training and capacity-building of social protection specialists, especially in international organisations. Along the lines of training programmes on equality, diversity and inclusion, staff working in international agencies could be asked to take part in training “on colonialism and colonial thinking” (INT-3).

Another respondent pointed to the need to pay closer attention to, and to engage with, the prevailing political ideology in the respective country, even if that runs counter to one's own preferences or the organisation's models of social protection:

I'm inclined to think that by and large, you know, if you want to expand social protection in across most of Africa, you have to take conservative arguments [...] more seriously,

even if you're not a conservative yourself. [...] That's not an unproblematic position because it doesn't tell you how far you can go in changing patriarchy, for example. So, it's not straightforward. (EXP-4)

5.3 Facilitating South-South learning

South-South learning as a mechanism to disrupt postcolonial influence was mentioned by various international respondents. One bilateral partner noted:

I think this is a very important instrument. I think it's very promising. And it should be done really much more and maybe even in it rather institutionalised level with UN agencies. (BIL-3)

Another added:

Absolutely. This is what works, and particularly in Africa. (BIL-5)

A respondent from another bilateral partner pointed out that, although models of social protection from the Global North appeared unachievable, learning about examples and from experiences from Latin America might lead African governments "to think, oh yes, that that might work" (BIL-1). This view was shared by one of the international experts interviewed, expanding the geographical remit to South Asia:

I think learning from the experiences in Brazil and India, particularly, could be very beneficial to Africa. (EXP-3)

Regional and in-country respondents also spoke to the benefits of South-South learning. As noted by a respondent from a regional civil society organisation, it allows for learning from countries with a similar level of development, shared colonial histories, path dependencies as well as current economic structures that have – and continue to – impact social protection arrangements in these countries. As noted by one respondent, South-South learning allows for gleaning insights from

economies of similar development trajectory [so that they] can come together, and help themselves rather than the typical North-South cooperation that has not helped us. (CSO-1)

South-South learning also comes with its challenges, as it requires navigating different political ideologies or priorities across countries. This is especially pertinent for bilateral partners to facilitate South-South learning, as noted by one respondent:

It's very complex because you have to adjust different systems. Normally the partner country, which contributes, you would sit with us in a third state [that] has a different system, development cooperation set-up. So, it's quite difficult to bring this together and of course, you have to look at political agendas as well. (BIL-3)

A respondent from Tanzania highlighted that South-South learning can be valuable, it tends to be less about the fundamentals of social protection, or the shape of social protection systems, but rather focuses on administrative arrangements:

The vast majority of South-South cooperation is actually focusing on fine tuning. Administration of existing social protection mechanisms is also focusing on trying to unearth new forms of financing these domestic social protection schemes. So, I think if it is through the provision of new and innovative taxes, the provision of other contributory and non-contributory schemes. So that's where it has actually centred on, and less on large-scale system of people. (TA-5)

At the same time, it is noteworthy that not all South-South cooperation is free from donor influence. For instance, there are many accounts of policy tourism organised by leading international organisations and financiers to promote social policy interventions such as social safety net programmes. Hence, there is a subtle but important difference between donor-driven policy transfer and genuine attempts to foster knowledge exchange and policy dialogue for the benefit of strengthening domestic leadership.

5.4 Rethinking modes of engagement

Overall, international stakeholders interviewed for this study acknowledge the continued power imbalances, and those working with international agencies and bilateral donors do, to some extent, recognise their own roles in perpetuating these imbalances. In principle, they agree that these imbalances should be shifted towards more equal partnerships that place countries in the driver's seat of their own social protection arrangements. However, at the same time, there is an acknowledgement that in doing so, social protection – in its current shape – may diminish or disappear, and that this is an undesirable outcome from their perspective (INT-1). As noted by one international expert:

When I talk about the future of social protection in Africa, I always say the big test is what happens when the donors withdraw or they stop supporting social protection, or then move on to something else, like climate change, and then give up on social protection. What happens then? You know, that's when we'll see how sustainable and how indigenous it is or domesticated it is. (EXP-3)

One interviewee voiced interest in the question of how countries perceive the process of social protection, and “if they feel free to choose their own approach, fitting to their own environment” or if they “have to somehow adhere to what, what is proposed by the agencies” (BIL-3).

Devereux also problematises the role of international actors in promoting the expansion of social protection, especially in terms of building long-term and sustainable domestic support for social protection. He noted:

The first challenge is not, as is often asserted, to build political will for social protection, but rather to construct a social contract for social protection in each country – which immediately problematises the dominant role of donors and international nongovernmental organisations in designing, delivering and financing social protection in much of Africa. (Devereux, 2013, p. 21)

The social contract refers to enforceable claims to social protection so that citizens can hold governments accountable for the right to social protection.

This illustrates a conundrum many respondents from international agencies acknowledged facing in advocating for models of social protection that they consider to be most important or vital for achieving equality and social justice. On the one hand, there is acknowledgement that the ways in which such models are pushed and promoted feed off and reinforce longstanding historical power differentials and are a form of postcolonial influence. On the other hand, they are concerned that if they loosen their grip, the agenda they feel so strongly about would take a – in their view – less desirable shape, be downscaled or disappear altogether. As noted by one respondent from a bilateral partner:

Social security arrangement for formal employees and for the military and for the civil servants will further exist, I'm sure. But the biggest part of the population was working in the informal sector, you know, just the so-called missing middle. I think nobody will care about that. And probably also nobody would care about health insurance because the elite, they just take the next plane to the US or to South Africa and the rest, they can see what they know, how they can deal with, in the run-down health system. I think that

is something health financing, that is something where I don't see that really needs a bit, for many countries wouldn't exist [...] if there was no, external influence on that. (BIL-2)

It is against this backdrop – a concern that governments in sub-Saharan Africa will not put in place social protection as desired or advocated for by international actors – that respondents from international agencies offered ideas for how to change their engagement with country partners to counteract patterns of postcolonial influence and promote government-owned social protection arrangements.

That said, respondents in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire widely emphasised the domestic commitment to social protection. In Côte d'Ivoire, they recounted the domestically driven initiation of new social insurance schemes aimed specifically at informal sector workers (e.g. RSTI) (IC-9). Similarly, more longstanding social protection investments, such as the social centres operating since the 1960s in Côte d'Ivoire, suggest that social protection is a key area of domestic public policy, with or without international actors. This positioning appears to be strengthened further by the acknowledgement of social protection being an important adaptive mechanism against increasing climate shocks.

At the international or global level, one practical suggestion for rethinking collaboration with national governments pertains to enhancing their engagement in global platforms such as Universal Social Protection 2030 (USP 2030), SPIAC-B and the Global Accelerator. There was widespread acknowledgement that, although there are attempts to invite and include low- and middle-income countries into these spaces, this proved challenging. Various respondents pointed to a lack of capacity at the country level, primarily in terms of a lack of resources for most welfare ministries, programmes that were already working with limited resources and staff having to stretch themselves to cover many responsibilities:

For the Global Accelerator, the expectation was also that the pathfinder countries with a seat on the committee, that they're representing others. So it's not only just participating in the meeting and preparing the meeting, but it's also in the best case scenario, of course, connecting with other countries representing their views. [...] Some countries don't have the capacity. It's not this as easily done. (BIL-1)

Interestingly, stakeholder perspectives from Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania made little mention of international agendas or policy processes at the global level – which they are rarely a part of. This further underscores the two levels (and actor groups) of policymaking around social protection, and the unequal dynamics between these levels.

One respondent from an international agency also reflected on the importance of speaking English, as this is still the most commonly used language in terms of shaping social protection discussions (INT-1). The barrier to engage in conversations is not limited to understanding the language – it is also about the ability and confidence to engage in discussions. Another suggestion is to ensure diversity among staff, especially working in international organisations. As observed by one respondent, although teams within their international organisation include multiple nationalities, they still tend to be dominated by Western and white staff (INT-4).

One suggestion for how international partners could support social justice principles while at the same time promote local ownership was greater bottom-up engagement of civil society organisations in partner countries. One respondent noted how this model worked well in relation to promoting the rights of people with disabilities, which could subsequently be linked into the social protection system (INT-4).

Findings from Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania underscore the importance of strengthening country–donor engagement, also on the ground. Stakeholders from both countries asserted that the current fragmentation of activities by different external actors needs to be resolved through strong government coordination – ideally guided by a holistic and clear vision for social

protection. Country leadership was also deemed important in moving away from aid allocation mechanisms that create further dependencies in the long term, notably, World Bank loans.

5.5 Integrating context-specific and home-grown ideas and knowledge

In a bid to counteract postcolonial influence through the production and transfer of knowledge, stronger integration of home-grown ideas for models of social protection is imperative. These include longstanding models such as the anticolonial social compact (EXP-2) as well as new ideas, knowledge and scholarship.

Indeed, current models and approaches to formal social protection arrangements in Africa remain largely inspired by the Western “policy repertoire”, including social assistance for the most deprived population groups, social insurance (typically for formal sector employees) and basic protection against the ILO’s nine life contingencies (ILO Convention No. 102, 1952). In relation to that convention, one international stakeholder suggested:

A more African flavour in there, a more Global South flavour, which might mean saying that the nine contingencies of ILO would change. Maybe we’d have five of those nine, and we’d have the other three or four coming from Africa or from the Global South, which affects things like the need for a funeral plan for when you die. (EXP-3)

Other stakeholders noted the need to move away from policy pollination by external actors. Instead of having social protection policies and strategies written by international consultants,

We would better go with strategies developed over a longer time, in a more participatory way, and written in the language. (BIL-2)

As noted by a regional scholar:

We need to adopt a different positionality. So far, be it the Millennium Development Goals or the Sustainable Development Goals or this USP [Universal Social Protection 2030], most of them are designed from the position of the Global North. Unless we design it from the position of the Global South, it will just simply replicate, reinforce the existing power symmetries and inequalities. (EXP-5)

If developed through a bottom-up approach with strong domestic leadership (e.g. with a focus on communities and by leveraging informal and semi-informal social protection structures), social protection arrangements might look distinctly different. Without the availability of a counterfactual or comparative case study country in Africa where social protection was developed in such a way, it is impossible to say with certainty whether these forms of social protection would be more effective. However, it is not inconceivable that domestically led policies that build on home-grown forms of social support might be better able to serve the immediate and lifelong needs of local populations, in alignment with social and cultural norms and practices.

Finally, there is significant siloing of social protection interventions, their leading domestic institutions and the external actors providing support for each of them, as evident from the Côte d’Ivoire and Tanzania case studies. Countries would greatly benefit from a clear, holistic social policy vision that brings together different interventions and actors under a shared approach that is aligned to country-specific development needs and a home-grown vision.

The vision [...] of someone who can have a holistic vision of social protection by not only saying that we are going to set up a contributory system that will generate money for us, but someone who is able to say here is the system in a holistic way, this is how I make the different pieces communicate and this is how I build a viable social protection system for Côte d’Ivoire, including its financing. (IC-6)

5.6 Strengthening domestic financing capacity

The case studies of Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania point to the importance of strengthening domestic resource mobilisation to enhance domestic ownership of social protection policies. Sufficient fiscal capacity constitutes a primary means to counter external influences in social protection processes.

Learnings from Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania indicate that, in practical terms, this can be pursued through domestic-level action through improved taxation policies and economic diversification, with the latter leading to a better position in global value chains. Doing so strengthens the domestic fiscal space for sustainable social protection investments. At the same time, development partners must acknowledge how levels of debt servicing across Africa severely constrain countries' fiscal space for reform, and reconsider the dominant role of Western actors in high-value sectors, such as extractive industries, with development cooperation needing to prioritise fair economic engagement. International action is urgently needed to limit capital flight from resource-scarce countries.

We need consistent funding and better administrative capacity for social protection schemes. We can start with increasing revenue collection, improving tax efficiency, proper allocation of government resources to fund social protection programmes. (TA-14)

6 Conclusion and recommendations for policymakers

This study sought to investigate **the role of coloniality in social protection in the Global South**. It did so using a mix of a literature review, in-depth interviews with international stakeholders and detailed country case studies of social protection in mainland Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire.

Analysis was framed against a newly developed “social protection and coloniality” framework, highlighting the three interlinked components of colonial legacy, postcolonial influence and domestic political economy factors that underpin social protection systems and policies. The framework serves to consider the path dependencies and pathways that have led up to – and continue to influence – current social protection arrangements across sub-Saharan Africa, allowing for context- and country-specific issues to surface and be brought to the fore. It does so with the explicit aim to highlight colonial footprints and their interaction with domestic factors. At the same time, the framework allows for recognising that there is great diversity across Africa and the Global South, and that shared colonial histories or continued colonial influence are insufficient to explain in-country social protection arrangements.

In this section, we offer concluding remarks and reflect on the sub-research questions that guided this study.

6.1 Social protection and coloniality

In unpacking the role of coloniality, this study considered three sub-research questions. We discuss findings for each of these in turn before offering overarching reflections.

The first question this study considered was: **What is the colonial legacy in social protection?** That is, what are the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times, that were maintained post-independence, and that are still in place – in part or in full – at present?

Findings show that there is still a considerable colonial footprint across sub-Saharan Africa in terms of social protection. Social insurance is widely acknowledged as having originated in colonial times, regardless of the colonial power. At the same time, there are also differences in social protection arrangements across the region, depending on the colonising country. Notably, social insurance schemes are far more prevalent across Francophone Africa compared to Anglophone Africa.

Nevertheless, in the words of Mkandawire, “colonial legacies are not destiny” (Mkandawire, 2016b, p. 18). Indeed, many countries – such as in Southern Africa – convey considerable divergence in their social protection trajectories, despite similarities in their colonial pasts. An interplay between postcolonial influence and domestic factors such as ideology, elite interest and economic resources has led countries to maintain, adapt or discard social protection arrangements that were installed in colonial times.

The study’s second question was: **What are the postcolonial influences in social protection?** That is, what are the continued patterns of power imbalances that shape social protection arrangements in countries in Africa and across the Global South, even decades after independence?

Findings of this study provide evidence for a range of postcolonial influences and that they play a considerable role in shaping social protection arrangements in sub-Saharan Africa. Western actors and organisations continue to set the agenda and employ important policy levers such as through international aid and funding mechanisms as well as the export of knowledge and ideas. These continued and persistent imbalances in who gets to shape social protection are acknowledged by both international and in-country stakeholders, despite efforts to address them through global platforms and policy engagement initiatives.

At the same time, it is important to recognise there is great diversity across the continent, and there are important examples of countries pushing their own priorities. As noted in relation to colonial legacy, an interplay with domestic factors – such as the availability of greater economic resources, prevailing political ideology or elites’ preferences being in line with or challenging external ideas – feeds into the diversity of social protection across the region.

The third question underpinning this study was: What are the **political economy factors at the domestic level** that play into country-level social protection arrangements?

Findings highlight the importance of domestic resistance and political ideology; elites and governance; and civil society engagement and workers’ movements in shaping social protection. The study underscores the complex interplay between domestic political actors and external influences in determining the trajectory of social protection systems across Africa. Although some governments align with international donor preferences, there are many examples of resistance – both historical and current – to external influences. Countries such as Malawi, Ethiopia, Côte d’Ivoire and Tanzania, for example, have demonstrated varying degrees of resistance to externally imposed models, pushing back against proposed interventions or adopting alternative configurations.

Indeed, in shaping social protection, governments ultimately prioritise domestic interests and ideological preferences. Political elites – often influenced by historical ties to former colonial powers or international institutions – play a crucial role in policy adoption and implementation. The study also points to concerns over elite capture, whereby social protection benefits are disproportionately allocated to privileged groups rather than the broader population. Civil society and workers’ movements have historically played a significant role in advocating for welfare reforms, particularly during the colonial era and early independence movements. Trade unions and grassroots organisations have – and continue to push for – better labour conditions, social insurance and gender-sensitive policies, sometimes through direct activism and protests.

We summarise the key findings from this study in relation to colonial legacy, postcolonial influence and domestic political factors in Box 4.

Box 4: Social protection and coloniality: key findings

- (1) The **footprint of colonial legacies** – that is, the institutional, legal and policy arrangements that were put in place during colonial times – remains visible across contemporary social protection, albeit in a highly contextual manner. We identify four elements that play into this:
 - a. Economic disadvantage and dependency
 - b. Institutional and legislative arrangements
 - c. Hegemony of Western ideals and models
 - d. Colonial models of social protection
- (2) **Postcolonial influences** – that is, continued patterns of power imbalances – have a sizeable impact on social protection arrangements across the region and, on balance, are considered more important than colonial legacies. We identify four mechanisms through which this plays out:
 - a. Maintaining unfavourable global economic structures
 - b. Narrowing of the global social protection agenda by prioritising (i) consumption over production, and (ii) cash transfers over other forms of social protection
 - c. Imposing aid and funding conditionalities
 - d. Exporting ideas and knowledge
- (3) **Domestic political economy factors** – and how they counteract or reinforce colonial legacies and postcolonial influences – are vital in shaping social protection. Three elements emerge as particularly relevant:
 - a. Resistance and political ideology
 - b. Elites and governance
 - c. Civil society and workers' movements

In considering the three elements of the “social protection and coloniality” framework – colonial legacy, postcolonial influence and domestic political economy factors – findings point to the dominant role of postcolonial influence. Overall, findings in this study suggest that the current configuration of the international social protection eco-system is out of kilter, with strong international interference in the determination of in-country social protection trajectories. Although countries do offer resistance and governments are strategic in engaging with different international actors and invest in their own priorities when possible or as desirable, continued external influences – predicated on historical power imbalances – are often strong and overbearing. From deeply engrained inequities in global economic structures to influence, trainings and technical assistance, coloniality has a strong presence in today’s social protection arrangements across the region.

We also wish to mention that, although much of the external interest in this study – as we were in the process of undertaking it – was in tracing colonial legacies and unpacking what types of social protection were established during colonial times and why (and to what extent they still exist or have been adapted or discarded and why), this interest was not shared by many of the interviewees, especially at the country level. Instead, what was deemed of far greater interest and concern was the enduring postcolonial influence, and how this perpetuates inequities and creates challenges for developing a more level playing field for future social protection.

Finally, it is vital to point out the complexity of social protection trajectories and how systems, policies and arrangements take shape. This study considered this issue through the lens of coloniality and sought to surface patterns, challenges and opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa, with relevance for the Global South more broadly. While this study allowed for identifying themes with relevance across countries and contexts, it also highlights the problem with creating a singular or linear story about the role of colonial legacy, postcolonial influence and domestic

factors in social protection. The origins and trajectories of individual arrangements merit and require in-depth study to do justice to all facets of their histories and the external and in-country influences that shaped them.

6.2 Disrupting coloniality in social protection

With the aim to disrupt patterns of coloniality and create a more level playing field in social protection, a fourth sub-research question was presented: What are **ways forward** to support countries in Africa and the Global South in shaping social protection arrangements in line with their own priorities?

A number of recommendations emerge from this study, summarised in Box 5 and elaborated below.

Box 5: Social protection and coloniality: recommendations

- **Reflecting more critically on the enduring role of coloniality** in the design of social protection systems and policies, which is essential for developing more equitable and effective solutions. International organisations are encouraged to critically evaluate their approaches and the impacts of their interventions, promoting more reflective and context-specific practices.
- **Paying greater attention to knowledge and ideas from the Global South**, both in terms of historical knowledge that has been largely overlooked and ignored, and new knowledge production to inform social protection in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world.
- **Engaging national governments more meaningfully in global platforms** is vital to enhance the ownership and sustainability of national social protection systems, such as through the provision of adequate resources, a clear articulation of the benefits to partner countries and more accessible use of language.
- **Building on and furthering South-South learning** in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western ideas and knowledge, rather than reinforces it.
- **Firmly placing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and across the Global South in the driver's seat** when choosing, developing and implementing social protection arrangements, with international organisations following their lead rather than the other way around.
- **Strengthening domestic financing capacity** to decrease reliance on and counter external influences, and enhance domestic ownership of social protection.

First, the creation of more equal partnerships and ensuring that social arrangements are more country-driven and -owned requires **international stakeholders to be more critically reflective** in terms of their approaches towards social protection, and how they promote the expansion of social protection. Findings from across the study's research components point towards a degree of arrogance and lack of self-reflection from within international organisations and among donors and development partners in terms of the types of social protection they promote. People matter: There are considerable differences between individuals working for these organisations in terms of their views, attitudes and ways of engaging with in-country counterparts, using their discretion to shape the agenda or set priorities. Nevertheless, ultimately they are acting on behalf of the organisations they work for and therefore bound by organisational mandates. The end result is the promotion of potentially inappropriate models of social protection in often uncritical ways.

Second, in challenging dominant models of social protection that have originated – and continue to originate – from the Global North, **there is a need to pay greater attention to and build knowledge from the Global South**. This refers to (i) knowledge that already exists but has

been largely overlooked, and (ii) knowledge that is currently produced and disseminated to inform social protection arrangements.

The first aspect pertains to longstanding and well-established but largely ignored models of social protection in Africa, and the Global South more broadly. As evidenced in this paper, there is no shortage of intellectual thought or literature on this topic, nor is there a dearth of initiatives or alternative visions to shape social protection. However, these have mostly been overlooked and pushed aside by Western scholarship and policy dominance. For example, scholars such as Mkandawire, Adésinà and Ouma have argued that social protection is only one component of social policy, and the ongoing narrow focus on social protection instruments by donors and external agencies in the African context hinders the development of holistic, development-oriented social policy arrangements.

Relatedly, a range of “indigenous” social protection instruments can be observed across the continent – from the Girinka Programme (or the “One Cow per Poor Family” initiative) in Rwanda and the Village Banking system (VICOBA) in Tanzania to semi-informal savings groups and funds by informal workers’ associations that provide the primary form of organised social protection for many people. Over the past decade, there has also been a significant increase in the domestically led expansion of social insurance instruments to informal sector workers (e.g. the National Informal Sector Scheme (NISS) in Tanzania and RSTI in Côte d’Ivoire; see Lambin & Nyssölä, 2024). Yet, these largely home-grown (and sometimes grassroots) initiatives have gained little attention in global policy arenas and deliberations. A critical engagement with alternative models of – and home-grown approaches to – social protection is imperative for opening up space for contemporary country-driven models to take shape and be established.

The second aspect refers to the fact that most knowledge about social protection is produced in or by the Global North through the mechanisms of policy pollination, technical assistance and training programmes. As evident from the analysis in this paper, this is often intentional: They represent important forms of policy transfer and are used strategically by international agencies to promote their own models of – and priorities for – social protection. It is exactly because of the strategic importance of knowledge and ideas that an effort to disrupt postcolonial influence requires an investment in scholarship and expertise in the Global South to allow for moving the ideational centre of gravity on social protection in the Global South away from the Global North towards the Global South. Doing so also requires engagement with wider efforts to decolonise knowledge production and challenge ingrained perceptions – held across the Global North and Global South – about the supposed superiority of Western knowledge.

The third recommendation pertains to **supporting the greater meaningful engagement of national governments in international platforms**. International respondents have pointed to such platforms as key spaces for the global community to discuss and set priorities for the types of interventions, their modalities and their configuration to be promoted and supported, which subsequently forms the basis for external influences on national social protection policies. Although there have been efforts to include national policymakers in these spaces, these have been patchy, and the results have been limited. A move from seemingly tokenistic towards meaningful inclusion requires considerable investment from international partners who curate and hold these global spaces, both in terms of providing the resources for government counterparts to take part and including them as equal partners. This ranges from a clear articulation of the benefit for national partners to spend scarce time on engaging with such spaces as well as a rethink regarding their “openness” in terms of language or degree of technical jargon.

The fourth recommendation is to **further explore the potential of South-South learning**. Relocating the starting point of the flow of knowledge can serve as an important mechanism for disrupting the hegemony of Western ideas and models in social protection. Countries across the Global South, or within a specific region, should learn from each other rather than adopt the

Western model as the default template, allowing them to give greater heed to context-specific and indigenous models of social protection.

The potential of South-South learning comes with two caveats: First, given the (post)colonial footprint on much of social protection in sub-Saharan Africa, and arguably across the Global South, there is a risk that South-South learning simply reproduces Western models with a context-specific flavour, rather than allow for the emergence of more radically home-grown arrangements. Especially when facilitated by international partners, South-South learning must avoid becoming a conduit for further entrenching Western ideas of social protection under the guise of peer learning. Second, South-South learning is not devoid of power imbalances and political agendas.

The fifth recommendation for countering colonial legacy and postcolonial influence is to **put countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the driver's seat** of the design and implementation of social protection programmes, rather than having them follow the lead of international organisations. Although representatives of international organisations voiced a strong preference for this dynamic – and in some cases suggested that this is an underlying principle of their engagement with partner countries – this study clearly shows that regional and in-country stakeholders do not feel they hold the reins when it comes to setting the social protection agenda. “Handing over the stick” requires international organisations to give up control and allows countries to set their own priorities, even if they are not in line with their own. Greater investment in and collaboration with civil society and in-country non-governmental partners would serve as a mechanism to create bottom-up accountability to avoid the potential infringement of rights of vulnerable or marginalised groups, and which might be more effective in responding to needs in keeping with local norms and values.

As for the countries themselves, taking a full leadership role is most fruitful when done from a place of clear vision and ambition. Developing a strong domestic policy framework and coordinating mechanisms that allow for building synergies between social protection domains and different actors are crucial for optimising system-level effectiveness and overcoming internal competition and friction between different coalitions pursuing separate agendas.

Finally, we emphasise the importance of **strengthening domestic financing capacity**. Resource mobilisation, such as through enhanced taxation policies and economic diversification, can help decrease reliance on and counter external influences, and enhance domestic ownership of social protection. Doing so also requires development partners to reconsider their roles in high-value sectors, such as extractive industries, and address high debt-servicing levels, which severely limit many African countries' space for manoeuvre.

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