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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme, this article examines the extent to which national governments have embraced the rights-based approach to social assistance. Based on interviews with beneficiary households and policymakers at national and sub-national levels, it finds that although official policy documents depict the LEAP in rights-based terms, beneficiaries see it as a charitable programme. The article concludes that if the LEAP is to play a stronger role in promoting citizenship rights in Ghana, it is important to strengthen district level structures to investigate and redress beneficiaries' complaints in a timely manner.

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Introduction

In recent years, social protection has been established as a core function of development policy. It features prominently in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call on their signatories to "implement nationally appropriate social protection systems" and "achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable" by 2030. Initially firmly rooted in social safety nets and humanitarian relief where assistance was provided on a discretionary rather than an entitlement basis (Devereaux, McGregor, and Sabates-Wheeler 2011), there is now growing consensus among academics and development practitioners that social protection is a basic human right and a means to attaining social justice in society (Devereux and McGregor 2014; Barrientos 2016). The 2006 Livingston Call for Action declared social protection as "both a rights and an empowerment agenda" while the African Union's social policy framework for Africa called on member states to "implement social development objectives in accordance with the principles of a human rights-based approach". Recently, the International Labour Organization (ILO) declared social protection as a right, and urged all countries to adopt social protection floors, defined as "sets of basic social security guarantees which secure protection aimed at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion" (ILO 2012).

A human rights-based approach sees social protection "as an inherent social entitlement or right, rather than as 'charity' for programme beneficiaries" (UNRISD 2016, 3). This approach takes social protection beyond its minimalist interpretation, seeing it "as an instrument of social restructuring" (Durojaye 2015, 272) to redress conditions of injustice and exclusion that perpetuate poverty and inequality. Social protection, therefore, is grounded in the notion of a social contract between states and citizens, ensuring the predictability of benefits necessary to tackle poverty on a sustained basis. Such benefits are not charitable gestures, but are "entitlements that citizens may claim and for which governments may be held accountable" (Tessitore 2011, 13). A rights-based approach (RBA) to social protection is important in attaining the SDGs because it obliges states to take appropriate measures to ensure that a significant number of the population is guaranteed a dignified living (Durojaye 2015, 272). While there is a large amount of literature on social assistance in developing countries, this has mostly focused on issues of design, and of the impact of

programmes on poverty reduction (Davis et al. 2016). Much less attention has been paid to examining the extent to which national governments have embraced social assistance programmes from a rights-based perspective, and whether and to what extent this is transforming state-society relations in Africa.

This article addresses this gap through a case study of Ghana's flagship cash transfer programme, Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), which now benefits nearly one million people across the country's 216 administrative districts. Three interrelated questions are addressed: Is social protection in Ghana a right? To what extent can the LEAP be held as a rights-based approach to social protection? What are the key constraints that undermine the rights-based orientation of the LEAP? The article first discusses the rights-based approach to social protection in some detail, then provides a brief history of social protection in Ghana, before turning to examine the rights-based orientation of the LEAP in terms of policy and practice.

The rights-based approach to social protection

Social security has long been enshrined as a right in various international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The most recent global push towards RBAs is the ILO's recommendations on social protection floors (ILO 2012). Under these recommendations, states are enjoined to apply some important elements of a rights-based approach to social protection, including universality of protection and benefits, entitlement to benefits under national law, adequacy and predictability of benefits, accessibility to complaints mechanisms, and respect for the rights and dignity of beneficiaries.

The human rights approach to social protection requires that social protection programmes be grounded in legal and institutional frameworks; without this, programmes become vulnerable to political manipulation, and their sustainability is threatened during regime changes (Sepúlveda and Nyst 2012). Legal and institutional frameworks also enhance beneficiaries' abilities to demand their entitlements and protest violations of their rights (Sepúlveda and Nyst 2012; UNRISD 2016). The most successful experiences of social protection systems are those grounded in legal instruments that create an entitlement to social protection benefits, ensure the permanence of these initiatives, and give rights holders the legal ability to invoke their rights (Devereaux, McGregor, and Sabates-Wheeler 2011). The success of social protection systems in countries such as Brazil and South Africa is due in part to the existence of specific legal provisions that transform benefits from charitable gestures into justiciable rights (Sepúlveda and Nyst 2012; Devereaux, McGregor, and Sabates-Wheeler 2011). In Swaziland, where pensions were introduced for all older citizens in 2005, a delay in payments due to cash flow problems provoked aggrieved pensioners to lobby their MPs, and parliament was suspended until the issue was resolved (Devereux 2011).

A human rights-based approach also requires that policymakers, programme administrators and others whose actions have an impact on programmes should be held accountable for their actions. Tessitore (2011, 15) notes that since the most vulnerable and socially excluded have more difficulties in accessing benefits, effective grievance and redress mechanisms need to be a central concern of any intervention targeting them. Therefore, social protection programmes require in-built mechanisms for collecting, investigating and responding to grievances from affected citizens in a timely and consistent manner. If designed well, grievance mechanisms can solicit inquiries, invite suggestions, disclose information and thereby increase community participation in programmes. The combined result would be an improved social contract between states and citizens (Druzca 2016).

Beyond grievance and redress mechanisms, the effective participation of citizens must be a key component of any social protection system because it provides an opportunity for vulnerable and marginalised groups to shape decision-making that may affect their lives (Durojaye 2015). Thus, a rights-based approach demands the inclusion of participatory channels that are designed to take into account the existing asymmetries of power between service providers and programme

participants, eliminate or diminish abuses of power by local elites, and avoid the exclusion of marginalised groups from decision-making processes and structures (Sepúlveda and Nyst 2012).

From a rights-based perspective, the adequacy of social protection benefits based on prevailing circumstances in any given society is also crucial. Adequacy means that the benefits given must be sufficient enough to maintain a minimum standard of life in the long term. As Barrientos (2016) notes, one important but challenging feature of a justice-based social assistance is to ensure that benefit levels are such that they are able to “*maximise ‘the life prospects’ of disadvantaged groups*”. This also points to the need for a regular adjustment of benefit levels in order to ensure that beneficiaries are able to afford the goods and services they require to realise their basic human rights.

This article draws from this framework to examine the extent to which social protection in Ghana, particularly the country’s flagship cash transfer programme, the LEAP, is oriented towards the realisation of rights.

Study context and methods

This study used a qualitative research approach, and was conducted in the Asante Akim Central Municipality and the Shai-Osudoku District in the Ashanti and Greater Accra regions of Ghana, respectively. Located in the Eastern part of Ashanti Region, the Asante Akim Central Municipality was created out of the then Asante Akim District Council in 1988 and attained municipal status in 2007. Total land size of the municipality is 300 square kilometres. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, the municipality has a population of 70,584, the majority of whom are female (52.5%). The Shai-Osudoku district, on the other hand, is situated in the South-eastern part of Ghana in the Greater Accra region, and has Dodowa as its capital. The district was demarcated in June 2012 and carved out of the Dangme West District Assembly. It has a total land area of about 968 square kilometres, representing 30% of the total land space of the Greater Accra Region.

The selection of these districts was guided by two main criteria. First, these districts reflect the rural-urban divide in Ghana. While Shai-Osudoku is a predominantly rural district with about 76.5% of the population living in rural areas, a higher proportion of the population (67.8%) in Asante Akim is urban. Second, unlike many districts in Ghana which only joined the LEAP in 2016, both the Asante Akim Central Municipality and the Shai-Osudoku district were part of earlier LEAP beneficiary areas. Households in these districts have therefore had several years of experience with the programme and hence are better placed to assess the rights-based orientation of the LEAP.

Primary data were gathered through a combination of key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants at national and sub-national levels, involving senior bureaucrats and technical staff at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGCSP) and LEAP Management Secretariat (11 interviews), officials of the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) (six interviews), and community focal persons (four interviews) who play intermediary roles between beneficiaries and district-level programme implementers. FGDs were conducted with LEAP beneficiaries in the two districts. Within districts and communities, a purposive sampling technique was used to recruit beneficiaries for participation in the FGDs. Following Oduro (2015), FGD respondents were recruited to cover the three broad beneficiaries in the LEAP; namely OVCs, PWDs, and poor people over 65 years old. In each community, focal persons were used to help identify suitable beneficiaries for the FGDs. This approach ensured a suitable degree of representation among LEAP beneficiaries in the sampled districts.

Four FGDs were conducted among beneficiaries in each district, for a total number of eight FGDs. Each FGD comprised between eight and 12 participants, and separate discussions were held with male and female beneficiaries. The FGDs were conducted directly by the researchers in local languages. With the consent of participants, most interviews with study participants were recorded and transcribed in English. To analyse the data, thematic analysis was used. This entailed carefully going through the interview transcripts to extract various themes and sub-themes related to the

research questions. Where possible, direct quotations from informants were extracted and used to buttress the study's arguments.

Social protection in Ghana

Since the early 2000s, there has been a proliferation of social protection programmes in Ghana, beginning with a new contributory national health insurance scheme (NHIS) in 2003, a national school feeding programme in 2005, the LEAP cash transfer scheme (2008), and the Labour Intensive Public Works Programme (2008). At least in principle, Ghana's social protection policies and interventions are moving toward a rights-based approach to development (Kaltenborn et al. 2017), with social protection increasingly being viewed within various government agencies as "*a right of every citizen*" (Government of Ghana 2007a, 10). The approach to Ghana's social protection programmes is influenced by a range of international and regional legal instruments and the provisions of the 1992 Constitution. Ghana is a signatory to, and has ratified almost all, the relevant conventions, treaties and protocols of the United Nations and the African Union (AU) for social protection, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Persons with Disabilities, the African Union Social Policy Framework (2003), the Livingstone Declaration (2006), the Ouagadougou Declaration and Plan of Action (2004, 2008) and the AU Heads of State Common Agenda for Action Post-2015 (Government of Ghana 2015). These international and regional agreements impose some tacit obligation on the state to pursue social protection programmes.

Most recent major national development frameworks justify the need for social protection for the vulnerable often from a human rights perspective. Since 2010, Ghana's medium-term development frameworks have been the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA) I and II. The GSGDA I was implemented from 2010 to 2013, followed by the GSGDA II from 2014 to 2017. The GSGDA I underscores the importance of the human right to social security. For example, this strategy emphasised the need to review Ghana's national social protection strategy so as to "*ensure mainstreaming of a human rights framework into development*" (Government of Ghana 2010, 95). It expresses concern about the inadequacy of specific policies aiming to deal with historically excluded and vulnerable populations, and emphasises the need for a vision of social development that is anchored on "*redistribution, social protection, and social integration*" (Government of Ghana 2010, 95). The GSGDA II also provides for social protection from a human rights perspective and goes on to advocate the need for a national social protection floor (Government of Ghana 2014, 128). The idea behind the social protection floor – defined as a "*set of basic rights, services and facilities that a global citizen should enjoy*" (Government of Ghana 2012) – is to ensure that the extreme poor have access to basic social services (e.g. health, education) and cash transfers that grant them decent standards of living. The Ghanaian social protection floor, as defined in the more recent National Social Protection Policy, seeks to balance social assistance, social security and productive inclusion among vulnerable populations (Government of Ghana 2015, 2).

In 2007, Ghana developed National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) with the vision of ensuring:

an inclusive equitable society in which ordinary and extremely poor and vulnerable citizens are protected from risks and shocks and are empowered ... to overcome social, economic and cultural challenges in order to realise their rights and responsibilities and to make meaningful contributions to society. (Government of Ghana 2012, 20)

The NSPS highlighted the need to implement a new set of programmes to address poverty and vulnerability in a more comprehensive way, and identified the LEAP as its flagship programme. At the outset, ideas around the responsibility of the state towards its citizens were the main basis for justifying the LEAP in the NSPS. Drawing inspiration from the 1992 constitution, the NSPS was "*founded on the principle that every Ghanaian matters*" (Government of Ghana 2007a, 6), and hence deserve some form of state support irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds and productive capacities. In this respect, social protection was framed not as a waste of public resources, but

instead as “an indispensable part of any government’s responsibility towards its citizens” (Government of Ghana 2012, 10).

Launched in 2008, the LEAP is Ghana’s flagship cash transfer programme that provides bi-monthly cash transfers to households living below the national extreme poverty line. Specifically, LEAP targets poor families that have at least one member who is either aged (over 65), has a disability and is unable to work (PWD), and has an orphan or a vulnerable child (OVC). From 2016 onwards, poor households with a pregnant woman or a child under one year old were added to the list of beneficiaries. The overall goal of the LEAP is to increase long-term human capital development among the poorest and most vulnerable populations (Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare 2012).

The level of the LEAP benefit varies, depending on the number of eligible people in a household. Currently, a one-eligible member household receives GHC64.00; a household with two eligible members receives GHC76, while households with three eligible beneficiaries get GHC88. Those with four eligible beneficiaries or more receive GHC106.00. Transfers are either conditional or unconditional depending on the characteristics of beneficiary households. While conditional cash transfers are targeted at the extreme poor with no alternate means of meeting their subsistence needs, unconditional grants are offered to individuals with no productive capacity such as the elderly poor, and persons with severe disabilities (PWDs).

Findings and discussion

The LEAP as a rights-based approach to social protection: progress and limitations

This section examines whether and to what extent the LEAP can be characterised as a rights-based approach to social protection. The discussion shows that although some progress has been made in moving Ghana’s social protection agenda towards a rights-based approach, especially at the level of policy and programme design, a number of significant constraints remain. These include a rather weak legal and institutional framework for the LEAP and social protection programmes more broadly; limited value of the LEAP cash transfer; deep-seated perceptions of the programme as charity rather than an entitlement; and a significantly weak complaints and grievance mechanism through which beneficiaries can hold programme implementers accountable.

The legal framework for social protection

An important feature of a rights-based approach to social protection is the existence of a legal framework that contributes to the predictability and transparency of benefits. Although RBAs require that the right to social security be enshrined in national constitutions (Sepúlveda and Nyst 2012), growing evidence suggests that constitutional provisions are often inadequate unless they are accompanied by “detailed national legislation ... that determines the design, administration, management, delivery, financing and monitoring arrangements of the entitlements provided by the social security system” (ILO 2012, 31). The 1992 Constitution of Ghana enjoins every government to promote just and reasonable access by all citizens to public facilities and services, provide adequate means of livelihood to citizens and public assistance to the needy, as well as “provide social assistance to the aged such as will enable them to maintain a decent standard of living”.

However, beyond these broad-brushed constitutional provisions, most individual social protection programmes as well as the overall institutional framework for social protection are still not anchored in law. Consequently, nearly all of Ghana’s social protection interventions, including the LEAP, tend to be “based on somewhat volatile budget statements that have to be renegotiated for each fiscal period” (ILO 2014, 67). Ghana has recently taken steps to strengthen the legal framework for social protection by launching a national social protection policy in 2015 and the development of a Social Protection Bill which seeks to give legal identity to the LEAP programme and other social intervention programmes. In its 2016 election manifesto, the then ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) party, which drafted the bill, pledged to pursue its quick passage and implementation. However,

with the change in government that followed the elections, progress on the passage of the bill seems to have stalled (Abdulai 2019). Consequently, the legal framework for the LEAP and the broader social protection landscape in Ghana remains weak, undermining the rights-based orientation of social protection in the country.

Limited value of grant

When the introduction of the LEAP was first announced in November 2007, reactions from the general public were largely negative; many criticised it as “free hand-outs” (Foli 2016) that would create “dependency in poor households” (Luigi et al. 2016, 162). Amidst such criticisms, proponents deployed a range of ideas that sought to sell the programme to the general public and a few sceptics within government. Our field research suggests that one such idea was to set the cash grant at a level that would enable the extreme poor to meet their basic food requirements but which would neither be sufficient enough to discourage them from productive activities nor push the incomes of the poorest above other poor income groups. As one of the design team members explained:

some people tried to talk about dependency but we tried to downplay it. The cash that is disbursed is not such that it would serve as an incentive for people not to work ... because the level of the grant is ... not even anything like the minimum wage.

In this respect, fixing the transfer rate that was both adequate and acceptable to politicians and the society at large was important because, as this respondent further explained: “if we were giving cash transfers of \$100 a month, all of us will start complaining because it ... will not be something that is socially acceptable”.

Such arguments might have succeeded in eliciting broad-based support for the programme, but they have also contributed to one significant unintended adverse consequence, the rather low amount of the cash grant which undermines the rights-based orientation of the LEAP. The literature on cash transfers show that one crucial determinant of the effectiveness of such programmes on poverty alleviation is the sufficiency, regularity, and predictability of benefits that facilitate household budget planning (Farrington and Slater 2006). Since its inception, the value of the LEAP cash grant has been consistently low even by the standards of sub-Saharan Africa. In 2010, the value of the transfer was 7% of consumption, which did not compare favourably with other successful programmes elsewhere which transferred at least 20% of consumption to beneficiaries (Handa et al. 2014). Figure 1 shows transfer amounts as a share of average beneficiary consumption for several cash transfer programmes in Africa and elsewhere. In 2010, the LEAP transfer was the lowest of all and less than half the size of the next lowest value, in Mozambique.

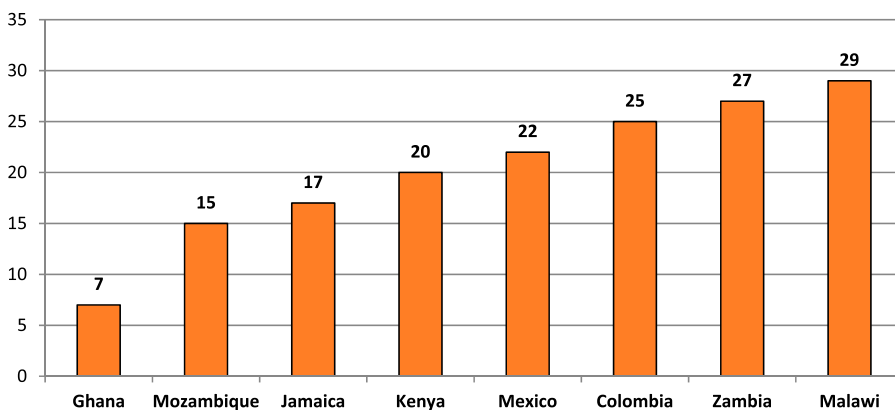


Figure 1 . Transfer as share of beneficiary consumption in various countries. Source: DFID Ghana (2012) .

Despite tripling the transfer value in 2012 and increasing it again by an average of 20% in 2015, the transfer currently represents just 13% of household consumption, or less than six days' worth of food per month (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2017). Currently, the LEAP transfers GHC64 (US \$14) to households with one beneficiary member every two months. This translates into an abysmal US\$7 per month, compared to the international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day or US\$37.5 per month. This means that the LEAP cash grant falls far below the amount needed for the survival of the poorest if the grant were the sole source of income or livelihood for such households. Indeed, the value of the transfer was a major concern raised by most respondents during this study. As one beneficiary asked: *"How am I supposed to manage with GHC88, with my two children for two months?"* Another beneficiary reported that even though they are often advised to save part of their grants for investment purposes, *"we cannot save the money because it is too small"*.

The limited value of the grant is further undermined by a number of factors. First, the programme reaches a very small proportion of Ghana's extreme poor. This reduces the programme to a few "deserving few". Second, the value of the LEAP grant is eroded both by Ghana's high level of inflation, and the tendency of some community focal persons to demand "compensation" from beneficiaries for mobilising them for payments. In some cases, beneficiaries themselves "willingly" show appreciation by contributing a portion of their grants to Community LEAP Implementation Committee (CLIC) members: *"I usually give the CLIC something small as 'kola' for the work they do because they are not paid. How can someone who facilitates the collection of your cash go home empty handed?"*

Third, until from late 2013 onwards, payments of LEAP grants were generally highly erratic, and the transfers were often in arrears for several months due to delayed release of funds by the Finance Ministry (National Development Planning Commission 2009, 213). In 2011, LEAP households received an amount equivalent to only four payments (instead of six) in three irregular instalments. By August 2013, payments to LEAP beneficiaries were so irregular that *"government was in arrears by eight months"* (DFID 2014, 1). The unpredictable payment patterns mean that households were unable to factor the grants into their regular spending and investment plans, thus undermining the rights-orientation and poverty reduction potential of the programme (Handa et al. 2014; Luigi et al. 2016). The effect of these problems has been the limited impact of the LEAP on the livelihood dynamics of beneficiaries. In a recent study that sought to assess the programme's impact on beneficiaries' productive capacities, Peprah et al. (2017) conclude that a vast majority of LEAP recipients *"have not been able to acquire productive livelihood assets with the direct cash given to them bi-monthly"* and attributed it to the relatively low amounts received.

In spite of this, the LEAP has contributed to improving state-society relations in Ghana. Many beneficiaries explained that the programme has given them some form of recognition as citizens, implying that the state is concerned about their welfare. One key mechanism that generates this feeling is the issuance of identity cards that help beneficiaries to access their LEAP grants. To an extent, these ID cards foster feelings of "belongingness" and signify the existence of a form of contract between the state and its citizens. Citizenship must be understood in a broader sense to include not only being considered as belonging to a particular territorial jurisdiction, but more importantly how being a citizen entitles one to certain socio-economic and political benefits within a polity. In one recent study, some respondents spoke of their ID cards as a source of pride: *"As you can see, not everybody in this community has this card ... At least if I don't have anything to show, the card means that I am entitled to some benefit from the state"* (quoted in Quayson 2018, 47).

Moreover, despite the limited value of the LEAP cash grant, it has contributed to citizens' positive perceptions about the state because the beneficiaries see it as a free gift. This is supported by the following quotes from beneficiaries in our two study districts:

Receiving this cash has made me to believe that truly the state thinks of us.

Before this programme, I didn't have any sense of belonging to a nation at all. There was no assistance from government. But the situation is now different. The programme has given me hope that I belong to a nation and it has increased my trust to a nation.

These observations clearly show that even in contexts where cash transfers amounts are small and irregularly given, they can help improve the social contract between states and citizens and by extension help foster social inclusion.

Deep-seated perceptions of the LEAP as charity

Beneficiaries' understanding of cash transfer programmes in rights-based terms is important because it provides the basis for the poor to defend those rights against the state when their cash grants are either withheld or delayed. In contrast, where programmes are viewed by beneficiaries as the product of government's discretion or charity, it becomes difficult for citizens to meaningfully engage in monitoring activities to demand accountability. Moreover, whether programmes are viewed as a right or favour from the state is important in influencing the extent to which beneficiaries would utilise existing complaints and grievance mechanisms.

In line with the rights-based approach to social protection, LEAP policy documents are littered with the language of rights, with the assertion that *"the LEAP has adopted an essentially rights-based approach"* (Government of Ghana 2007b, 38), and that Ghana was *"to pursue a more structured and more equitably distributed social protection programme, based on rights-based principles"* (Government of Ghana 2007b, 8). One senior official in charge of implementing the programme echoes these sentiments during our interviews, claiming that:

The LEAP ... is rights-based because the overall provision of social services is the responsibility of the state ... it is not a favour that they are receiving; it is the responsibility of the gov't to be able to make sure that as the country develops, we don't leave out these segments of the population ... So ours is more of rights-based.

However, such characterisations are in sharp contrast with the perception of the programme's beneficiaries who generally perceive the LEAP as a form of government charity. During FGDs, a vast majority of respondents understood the programme as a favour because, as one put it, *"we don't work for it"*. Such perceptions were so widespread that even when beneficiaries expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the programme such as the inadequacy of the grant and the long periods they often have to wait on payment days, they still find no reason to question duty bearers since the benefits are primarily perceived as *"free cash"* offered to them in the form of a gift. For example, asked what challenges they have with regards to the programme, one male FGD participant noted:

We can't say there are challenges because if you don't have something and someone says he would help you, how can you complain about that help? Especially given that they [payment officials] even come to your community to pay you, how can you complain on top of that?

Since we have not worked for anybody to be receiving this payment, we are appreciative of whatever we get.

We are not doing any work for this money. So we don't have anything to say than to thank and pray for them. Once it's a help, we cannot ask for more.

Partly as a result, some beneficiaries do not even bother to check the accuracy of the amount they receive, fearing that questioning the sufficiency/accuracy of the cash grant may attract the anger of payment officers and potentially lead to their exclusion from the list of beneficiaries. This problem is partly the result of the limited education that accompanied the introduction of the programme. At the time it was introduced, very little effort was made to explain the programme to beneficiaries in rights-based terms (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2017). Although several sensitisation meetings were organised with beneficiaries and various community members at the planning stage, our interactions with beneficiaries suggest that the initial communications focused more on issues related to the conditionalities that beneficiaries had to fulfil in order to remain on the programme, with limited efforts aimed at enhancing citizens' understanding of the programme as a fundamental right. From a rights-based approach, this represented a major setback of the LEAP.

Weak grievance and complaints mechanisms

In line with the RBA, the LEAP cash transfer programme has a case management system. This system seeks to allow “beneficiaries and any other stakeholder to file complaints concerning the payment system, quality of service being provided and other aspects of the program” (Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare 2012). While this is an important first step towards a rights/justice-based approach to social protection, several challenges remain. First, with most beneficiaries still perceiving the transfer as charity rather than a citizenship-based entitlement, we found that many beneficiaries are unwilling to lodge complaints against programme officials who are viewed as their representatives in the chain of implementation. In particular, beneficiaries view their community focal persons and district social welfare officers (DSWOs) as their main link to the LEAP grant and therefore deem it unwise to exercise active citizenship by lodging complaints against them:

We are afraid that one may complain and they will delete the person’s name from the beneficiary list; we don’t know where they get the money to pay us. So we can’t complain about their work or their behaviour towards us even if we are not happy.

Second, while there are opportunities for beneficiaries to lodge complaints at the district level through their DSWOs, many beneficiaries remain unaware of such mechanisms. Third, the resolution of cases encounters excessive delays in ways that discourage beneficiaries from lodging further complaints. While the sector minister hinted in 2015 that the LEAP programme will introduce hotlines to encourage complaints and feedback as a way of enhancing citizen participation and social accountability, this has not happened to date. As a result, the state’s accountability to the programme’s beneficiaries remains weak.

Conclusion and implications

This article set out to examine the extent to which Ghana has embraced the rights-based approach to social protection. The analysis focused on the country’s Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty programme which was launched in 2008 as part of government’s efforts in tackling vulnerability and exclusion. The study’s findings point to a significant disconnect between national-level rhetoric and ground level realities: while official policy documents and national-level programme implementers frequently refer to the LEAP in rights-based terms, most beneficiaries see the programme as a form of government charity and not a right to which they are entitled. As Oduro (2015, 34) puts it, many beneficiaries often refer to the LEAP cash grant as “Abban Sika”, that is, “the government money”. This widespread perception among beneficiaries has important adverse implications both for the poverty reduction potential of the LEAP and the programme’s role in shaping state-society relations. As Sugiyama (2016) notes, beneficiaries’ understanding of cash transfer programmes in rights-based terms is crucial because it provides the basis for the poor to defend those rights and demand accountability from service providers.

Much of current thinking emphasises the need to anchor social protection programmes in legal frameworks (including in national constitutions), hoping that such efforts will enable programme beneficiaries to exact accountability on duty bearers (Kaltenborn et al. 2017). The findings of this article show that constitutional guarantees of beneficiary rights and the ability of vulnerable groups to demand and proactively exercise such rights can be two significantly different things. What is more important for the emergence of new modalities of citizenship is about citizens’ awareness of their rights (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2017), especially in the case of the LEAP where most beneficiaries tend to be rural dwellers with no formal education. In such contexts, merely ascribing citizenship rights to programmes in policy documents and legal frameworks will mean little unless concerted efforts are made to educate beneficiaries on their rights and entitlements, establish effective complaints and redress systems, and encourage citizens to report perceived violations of their rights by programme implementers.

While the LEAP has a case management system designed to facilitate the reporting of possible incidence of complaints and appeal, a number of factors, ranging from citizens' limited awareness of the system, excessive delays in the resolution of cases and the general perception of the programme as charity, have undermined the effectiveness of the existing system in transforming the LEAP towards a rights-based approach to social protection. Therefore, if the LEAP is to play a more meaningful role in promoting citizenship rights in Ghana, it is important to strengthen the responsiveness of the programme's grievance and redress mechanisms. One way of doing this is to move away from the overly centralised approach to resolving cases – which contributes to the delays in the resolution of reported cases (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2017) – to a more decentralised approach by strengthening district-level structures to be able to investigate and redress beneficiaries' complaints and appeals in a timely manner.

Finally, while the limited value of the LEAP cash grant has also contributed to undermining the rights-based orientation of the programme, beneficiaries remain largely appreciative of the grant. As the findings here revealed, the fact that this cash is given without any work being done by the beneficiaries has contributed to a more positive view of the state on the part of programme beneficiaries. This finding reinforces recent observations (based on evidence from Nepal) that even in contexts where cash transfers amounts are small and irregularly given, they can help improve the social contract between states and citizens and by extension help break some of the barriers that underpin poverty and exclusion (Druzca 2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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