Critical Social Policy

Article

Competitive clientelism, donors and the politics of social protection uptake in Ghana

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Abstract
Ghana's *Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty* (LEAP) cash transfer programme has been widely characterised as 'home grown'. This article challenges such accounts of the LEAP by showing how donors used their financial muscle to shape the LEAP both at the level of programme *adoption* and *implementation*. However, the extent to which donor interests and ideas influenced the programme's design and implementation depended on the degree to which such interests were aligned with those of domestic political elites. While it was donors who first pushed cash transfers on the agenda of the Ghanaian government, electoral calculus took centre stage in driving the programme's subsequent expansion and institutionalisation. The article suggests the need to move beyond the donor-driven versus state-led type of arguments to explore the complex ways in which transnational factors and the formal and informal aspects of domestic politics interact to produce different levels and types of commitment to social protection in Africa.

Key words
cash transfers, competitive elections, donors, political settlements, politics

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Critical Social Policy 2021, Vol. 41(2): 270–293

DOI: 10.1177/0261018320945605 journals.sagepub.com/home/csp
SAGE

Introduction

In March 2008, the Government of Ghana (GoG) commenced implementation of the *Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty* (LEAP) programme with the stated aim of increasing long-term human capital development among extremely poor households. The LEAP provides bi-monthly cash transfers to extremely poor households with Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC), persons with severe disability, elderly persons who are 65 years and above, and poor pregnant women and infants below the age of one year. In addition to the cash grant, beneficiaries are also to be linked to a wide range of complementary services, including microfinance initiatives, supplementary feeding, agricultural inputs, skills training, social housing, and access to sustainable energy; among others (GoG, 2007; 2015). The number of LEAP beneficiary households has expanded dramatically over time, increasing from 1,654 in 2008, to 332,200 by the end of 2019 (GoG, 2019: 72), and government's budgetary allocations to the programme has also increased from GHC2.2 million (approximately US2 million) to GHC168 million (approximately US$32 million) during this period. Why did the Ghanaian government introduce the LEAP, and what roles did transnational actors and domestic political processes play in this? What were the key political economy factors that shaped the adoption, design and subsequent expansion of the LEAP?

These questions are especially important because not only was the programme introduced by a 'right-of-centre' political party – the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – that professes a free market ideology, but was also introduced at a time when government's development priorities had shifted towards wealth creation and economic growth (GoG, 2005; 2010). Moreover, the introduction of the programme was heavily criticized by sections of Ghanaians who saw it as a 'charitable handout' that would perpetuate 'dependency in poor households' (Ragno et al., 2016: 162; Sultan and Schrofer, 2008: 6). One prominent observer characterized the LEAP as 'money down the drain', and questioned the government's introduction of a programme that could encourage the poor to 'believe in manna from heaven without any effort on their part' (Asante, 2008).

Existing work on the spread of cash transfers in Africa has tended to either downplay the role of national-level political factors by emphasising the influence of donors or of focusing only on formal aspects of politics, such as democracy and good governance (Hickey and Bukenya, 2020). For example, Awortwi and Aiyede (2017) argue that most social protection programmes in Africa are donor-driven, and that governments have increasingly embraced cash transfers because of donor commitment to funding them. In contrast, Brooks (2015) emphasises the role of 'good governance', arguing that 'more democratic countries are more likely to adopt any form of cash transfer' (p.568). In the case of Ghana, the LEAP has frequently been described as a 'home grown' programme

(Sultan and Schrofer, 2008; de-Graft Aikins et al., 2017), with transnational actors like donors encouraging its adoption only through ideational mechanisms rather than coercion. As Foli (2016) puts it, the LEAP 'cannot be attributed to the imposition by external actors' (2016: 278).

This article argues that it is inappropriate to characterize the LEAP either as home-grown or donor-driven, given the mutually-reinforcing roles played by transnational actors and domestic political dynamics in shaping the programme's adoption, design, and implementation. The initial impetus of the programme is best traced to the promotional efforts of transnational actors not simply via ideational mechanisms, but significantly through the deployment of 'hard' forms of power in the form of aid conditionality. However, within ruling coalitions, there has been very little resistance to the LEAP not simply because of the coercive powers of donors, but also because the programme offered a new strategy for securing electoral popularity, particularly through the redistribution of benefits to party supporters and sympathizers. Thus, once adopted, ruling parties' need for visible distribution associated with Ghana's competitive clientelist political settlement took centre stage in driving the subsequent expansion and institutionalization of the programme. Our findings therefore highlight the complex ways in which transnational factors and domestic politics interact to produce different levels and types of commitment to social protection, both at the level of programme adoption and implementation.

In the next section, we present the theoretical framework of the study, based on insights from an adapted version of the literature on political settlements. This framework explicitly incorporates the influence of ideational and transnational factors into domestic political dynamics in order to fully understand the growing elite commitment to social protection uptake in Africa. Next, we summarise Ghana's political settlement dynamics, before providing a brief overview of the research methodology. We then turn to show how transnational actors and domestic political processes shaped the adoption, design and implementation of the LEAP, before drawing conclusions.

Adapted political settlements theory

'Political settlements' can be defined as 'a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible, and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability' (Khan, 2010: 4). The analytical focus of political settlement theory is on power relations between socio-economic and political elites; between these elites and non-elite groups; and how this distribution of power both shapes and is shaped by the formal and informal institutions that distribute resources and political power (Khan, 2017). From this perspective, social protection is a resource whose distribution is subject to competition and negotiation and which is shaped by the survival strategies of political elites (Hickey et al., 2018). Scholars have distinguished between two broad types of political settlements. The first is *dominant ruler/party* settlements where power is highly concentrated among a narrow ruling elite, such that there is little prospect of the ruling coalition losing power in the near future. The second is *competitive clientelism*, where power is distributed more widely among elite groups and there is a high likelihood that ruling political elites can be replaced by excluded elite factions in the short to medium term.

This study applied the 'adapted political settlements' framework (Lavers and Hickey, 2016), which augments the standard political settlements literature with a focus on ideas/ideology and transnational factors/processes. First, according to this framework, political settlements are not just based on the balance of power between competing domestic factions but are also underpinned by a shared sense of paradigmatic ideas: philosophies or worldviews that provide an understanding of how political, economic and social processes interact (Lavers, 2019). Second in a context in which donors continue to finance a significant portion of central government expenditure, the domestic focus of political settlements theory must be complemented by an acknowledgement of the transnationalised nature of governance in contemporary Africa. Foreign aid donors operate as a distinct faction (or factions) within political settlements, and their power and influence flow partly from the resources they provide (Hickey et al., 2018).

There are a number of ways in which political settlement dynamics may shape the evolution of social protection. Under competitive clientelism, which has been the prevailing settlement type in Ghana since the early 1990s, this framework suggests two main causal propositions that can be tested through the LEAP case study. First, in countries characterised by competitive clientelism, there is a tendency for ruling political elites to focus on a broader geographical coverage in the distribution of social assistance, rather than targeting limited public resources to more deprived areas. In such contexts, the need to appease a wide spectrum of voters in order to win competitive elections has the tendency of discouraging overt efforts to direct resources to disadvantaged areas (Abdulai, 2017a). Distributional patterns therefore tend to be driven more by electoral calculus than needs.

Second, ruling elites prioritize reforms with visible impact in order to ensure that prospective voters can attribute performance to the regime ahead of elections (Hickey and Hossain, 2018). This visibility bias favours the extension of services, but subtly works against improving the quality of such services because ensuring quality service delivery is more logistically complex and requires longer-term thinking beyond the time horizons of those in power (Batley and Mcloughlin, 2015). For example, expanding the geographical coverage of a cash transfer programme is relatively easy and visible, with a clear political payoff, but providing the necessary resources for strengthening the technical capacity of programme implementers and building systems for the effective implementation of programmes are more difficult, time-consuming and unlikely to be easily attributed to politicians. Thus, typical of most countries characterised by competitive clientelism is 'a growing disconnect between a rapid expansion in the provision of resources for service provision and corresponding expansion in access to services, but continuing shortfalls in service quality and results' (Levy, 2014: 139).

The prevailing political settlement in Ghana has been characterised by competitive clientelism (Abdulai and Hickey, 2016; Hirvi and Whitfield, 2015). Since returning to multiparty democracy in 1992, Ghana has conducted seven rounds of increasingly competitive elections, three of which resulted in power alternations between two dominant parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Competition between these parties has become so intense that any particular ruling coalition faces powerful excluded coalitions who are always mobilising support to win highly competitive elections. In 2008, the NDC won presidential elections by a razor-thin margin of less than 0.5% of the votes (Abdulai and Crawford, 2010) and the subsequent election in 2012 was won by just a few thousand votes. There is a strong ethno-regional basis to electoral competition in Ghana. The NPP has its strongholds in the Ashanti and Eastern regions, while the Volta and three northern regions (Northern, Upper West and Upper East) have voted strongly for the NDC since 1992. The remaining regions are generally considered as swing regions, where elections have swung back and forth between these parties. Banful (2009: 1) notes the tendency of governments to 'provide more funds to regions that support them politically' – an observation supported by the distributional politics of the LEAP.

As a consequence of their high vulnerability due to intense electoral competition, ruling political elites often strive to appease voters by focusing 'on projects and actions that can deliver immediate, visible benefits to the widest spectrum of voters before the next election' (Whitfield, 2010: 733). In this context, most public investments are undertaken not with the objective of achieving inclusive development, but with short-term political considerations in mind. One result has been the challenge of combating spatial inequalities, not least as electoral pressures tend to encourage the geographical spread of social interventions in ways that rarely take into account the additional challenges faced in the historically deprived northern regions (Abdulai, 2014; Abdulai and Hulme, 2015; Abdulai et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, while overall poverty levels have been declining, regional inequalities have continued to widen, especially between the three northern regions and the rest of Ghana. Between 2013 and 2017, poverty increased in all the three northern regions to reach a staggering 70.9% of the population in the Upper West, compared to a national poverty rate of 23.4% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018: 19). Critical observers explain this problem from a political economy perspective, drawing attention to the incorporation of northern political elites into various ruling coalitions on unequitable and disempowering terms in ways that undermine their capacity to influence resource allocations decisions in favour of their constituents (Abdulai and Hulme, 2015; Abdulai and Hickey, 2016; Abdulai, 2017a). Poorer citizens in the north therefore tend to suffer from socio-economic exclusion because their political representatives have rarely been part of the inner circles of political power (Ladouceur, 1979; Abdulai, 2017b).

Methods

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in the design and implementation of the LEAP, combined with an analysis of primary documents, existing research and newspaper articles. Altogether, we conducted 22 in-depth interviews with senior politicians and bureaucrats within government (11 interviews – respondent codes GR); donor agencies (9 interviews – respondent codes DR); and academics/consultants (2 respondents – interview codes CR). Using a snowballing approach, respondents were purposively selected based on their knowledge of, and direct participation in, the processes leading to the adoption of the LEAP. Our respondents included some members of the programme's design team and four members of the Vulnerability and Exclusion Sector Working Group (V&E group) – the group that first floated the idea of cash transfers as an alternative approach to tackling vulnerabilities and growing inequalities in Ghana. Most interviews were conducted during field work in Accra while a few skype interviews were conducted with donor representatives who had since left the country. The interviews were conducted between July 2017 and March 2018. Except two donor representatives who refused to be recorded, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable the use of direct quotes in illustrating the study's findings. All participants were assured of their anonymity and their express consent sought before starting each interview.

Transnational policy coalitions and the adoption of the LEAP

Existing studies highlight two main mechanisms through which transnational actors usually transfer policy ideas to countries in the Global South: the use of *soft power* which entails promotional efforts aimed at shaping policy-makers' preferences, particularly through learning; and *hard power* which involves both the threat of sanctions and the opportunity of rewards for the adoption of particular ideas (Lavers and Hickey, 2015; Liete, et al., 2015). Lavers and

Hickey (2015: 15) suggest that social protection ideas are 'frequently transferred through forms of soft power'. Here, we show that the adoption of the LEAP was facilitated by the active deployment of both the soft and hard forms of power, as discussed in the sub-sections below.

Policy translation through soft forms of power

The roots of the LEAP can be traced to a series of Poverty and Social Impact Assessment (PSIA) studies, conducted as part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Ghana joined the Enhanced Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative in 2002, and was obliged to formulate a PRSP as a way of demonstrating how HIPC resources would be used to reduce poverty and vulnerability. The government implemented its first PRSP, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS I, 2003–2005), followed by the GPRS II (2006–2009). As part of the review processes of the GPRS I, the IMF and World Bank required and supported the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) to conduct three PSIA studies on issues of vulnerability and exclusion and on the effectiveness of existing government's pro-poor/subsidy programmes in the agricultural and energy sectors. All of these studies converged in their recommendation of cash transfers as a more promising alternative to reducing poverty and inequality.

The PSIA on vulnerabilities and exclusion showed that although overall poverty levels were reducing, levels of vulnerabilities and exclusion were worsening (NDPC, 2004). This study highlighted the weaknesses of existing social protection programmes in reaching extremely poor households, and suggested the need for 'a different approach to social protection', one in which government must consider providing 'support for those who are unable and may never be able to help themselves' (NDPC, 2004: 60). In the agricultural sector, where government's subsidies focused on providing poor farmers with agricultural inputs like fertilisers and seedlings, the PSIA revealed that some farmers either sold the fertilisers to make cash for themselves or ate up the seedlings in order to address short-term hunger problems. As one member of the LEAP design team explained:

> When I am hungry and you come and give me seeds to plant, it will germinate and I will need energy to work on it until the maize comes up. What if in the process of doing it I collapse? So the best thing is to let me settle my hunger and eat (GR-3, 26 July 2017).

This problem framing suggested that what was more relevant for the extreme poor was access to direct cash that would enable them to smoothen consumption. As the agricultural sector PSIA study recommended, '*cash transfer programs*, food subsidy programs and supplementary feeding programs would have to be part of the social safety net strategy of the government that would help to alleviate chronic and transitory food insecurity' (Asuming-Brempong et al., 2004: 123). One important platform that served as a basis for bringing issues of vulnerability to the centre of policy debates, and in proposing cash transfers as the solution to these problems, was the V&E group. Co-chaired by the sector minister and one representative from donors, this group met quarterly to share experiences and discuss how policies could best be tailored in the interest of most vulnerable populations.

During the policy dialogue towards the formulation of the GPRS II, members of the V&E group advocated cash transfer programmes as a potential solution to the government's ineffective subsidy programmes in tackling growing vulnerabilities. As the donor representatives within this group signalled their preparedness to provide technical and financial support for the design and implementation of a cash transfer programme, these suggestions were taken on board in the formulation of the GPRS II policy document (GR-1, 14 July, 2017), which recommended the need for a cash transfer programme targeted at a wide range of vulnerable groups (GoG, 2005: 40).

Thus, the proposal to implement the LEAP programme emerged out of a network of local and international policy coalitions working on vulnerability and exclusion. With technical support from DFID and UNICEF, a National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) was drafted in 2007 under the leadership of the then Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare. The NSPS highlighted the need to implement a new set of programmes targeted at the poorest, and identified the LEAP as its flagship programme (GoG, 2007). Technical support from donors took the form of assembling experts to assist with drafting both the NSPS and the LEAP, and in providing relevant publications that communicated the importance of cash transfers.

During the development of the NSPS, teams led by the Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment were supported to participate in social protection capacity building and peer review programmes in Finland, Tunisia and Brazil (GoG, 2007: 32). Learning from other countries, and visiting countries where such programmes worked, was not only important in generating new thinking on social protection, but also in convincing Ghanaian policy makers about the benefits of cash transfers (Sultan and Schrofer, 2008). In January 2006, the UK's DFID and the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (MDS) organised a one-week study tour in Brasília for six African countries (including Ghana), with the objectives of exchanging experiences and learning from the Brazilian experience in the design and implementation of cash transfer programmes (Leite et al., 2013).

In March 2007, the GoG made an official request to the Brazilian government to send experts to Ghana to discuss the Brazilian experience and to make some contributions to the design of Ghana's cash transfer programme (Souza, 2007). Cooperation between Brazil and Ghana was implemented throughout

2007, resulting in three Brazilian technical missions to Ghana during the design phase of the LEAP. These missions served as an important mechanism for the transfer of technical knowledge to Ghanaian officials, playing a significant role in shaping the design of both the NSPS and the LEAP (Souza, 2007; MDS, 2008; Foli, 2016; Leite et al., 2015). Most of our key informants acknowledged the significant influence of the Brazilian experience on the LEAP, with a member of the design team stating that, although they learnt from several country experiences, he could stick his 'neck out to mention Brazil as the most influential' (GR-3, 26 July 2017).

In sum, transnational actors promoted the adoption of the LEAP through various soft forms of power, including assembling experts to assist in programme design and sponsoring policy makers to attend study tours. Yet, coercive strategies in the form of the imposition of loan conditionalities were arguably more important here, as discussed below.

Hard power and the adoption of the LEAP: The role of aid conditionality

Extant literature tends to dismiss the role of donor conditionality in shaping the adoption of the LEAP, evident in the widespread characterisation of the programme as 'a domestically-driven cash transfer scheme' (Grebe, 2017: 5); a 'home-grown idea' (de-Graft Aikins et al., 2016: 24); or as 'genuinely government owned' (Sultan and Schrofer, 2008: 9). For Foli et al. (2017: 6), the LEAP is an exception to the prevailing situation in Africa where policy reforms are often instigated by transnational actors mostly 'under some form of duress linked to the conditions attached to loans'. These arguments are misplaced because they ignore the significant donor efforts in *imposing* a cash transfer programme on the GoG through the deployment of hard forms of power such as the attachment of loan conditions to policy prescriptions. To the extent that discussions about cash transfers in Ghana were originally triggered by findings of the donor-required PSIA studies, the role of donor conditionality in the adoption of the LEAP cannot be overemphasised. Ghana's access to HIPC debt relief was conditioned on compliance with a set of 'HIPC triggers', and the PSIA study was among the HIPC triggers for reaching the HIPC completion point (NDPC, 2004: 8 and 84).

Ghana's adoption of the multi-donor budget support (MDBS) initiative is particularly crucial for understanding the impact of 'hard power' on the adoption of the LEAP. In the mid-2000s, General Budget Support (GBS) emerged as the preferred aid modality among both donors and national governments with the expectation that this will enhance prospects for strengthening national institutions and country ownership of national policies. Yet, as scholars have argued, GBS actually involved greater level of donor intervention and control (Whitfield, 2009). We found some evidence in support of this. Signed between the GoG and nine donors in 2003, the MDBS was a mechanism through which some donor agencies assisted the government with general budget support for implementing its poverty reduction initiatives. Substantial sums were involved, and it seems that the participating donors had very little trust that the GoG would implement the agreed policies of their interest. Thus, right from the beginning, a performance assessment framework (PAF) matrix was developed, almost unilaterally by donors. The PAF comprised a list of reform elements that the GoG was required to implement for donor monies to be released.

With nine donors ‘negotiating’ with one aid-dependent government, the power asymmetries embedded in the MDBS framework were evident. Importantly, in both 2007 and 2008, triggers under both the MDBS and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Credit (PRSC) emphasised the need for government to 'implement special programs to support the vulnerable and the excluded', with the explicit requirements that the draft social protection strategy be implemented and some specific number of the extreme poor benefiting from the LEAP (NDPC, 2008; 2009). It was within this context that the GoG commenced implementation of the LEAP as the flagship programme of the NSPS.

Table I summarises the MDBS/PRSC triggers in relation to the LEAP over the period 2007–2013. It shows that these triggers changed over time, depending on the most critical challenges facing the LEAP. Thus, when the GoG’s release of the LEAP grants became highly irregular from 2010 onwards, the need for regular payments was incorporated into the triggers in order to keep the government in check. It is worth noting that the GoG was required 'to prove', on annual basis, that the MDBS 'triggers were being met, in order to receive further funding' (Woll, 2008: 80); and government’s failure to meet some MDBS triggers in 2006 meant that some $24 million of the performance payment was withheld by donors (Whitfield, 2009). These findings reinforce recent observations regarding the central role of power relations for understanding the growing uptake of social protection policies in Africa, with donors playing a domineering role (Ouma and Adésínà, 2019). Here, we go further to highlight the role of asymmetric power relations in shaping the actual *implementation* of the LEAP.

DFID and the application of hard power

Implementation of the LEAP has been heavily supported by donor funding. DFID alone provided a £36.4 million grant during 2012-2017 (DFID, 2016: 3) and this constituted about half of all LEAP payments during the period. Disbursements of this grant were explicitly conditioned on the ability of the GoG to tackle some critical constraints to LEAP’s effective operation, most notably the irregular payments of the cash grant. By August 2013, payments

Table 1. Selected MDBS/PRSC triggers, 2007–2013.

Year	*Triggers*
2007	National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) being implemented At least 2000 households receiving the LEAP grant Undertake an institutional assessment of the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) at national, regional, and district levels and produce a capacity building plan to improve its efficiency in implementing the NSPS
2008	NSPS being implemented; At least 7000 extreme poor households receiving LEAP social grants on a regular basis by the end of 2008.
2009	14,000 extremely poor households receiving LEAP Social Grants on a regular basis by end of 2009.
2010	At least 21,000 extremely poor households receiving LEAP Social Grants on a regular basis by end of 2010.
2012	At least four LEAP payments made to all enrolled beneficiaries in 2012 (January – December 2012)
2013	A costed NSPS completed, validated and submitted to Cabinet for approval.

Source: compiled from the Annual Progress Reports of the GPRS I and II. See also: Ghana Multi-Donor Budget Support Aide Memoire of the 2011 MDBS Annual Review. Accra, 16, 17 and 19 May 2011; Multi-Donor Budget Support (MDBS) Policy Matrix, 2012–2013: Government's Reform Strategy and Progress Indicators. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/ghana/documents/eu_ghana/final_paf_2012-2013_ghana_en.pdf

to LEAP beneficiaries were so irregular that 'government was in arrears by eight months' (DFID, 2014: 1; DFID, 2013a: 13).

With funding from DFID, the GoG cleared all LEAP arrears in late 2012, with an understanding that subsequent payments would follow a more regular and predictable pattern. This did not happen, with no LEAP payments made throughout the first half of 2013 (DR-2, 30 November 2017; DR-3, DR-4, 16 November, 2017). In August 2013, DFID signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the GoG in which the latter was required to meet a set of conditionalities (subtly couched as 'partnership commitments'), failing which DFID's aid was to be either 'interrupted, reduced, suspended, delivered in a different way or terminated' (DFID, 2013b: 10). The MoU specifically required government to 'provide financial flows to LEAP in a timely and predictable manner' (DFID, 2013b: 5); without this, 'DFID will not . . . continue to provide assistance . . . nor disburse the associated planned earmarked budget support' (2013b: 10).

Shortly after signing the MoU, DFID put the LEAP on a Programme Improvement Plan (PIP) focused on some critical challenges that needed to be addressed: increased staff deployment to the LEAP Management Secretariat

(LMS); ensuring cash transfer arrears were cleared and regularity in disbursement achieved; and commencing an electronic payment system. The PIP was agreed with the Minister and Chief Director of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) in October 2013 and was to come to an end in May 2014. During this period, DFID worked closely with the MoGCSP, meeting at least once a month to assess progress against the PIP. As a result, the GoG made considerable efforts in improving the implementation of the LEAP. Within just one-year, not only were all arrears to the LEAP cleared, but also beneficiary households received regular and predictable payments over a 12-month period for the first time since LEAP started in 2008 (DR-2, 30 November 2017). At the same time, the e-payment pilot was completed, and the sector ministry allocated seven additional staff members to the LMS to bolster management and oversight of the cash transfer process (DFID, 2014).

DFID undertook its first annual review of the LEAP in August 2013, and scored the programme a ‘C’ for failing to meet a number of critical targets. This prompted a range of actions from DFID, including holding regular and periodic meetings with the sector minister and the President. One insider recalled that during one of such meetings, DFID

> gave an ultimatum to the minister. They told her . . . 'Honourable Minister if the programme does not improve and you start releasing regular payments, we are going to withdraw our funding. . .'. They did an evaluation of the programme and ranked it as 'C' and they told the minister 'if the programme gets another “C”, we will withdraw our support' (GR-2, 10 August 2017).

With the improvements recorded in the regular payments of the LEAP cash to beneficiaries, the programme’s performance improved, with subsequent scores of ‘A’ in both 2014 and 2015, and ‘A+’ in 2016. Our field research revealed that the consistently regular and predictable payment patterns of the LEAP grants from August 2013 onwards was primarily a response to the conditionalities associated with the PIP and the DFID-GoG MoU more broadly. As one interviewee put it, the PIP 'made a huge difference' (DR-2, 30 November 2017). Other important measures that facilitated the regular payment of the LEAP grant were the advocacy efforts of donors and the MoGCSP that resulted in the adoption of an interlocking payment approach and the Finance Ministry’s reclassification of the programme’s budget from general ‘goods and services’ into ‘transfers’ within the government’s fiscal management framework. Regarding the former, the GoG was required to make the first LEAP payment in any given year before DFID would commit resources for the next payment, in that order. Interviews with both government and donor representatives confirm that this approach helped put pressure on the GoG to release funding for the LEAP in a timelier manner.

Yet, not all of DFID's demands were met by government. For example, while DFID initially wanted to focus all of its financial contributions to the LEAP towards the more impoverished northern regions, this demand 'was rejected in favour of an approach that improves poverty targeting nationally' (DFID, 2012: 10). Here, as one donor official noted, 'regional equity is hard to argue for and does not align well with political incentives' (DR-6, 11 December 2017) because a winning electoral strategy within Ghana's competitive clientelist political settlements is to spread resources as thinly as possible in order to reach as many potential voters as possible.

The role of domestic politics

This section discusses the ways in which Ghana's competitive clientelist political settlement shaped the adoption and implementation of the LEAP. Three main themes are discussed: the domineering role of electoral incentives over programmatic ideas; geographical targeting; and an emphasis on quantity/visibility over quality.

The primacy of electoral incentives over party ideologies

Lavers and Hickey (2015) predict that in countries characterised by competitive clientelist political settlements, ruling elites are 'unlikely to be able to commit strongly to a particular ideology', given the fragmented nature of elite coalitions and the multiple interest groups that have to be satisfied in order to keep the ruling coalition together. 'In such settings, ideational influence by external actors is less likely to be constrained by fit with the ideology of the ruling coalition' (2015: 17), not least because of the strong emphasis on maintaining power through the distribution of rents. The LEAP is illustrative of how electoral incentives override the programmatic ideas of ruling elites in shaping policy choices. Ghana's two dominant parties distinguish themselves in ideological terms. The NDC professes to be a social democratic party committed to 'distributive justice' (NDC, 2004: 12). In contrast, the NPP, which introduced the LEAP, regards itself as a pro-market party. At its introduction, opposition to the LEAP surprisingly came mainly from leading members of the NDC, some of whom criticised the programme as a "miserable handout meant to recruit more voters" (Public Agenda, 2008), and as signalling the NPP's lack of ideas: as the NDC's vice presidential candidate reportedly noted, 'it is only when you fail that you dole out direct cash to people' (My Joy Online News, 26 February 2016).

In the December 2008 presidential elections, the NPP lost to the NDC, prompting fears that implementation of the LEAP might be discontinued.

Yet, the programme not only survived the two successive NDC governments (2009–2012; 2013–2016) that followed, but also witnessed a dramatic expansion during this period. Sandber and Tally (2015: 514) made similar observations in the context of Guatemala where parties, while in opposition, often 'heavily criticise CCT programmes, only to incorporate them in their campaigns to avoid political costs'. In Ghana, the keenly contested nature of elections is crucial for understanding why the NDC-NPP programmatic divides never resulted in the demise of the LEAP. Given the extremely narrow margin of votes that separate these two parties during elections, neither party would consider abolishing an increasingly populist programme like the LEAP, as political elites have become increasingly conscious of the vote-winning potential of the programme. These observations also demonstrate the two-way relationships between politics and social protection: not only is social assistance shaped by political processes, but also ‘‘social assistance programmes feed back into politics at the national and local levels’’ (Barrientos and Pellissery, 2015: 147-148).

The politics of geographic targeting

At the design stage, there were disagreements between the international and local consultants regarding the selection of targeted communities for the pilot phase. While the international consultants suggested the need for a more targeted approach (with a focus on the north), the national consultants insisted on a nationwide spread of the pilot districts. Working more closely with the political leadership, the local consultants insisted that a narrower geographical focus would likely cause 'political discomfort' (CR-1, 3 August 2017) and possibly undermine broad-based political support for the programme:

> Remember that the allocations of money to the programme are from politicians. . . . If you don't touch the other regions that have significant political influence, you risk the politicians going to parliament and vetoing the whole LEAP programme. . . (GR-1, 14 July, 2017).

Such political dynamics help explain why the initial 21 LEAP pilot districts were spread across nine out of the country's ten administrative regions, nearly half of which were concentrated in the Eastern Region, one of the two traditional ‘vote banks’ of the then NPP government. In order to facilitate the speedy rollout of the programme, a political decision was made to build on a pre-pilot UNICEF-sponsored programme in HIV/AIDS-prevalent districts (Jones et al., 2009). Indeed, there was an apparent political urgency to roll out the LEAP ahead of the 2008 elections, and the design team was often put 'under severe pressure' to finalise their work for implementation (Souza,

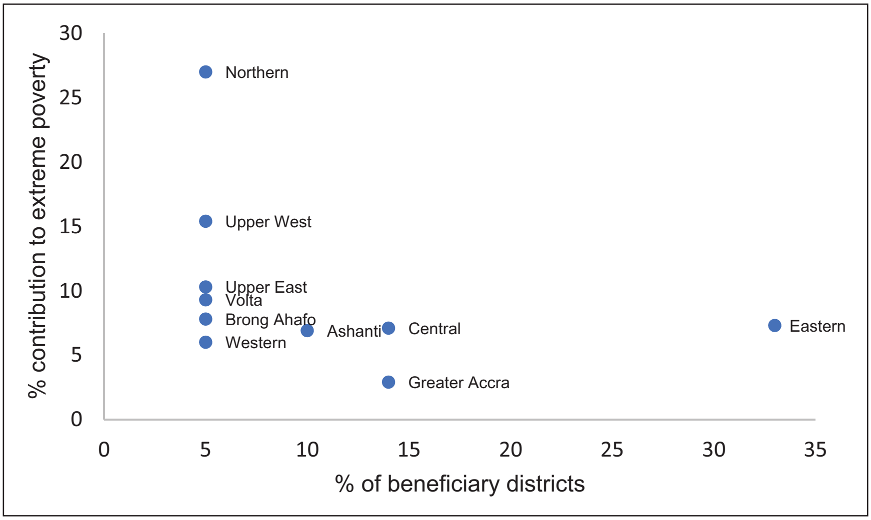

Figure 1. LEAP pilot districts and extreme poverty incidence.
Source: author, based on data from LMS, Accra; and Ghana Statistical Service (2018).

2007: 21). Ragno et al. (2016: 148) draw attention to the 'rushed' roll-out of the programme, and explain this in terms of the desire of the then NPP ruling coalition to gain electoral advantages over political opponents ahead of the December 2008 election.

One consequence of the commitment to geographical coverage, and of the decision to start off the LEAP in the ongoing UNICEF-supported OVC programme, was the inclusion of relatively wealthy districts in the initial pilot phase and a corresponding marginalisation of some of the poorest districts in the north. At the time the LEAP was being designed, the average incidence of *extreme poverty* in Northern Ghana was 56.3%, compared to 8.9% in the south. Yet each of the three northern regions had one beneficiary district while the Eastern Region alone had seven beneficiary districts, despite having an extreme poverty incidence of just 5.8%. Thus, the spatial distribution of the LEAP pilot districts did not follow, or was not significantly driven by, the logic of reducing extreme poverty (Figure 1).

The programme's next expansion occurred under the newly elected NDC administration, with an additional 33 beneficiary districts. This time, however, the Eastern region was excluded while the Northern, Volta and Upper West regions benefited disproportionately, suggesting that the NDC also favoured its ethno-regional electoral base, just as the NPP did during the initial pilot phase of the programme. One recent study concurred with this observation, highlighting the ways in which 'politicians have always used the LEAP . . . to reward their party supporters and sympathizers' (Tweneboah-Koduah, 2018: 159). Not surprisingly, many programme beneficiaries still perceive the LEAP as a charitable gesture from politicians and not as part of their citizenship entitlements (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020).

Under competitive clientelist political settlements, electoral pressures often compel ruling political elites to announce and make substantial investments in social protection around election years (Lavers and Hickey, 2015). Not surprisingly, not only was the LEAP officially launched in an election year, but also it was not until the next election in 2012 that the NDC administration tripled the value of the LEAP grant. A dramatic expansion of the programme also occurred in the run-up to the 2016 elections: from 147,624 in June 2016, the number of LEAP households increased to 164,785 in August 2016, and further to 213,038 in December – the month of the presidential elections. The 2016 round of expansion resulted partly from political pressures, especially from members of parliament, who 'had written to the [sector] Minister to ask that their areas be considered' (GR-1, 14 July, 2017). As one programme implementer explained: 'There was this thing about politicians: each of them coming to see us and saying I want the LEAP in my district, I want the LEAP in my constituency – and all of them would run to the Minister' (GR-2, 10 August 2017). Such pressures resulted in the expansion of the LEAP into districts and communities beyond what were recommended by technocrats within the LMS (GR-1, 14 July, 2017). As one LMS official put it:

> We provided a rationalised approach to targeting but because that needed to be approved by somebody else, what came back was almost always different. We were not privy to some information. So I didn't really understand the basis of expanding into some districts (GR-2, 10 August 2017).

Politicians clearly see the programme as a means to maximising votes through the delivery of some 'pork' to their constituents. Thus, while there are targeting criteria for the programme, politicians from the two dominant parties are able to circumvent the rules in ways that get the programme extended to politically-supportive districts and communities.

Prioritization of quantity over quality

When implementation of the LEAP commenced in March 2008, Ghana had 'a very limited number of career experts in social protection' (Souza, 2007: 24). The then sector Ministry as well as its implementing wing, the DSW, had 'serious capacity constraints', especially in terms of the availability of qualified staff (Jones et al., 2009: 97). Thus, most staff who were given the responsibility of implementation 'were never trained on any cash transfer programme' (GR-2, 10 August 2017). Instead, staff were pulled from various Departments of the DSW and then tasked with the responsibilities of implementing the new cash transfer programme without taking into account the skills needed for executing that mandate (Ibid).

Yet, and in line with the incentives engendered by competitive clientelism, the rapid expansion of the LEAP's coverage has not been matched with efforts aimed at its qualitative improvements. For example, whereas the number of LEAP beneficiary households increased from less than 2,000 to over 70,000 between 2008 and 2013, the programme continued "to operate with the same number of staff during this period" (DFID, 2013b: 10). It took the direct intervention of donors to begin to tackle these human resource problems more seriously, both by directly funding long-term technical assistants to work alongside senior management of the LMS, and by tying the disbursements of resources to the GoG's commitment to strengthening the human resource base of the Unit.

Moreover, the value of the LEAP grant has remained persistently low (Abdulai et al., 2019), currently representing less than six days' worth of food per month (Yablonski, 2017: 7). While studies have pointed to the programme's positive impact on improving the living conditions of the extreme poor (Alatinga et al., 2020), there is also a fair degree of consensus that the limited value of the cash has meant that most beneficiaries have been unable to translate the grant into a requisite livelihood asset base (Adjei et al., 2020; Peprah et al., 2017). Moreover, after more than a decade of implementation, only a limited progress has been made in implementing the declared intention of linking beneficiaries to various complementary services (Roelen et al., 2017) and benefits to the urban poor remain particularly limited (Cuesta et al., 2020). Although the programme has had a case management system designed to enable beneficiaries file complaints and have their grievances redressed, the resolution of cases encounters such long delays that beneficiaries often feel discouraged in lodging complaints. Consequently, the state's accountability to the programme's beneficiaries is weak and the LEAP has done little to transform state-society relations in Ghana (CDD-Ghana, 2016). In sum, the visibility bias and short-termism that are characteristic of competitive clientelism have combined to undermine the qualitative improvements of the programme.

Conclusions

Contrary to much of extant literature that characterise Ghana's LEAP as a 'domestically-driven' programme, this paper has argued that it was donors who first put cash transfers on the GoG agenda both directly and indirectly, and through the active deployment of soft and hard forms of power. Discussions about cash transfers in Ghana were originally triggered by findings of a donor-conditioned poverty and social impact assessment study, which needed to be undertaken as part of conditions for accessing HIPC debt relief. The promotional efforts of donors involved a range of strategies, including sponsoring influential policy makers to attend study tours; assembling experts to assist in programme design; and tying the release of significant monies to the adoption and progressive expansion of a cash transfer programme as an alternative means to tackling exclusion and vulnerability. These included conditions associated with the IMF's PPRSC and the Multi-Donor Budget Support Mechanism, involving nine donor agencies on the one hand, and one aid-dependent government, on the other.

Indeed, even at the level of programme implementation, donor conditionalities continued to play important roles in shaping the LEAP, evidenced in the threats of funding withdrawal contained in the DFID memorandum and the impact of this on reforming the programme. This MoU carried particular potency in influencing domestic actors in the light of the significant macroeconomic challenges at the time. Importantly, while the MoU eschewed the language of conditionality in favour of 'partnership cooperation', in reality, its content strongly reflected the imposition of the SAP-era type of donor conditionality on sovereign states. These observations suggest that despite the rhetorical emphasis on country ownership within the so-called new aid architecture, the global north has continued to resort to more subtle ways of imposing their ideologically-driven policy agenda on sovereign states in the global south. In this context, the promotion of cash transfers would seem to be one of the latest policy tools by which international organizations have increasingly integrated the global south into subordinate relationships with the Global North.

Although these findings significantly challenge the widespread characterisation of the LEAP as 'domestically-driven', it is important to note that they are not a straight-forward endorsement of the generic characterization of social protection in Africa as donor-driven. We found that the extent to which donor interests and ideas influenced the LEAP depended on the degree to which they were aligned with those of domestic political elites. Domestic elites' resistance to donor ideas explain the latter's inability to refocus the programme's reforms from continuous expansion to systems strengthening during critical electoral moments, as well as DFID's inability to follow through its interest of concentrating its financial contributions to the LEAP in the more impoverished north – an idea rejected by ruling political elites in favour of a broader geographical targeting.

Right from the onset, political elites saw the LEAP as a new route to securing electoral support, explaining why there has been little resistance to it w*ithin* ruling coalitions, and the strong interparty consensus that has emerged around the programme. Once the GoG accepted adoption of the LEAP, the incentives generated by the competitive character of Ghana's political settlement dynamics took centre stage in driving the design, implementation and sustenance of the programme. The influence of competitive clientelism was evident right at the pilot phase, where decisions about beneficiary district selection were driven more by consideration of geographical spread than by explicitly targeting areas of extreme poverty. Competitive clientelist pressures also help explain the 'rushed' roll out of the LEAP, and why the programme's most dramatic expansions and increments in the value of cash grant have often occurred in election years.

In keeping with the expectation of short time horizons in competitive clientelist political settlements, reforms have focused largely on expansion at the expense of qualitative improvements, evidenced in the persistently low value of the grant, the lack of complementary services for most beneficiaries, and the persistent weaknesses in social accountability mechanisms that undermine beneficiaries' ability to hold service providers accountable. That all these problems are the results of the visibility bias and short-termism that are characteristic of competitive clientelism would further seem to suggest that the LEAP has thus far been implemented primarily as a form of clientelism rather than as a strategy for promoting either significant levels of poverty reduction or an improved social contract, as has been the case in other cash transfer programmes in the region (Hickey and Bukenya, 2020).

These observations also suggest the need to move beyond a focus on the formal aspects of politics when seeking to understand the growing elite commitment to social protection in Africa. Brooks (2015) argues that democratization increases the likelihood of implementing cash transfer programmes because the poor could use their newly expanded rights to political participation to exact meaningful redistribution and demand accountability of elected leaders. Ghana's LEAP cash transfer programme is neither the product of bottom-up pressures nor has it significantly enhanced citizens' capacity in exacting accountability from politicians. Informal, elite-level politics may therefore be more important than the formal aspects of politics such as democratization for understanding the politics of social protection uptake in Africa.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the comments and insights of Tom Lavers, Sam Hickey, and Mohammed Ibrahim, and three anonymous reviewers for this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research for this article was undertaken within the Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, based at The University of Manchester, UK, with funding from the UK's Department for International Development. This document is therefore an output from a project funded by UK Aid. However, the views expressed and information contained in it are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the UK government, which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

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