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TRANSFORMATIVE CORRUPTION-PROOF CHILD-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION IN AFRICA: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes an explorative investigation into the intersection of systemic corruption and child-sensitive social protection mechanisms in Africa, interrogating how entrenched patterns of malfeasance function as structural violence against children on the continent. The study draws upon interpretivist-constructivist research paradigms to critically examine the extent to which corruption erodes the efficacy, legitimacy, and rights-based foundations of social protection systems designed for children. Through a review of empirical evidence and case studies, the analysis demonstrates how corrupt practices extend beyond financial misappropriation to encompass psychological harms, the erosion of public trust, and the normalisation of unethical behaviours within state bureaucratic systems. The research foregrounds the inadequacies of prevailing anti-corruption frameworks in African countries, which are often hamstrung by state-centric, punitive approaches and a lack of sensitivity to colonial legacies and neoliberal policy architectures that perpetuate exclusion. By situating corruption as both a symptom and driver of broader socio-political dysfunction, the article highlights the multiplicity of ways in which children's rights are systematically undermined, resulting in intergenerational cycles of poverty, marginalisation and limited human capital development outcomes. The study underscores that material deprivation, misallocation of resources, and diminished access to critical services such as healthcare, nutrition, and education converge to entrench disadvantage among African children, particularly in low-resource contexts. Ultimately, the study calls for a paradigmatic shift in both research and policy, one that favours nuanced, contextually grounded inquiry and foregrounds the lived experiences of children over reductionist metrics. By advancing a rights-based, transformative, and corruption-proof approach to child-sensitive social protection, the study offers pathways for dismantling systemic barriers and advancing social justice for Africa's children.

Keywords: *Accountability, Corruption, Child Sensitive Social Protection, Child Rights, Transformative*

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1. INTRODUCTION: CORRUPTION AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The phenomenon of corruption within social protection systems represents more than mere financial malfeasance. It constitutes a form of structural violence that disproportionately harms children across Africa. Current estimates suggest that approximately 60 percent of African children experience multidimensional poverty,¹ with systemic corruption exacerbating their vulnerability through the diversion of essential resources meant for nutrition, education, and healthcare. Existing anti-corruption frameworks, however, remain constrained by their reliance on state-centric, punitive approaches that fail to account for the colonial continuities and neoliberal policy architectures that enable graft.²

Corruption within child-sensitive social protection systems constitutes a profound violation of children's rights, which undermines both their immediate welfare and long-term developmental trajectories. Framed within rights-based development paradigms, including the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), corrupt practices extend beyond mere financial malfeasance. Corruption erodes the foundational principles of equity, trust, and human dignity that underpin effective social protection.³ Empirical evidence suggests that misappropriation within national social protection frameworks disproportionately affects marginalised children, particularly in low-resource settings where state capacity is weak.⁴ For instance, the deliberate misallocation of antiretroviral drugs for HIV-positive children not only jeopardises their health, but also entrenches systemic inequities, reinforcing cycles of exclusion.⁵ Such practices exemplify how corruption operates as both a cause and consequence of broader socio-political dysfunction, necessitating a rights-based analytical lens.

Beyond material deprivation, corruption inflicts profound psychological harm by eroding trust in public institutions. Children and caregivers subjected to predatory

1 World Bank (2020) *Adaptive Social Protection: Building Resilience to Shocks* Washington DC: World Bank.

2 Mbembe A (2016) *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg.

3 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare for the Child (ACRWC) (1990) Article 11.

4 OECD (2020) *States of Fragility 2020*. OECD Publishing, 102.

5 Liebel M (2020) *Decolonising Childhoods: From Exclusion to Dignity*. Policy Press, 44.

bureaucratic systems, where access to essential services is contingent on bribes or patronage develop a general suspicion of state actors.⁶ This erosion of trust is particularly acute in contexts where social protection mechanisms are the sole lifeline for vulnerable populations. The normalisation of corrupt behaviours within these systems further exacerbates the problem. When children witness the routine circumvention of rules for survival, they internalise these practices as societal norms, perpetuating cycles of ethical compromise.⁷ This phenomenon raises critical questions about the long-term implications for governance, civic engagement, and the legitimacy of social protection frameworks in Africa. The consequences of corruption in child-sensitive social protection systems extend across generations. Early childhood interventions, such as nutritional support, immunisation programmes, and preschool education, are critical for breaking cycles of poverty.⁸ When these resources are siphoned away, the resultant deficits in human capital development entrench intergenerational disadvantage.

Moreover, the systemic nature of corruption ensures that marginalised communities remain trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion. Children deprived of adequate social protection are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, lower educational attainment, and diminished economic prospects, factors that perpetuate their vulnerability to exploitation in adulthood.⁹ This cyclical deprivation underscores the urgency of addressing corruption not merely as an economic issue, but as a fundamental barrier to social justice. Consequently, any analysis of systemic corruption within social protection systems must embrace this layered complexity. It becomes imperative to recognise corruption as both a symptom and a driver of broader socio-political dysfunctions, with direct and indirect ramifications on the lived experiences of children. Such an approach demands a reorientation of policy and research, privileging nuanced, contextually grounded inquiry over reductionist or purely quantitative metrics.

6 Mungiu-Pippidi A (2015) *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption*. Cambridge University Press, 56.

7 Transparency International (2019) *Global Corruption Report: Education*. Routledge, 29.

8 Heckman J (2006) *Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children*. Science, 312(5782), 73.

9 Lewis J (2017) *Social impacts of corruption upon community resilience and poverty*. Jàmbá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies, 9(1), a391. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v9i1.391>.

2. EXPLORATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL INQUIRY: AN INTERPRETIVIST-CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

The nexus between systemic corruption and child-sensitive social protection has increasingly drawn scholarly attention, particularly in the context of developing economies. While social protection schemes aim to provide equitable access to health, education, nutrition, and financial security for children, persistent institutional corruption often undermines their design, implementation, and outcomes.¹⁰ Exploratory research emerges as a key methodological response to unpack the layered, context-specific nature of these failures, especially where formal accountability systems are weak or fragmented.

In contemporary research, exploratory approaches align with interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, which reject positivist ideas of objective social reality and instead emphasise the contextual, shared construction of meaning.¹¹ This epistemological orientation proves particularly salient when examining complex social phenomena such as corruption in child-sensitive social protection systems. The exploratory approach's strength lies in its capacity to surface the unarticulated, practice-based understandings that govern complex systems.

Exploratory studies are instrumental in illuminating the informal networks and power asymmetries that often elude traditional metrics of governance performance. Exploratory research enables scholars to 'map out' unfamiliar terrain, providing the conceptual scaffolding required for more structured investigation.¹² This flexibility is critical in corruption-affected settings, where data opacity and institutional resistance to scrutiny hinder hypothesis-driven approaches. Grounded explorations thus help to identify emergent patterns, such as illicit financial flows, leakages in cash transfer schemes, patronage in targeting mechanisms, or political interference in programme eligibility assessment criteria, which are factors that directly impact the effectiveness of child-sensitive interventions.¹³

10 Holmes R & Jones N (2013) *Gender and Social Protection in the Developing World: Beyond Mothers and Safety Nets* Zed Books 24.

11 Creswell JW & Poth CN (2017) 'Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches' *Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE*.

12 Stebbins RA (2001) *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences* Sage 5.

13 Transparency International (2020) *Corruption and Social Protection* Research Brief 13.

Furthermore, qualitative exploratory designs, particularly case studies as will be used in this article, are well-suited for capturing the lived experiences of beneficiaries and frontline implementers.¹⁴ These approaches afford deep insight into how corruption distorts service delivery, fosters distrust, and perpetuates cycles of deprivation among vulnerable children. In addition, they offer critical avenues for centring the voices of affected populations, thereby aligning research with ethical imperatives of inclusion and social justice.¹⁵ Exploratory inquiry, therefore, not only advances empirical understanding, but also supports the development of context-responsive, evidence-based policy frameworks capable of resisting and redressing systemic corruption.

Exploratory research plays a critical role in the early stages of knowledge generation, particularly in contexts where theoretical foundations are either underdeveloped or contested. It allows scholars to investigate phenomena that are not yet clearly defined, thereby offering the conceptual clarity necessary to refine future research questions and hypotheses. Exploratory studies are essential for 'mapping out' previously unexamined areas of inquiry, thereby laying the groundwork for more structured empirical investigation.¹⁶ This inductive orientation makes the exploratory approach particularly valuable in emerging fields and complex social contexts where rigid methodologies may prematurely constrain insight.

Finally, in policy-oriented and action research, an exploratory approach is indispensable for identifying the feasibility, relevance, and social implications of interventions before scaling them. For instance, in public health or human rights work, exploratory studies are often employed to understand community perceptions, cultural practices, or institutional barriers, ensuring that subsequent phases of research or programme implementation are ethically and contextually grounded.¹⁷ This aligns with a pragmatic epistemology that values research not merely for its explanatory power but for its capacity to inform and transform practice.

14 Creswell JW & Poth CN (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* Sage 49.

15 Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory* 17.

16 Stebbins (2001) at 12.

17 Yin RK (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* Sage 51.

3. TYPOLOGIES OF CORRUPTION IN CHILD-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION (CSSP) SYSTEMS

Corruption within child-focused social protection systems is not monolithic. It materialises through a range of typologies that correspond to distinct institutional vulnerabilities and socio-political contexts. Scholars broadly categorise corruption in these systems into elite capture, petty, and fund diversions and programmatic leakages each operating at different levels of governance, but often reinforcing one another in practice.¹⁸ Elite capture operates at the highest echelons of policy-making and administrative authority. It involves large-scale embezzlement or misallocation of programme resources by senior officials or political elites. Elite capture can manifest as the diversion of entire programme budgets, manipulation of national social protection policies to favour specific groups, or high-level collusion that undermines oversight mechanisms. Its effects are often systemic, distorting the intended objectives of social protection and disproportionately harming the most vulnerable children.

Petty corruption occurs at the interface between citizens and frontline service providers. Petty corruption includes the routine solicitation of bribes, ‘speed money,’ or informal payments in exchange for access to benefits or services.¹⁹ It may also encompass the withholding of entitlements unless recipients comply with unofficial demands. Though individually smaller in scale, petty corruption is pervasive and cumulatively erodes trust in social protection systems, resulting in the exclusion or further marginalisation of children most in need. Systemic corruption refers to entrenched and institutionalised patterns of corrupt practice that permeate multiple layers of CSSP systems. Systemic corruption is not confined to isolated actors or incidents. It is woven into the fabric of everyday operations through informal networks, patronage, and the normalisation of rule-bending.²⁰ It can manifest as political interference in the selection of beneficiaries, chronic leakage of funds through ghost recipients, or administrative practices that favour certain groups over others.

18 Fisman R & Gatti R ‘Decentralization and Corruption: Evidence from US Federal Transfer Programs’ (2002) 83(3) *Public Economics* 325–345.

19 Baez-Camargo C, Bukuluki P, Sambaiga, R, Gatwa T, Kassa S & Stahl C (2020) Petty corruption in the public sector: A comparative study of three East African countries through a behavioural lens. *African studies*, 79(2), 232-249.

20 Johnston M (2005) *Syndromes of corruption: Wealth, power, and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Systemic corruption perpetuates inefficiencies and inequalities, undermining both programme effectiveness and public legitimacy.

In practice, these typologies often overlap. Elite capture may create an enabling environment for petty and systemic corruption, while persistent petty corruption can, over time, become institutionalised as systemic. Recognising and disentangling these categories is essential for designing effective anti-corruption strategies within child-sensitive social protection systems, ensuring that interventions reach their intended beneficiaries and support positive, transformative outcomes for children. This multiplicity of forms poses a complex challenge for effective implementation, particularly in low-resource or high-inequality settings where programme integrity is already precarious.

3.1 Fund Diversion and Programmatic Leakages

Perhaps the most emblematic and well-documented form of corruption in CSSP systems is fund diversion, wherein public resources intended for vulnerable children are illicitly redirected by officials or intermediaries. This frequently occurs through ghost beneficiaries, inflated registries, or administrative overreporting. The case of Kenya's *Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC)* programme illustrates this pathology, as is unpacked below. Independent audits exposed significant discrepancies between official records and actual disbursements, revealing the existence of non-existent beneficiaries and the political shielding of complicit actors.²¹ This form of corruption not only undermines fiscal efficiency but directly erodes the principle of equity that underpins social protection. Programmatic leakage compromises the transformative potential of CSSP by reallocating benefits from the most vulnerable to politically connected or administratively powerful stakeholders.²² The issue raises broader questions about the capacity of state institutions to manage targeted transfers in contexts of weak oversight and patronage-based bureaucracies.

21 Adésinà JO (Ed.) (2021) *Social Policy in the African Context*. Dakar: CODESRIA. ISBN: 978-2-38234-045-5.

22 Hickey S & du Toit A (2007) 'Adverse Incorporation, Social Exclusion and Chronic Poverty' *Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper* 81:1–35.

3.1.1 *The CT-OVC Programme in Kenya: Promise, Performance, and Pathologies*

Kenya's Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children programme was launched in 2004 as a pilot initiative and later scaled nationally. It was designed to provide regular, unconditional cash payments to ultra-poor households caring for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs), particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS.²³ The programme aimed to promote child welfare through improved nutrition, school attendance, and retention within family and community structures. By 2018, the CT-OVC had reached over 353,000 households, making it one of the largest child-sensitive social protection programmes in Africa.²⁴

Despite its transformative potential, the CT-OVC has been marred by governance and accountability challenges, particularly in the areas of targeting, fund disbursement, and administrative oversight. Independent evaluations revealed significant discrepancies between registered and actual beneficiaries, with instances of 'ghost households' and politically influenced inclusion.²⁵ These irregularities pointed to a broader pattern of fund diversion, where resources intended for vulnerable children were siphoned off through inflated registries and weak verification mechanisms. Such leakages not only undermine fiscal integrity, but also erode the me legitimacy among intended beneficiaries.²⁶ Moreover, the programme was susceptible to petty corruption at the point of service delivery. Field reports indicated that local administrators and community-based targeting committees at times, demanded informal payments or exercised favouritism in beneficiary selection.²⁷ These practices disproportionately affected the poorest households, who lacked the social capital to contest exclusion or navigate opaque grievance mechanisms. The unintended result was a distortion of the programme's equity objectives and a reinforcement of existing social hierarchies.

23 Handa S et al (2015) 'Impact of the Kenya Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children on Early Pregnancy and Marriage of Adolescent Girls' 141 *Social Science & Medicine* 36–45.

24 Government of Kenya (2020) *Social Protection Sector Annual Report 2018/19* 12.

25 Ward P et al. (2010) *Cash Transfer Programme for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC), Kenya: Operational and Impact Evaluation 2007–2009* Oxford Policy Management 45.

26 Adésinà (2021) at 21.

27 Transparency International Kenya (2017) *Corruption Risk Assessment in Social Protection Delivery in Kenya* 18.

Some scholars have also critiqued the politicisation of social protection in Kenya, where cash transfer programmes were sometimes leveraged for electoral gain or patronage.²⁸ This dynamic complicated effort to institutionalise transparency and insulate welfare programmes from political interference. While the CT-OVC demonstrated positive impacts on child health and education outcomes,²⁹ its long-term sustainability and credibility hinged on the establishment of robust accountability frameworks and depoliticised governance structures.

3.2 Elite Capture and Politicised Resource Allocation

The phenomenon of elite capture is closely linked to fund diversion. Elite capture involves politically or economically powerful actors who manipulate the design or distribution of social protection benefits to serve narrow interests. In South Africa, the controversial entanglement of the *South African Social Security Agency (SASSA)* with private contractors, most notably the Net1/CPS scandal, demonstrated how procurement processes and grant delivery systems can be hijacked by elite networks.³⁰ Corruption was deeply entrenched, with the delivery infrastructure itself harnessed for profit maximisation and political rent-seeking.

Such corruption has been situated by some scholars within the broader framework of extractive institutions, where rule-making is manipulated to benefit elites rather than ensuring inclusive development.³¹ Elite capture distorts targeting mechanisms, lowers public trust, and creates a feedback loop where the most powerful actors fortify their access to public resources while systematically excluding marginalised populations, particularly children in poverty or informal settlements.

28 Hickey (2007) at 22.

29 Handa S et al. (2017) 'Investments in Children's Health and the Kenyan Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children: Evidence from an Unconditional Cash Transfer Scheme' 32(7) *Health Policy and Planning* 943–955.

30 Patel L (2021) *South Africa's Social Protection System: Institutionalized Ambiguities and the Urban Poor* 38 *Social Policy & Administration* 85–91.

31 Acemoglu D & Robinson J (2012) *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* Crown 73.

3.2.1 *The SASSA–Net1/CPS Scandal: Privatising Welfare and the Commodification of Poverty*

The entanglement between the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and the private firm Net1 UEPS Technologies, through its subsidiary Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), represents one of the most consequential case studies in the privatisation of welfare administration in post-apartheid South Africa. The contract was awarded in 2012. It mandated CPS to distribute social grants to over 17 million beneficiaries, a population comprising nearly one-third of the country's citizens.³² While initially justified on the grounds of logistical efficiency and biometric innovation, the partnership soon became problematic with systemic governance failure, regulatory capture, and the exploitation of vulnerable populations.

At the heart of the scandal was the unlawful awarding of the contract to NET1 UEPS Technologies. In 2014, the Constitutional Court of South Africa ruled that the tender process had been irregular and constitutionally invalid.³³ Despite this ruling, the Court permitted CPS to continue administering grants temporarily to avoid disruption of payments, an interim measure that extended for years, effectively entrenching CPS's role in the system. During this period, Net1 and its affiliates leveraged privileged access to beneficiary data to aggressively market financial products, including loans, insurance, and airtime, often through coercive or opaque means.³⁴ This practice not only violated data protection norms but also deepened the indebtedness of already impoverished recipients.

The scope of the impact was vast. Investigations by civil society organisations such as Black Sash and Open Secrets revealed that unauthorised deductions from grant accounts became widespread, with beneficiaries often unaware of the terms or unable to opt out.³⁵ The commodification of social protection infrastructure thus transformed a rights-based entitlement into a site of financial extraction. Scholars have argued that this model

32 Torkelson E (2020) 'The Financialization of Social Protection: South Africa's Cash Transfer System and the CPS Scandal' *Global Social Policy* 3–19.

33 Constitutional Court of South Africa AllPay Consolidated Investment Holdings v CEO of SASSA 2014 (1) SA 604 (CC).

34 Torkelson E (2017) 'Social Assistance as a Platform for Financial Inclusion: The Case of the South African Social Security Agency and Net1' *The Journal of Development Studies* 7–15.

35 Open Secrets (2023) *Unaccountable 00038: Net1 and CPS – Welfare Profiteers* Open Secrets.

exemplifies the ‘financialization of poverty,’ wherein welfare systems are restructured to serve the interests of capitalists rather than social justice.³⁶

Moreover, the scandal exposed deep institutional weaknesses within SASSA and the Department of Social Development. Ministerial interference, lack of procurement oversight, and the absence of a viable exit strategy from the CPS contract all contributed to a governance crisis that undermined public trust in the state’s capacity to deliver on its constitutional obligations.³⁷ The eventual transition to the South African Post Office and Postbank was marred by technical failures and further delays, illustrating the long-term institutional damage wrought by the CPS arrangement.

Notwithstanding the institutional capacity of the state to deliver social protection for its vulnerable population, the SASSA–Net1/CPS case underscores the dangers of outsourcing core welfare functions to profit-driven entities without adequate safeguards. It highlights the need for robust regulatory frameworks, transparent procurement processes, and a recommitment to the principle that social protection must serve the public good, not private accumulation. The success of interventions configured like the SASSA–Net1/CPS hinges on their ability to reconfigure traditional hierarchies of resource control while embedding social accountability into governance architectures. When properly implemented, such an approach not only mitigates elite capture, but also fosters more inclusive models of social protection administration that align with broader democratic deepening objectives. Future policy innovations must, however, contend with persistent challenges including local elite resistance and the need for sustained civic capacity-building to ensure these mechanisms achieve a lasting transformative impact.

3.2.2 *Uganda Case of Structural Distortion in Social Protection*

Another striking example of elite capture is found in the third phase of the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF-3) which was implemented between 2016 and 2021 under the

36 Ferguson J (2015) *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* Duke University Press 29.

37 Seekings J (2019) *The Promises and Pitfalls of Social Protection in South Africa* 50(1) *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 104–126.

Office of the Prime Minister. The social protection programme was financed by a US\$130 million World Bank loan and was designed to provide income support and build resilience among poor and vulnerable households in post-conflict northern Uganda. Despite its ambitious objectives, ranging from labour-intensive public works to livelihood investment support, NUSAF-3 became a textbook case of elite capture, where local political and administrative elites expropriated a significant share of programme resources.

Approximately 30 percent of grants under NUSAF-3 were diverted by local officials and politically connected actors, undermining the programme's redistributive intent.³⁸ This form of capture was facilitated by weak oversight, opaque beneficiary selection processes, and the discretionary power of community-level committees. The World Bank's own Implementation Completion and Results Report corroborated these concerns, noting that while the programme reached over 70,000 households, it faced persistent challenges in ensuring equitable access and transparency in fund allocation.³⁹ The phenomenon aligns with a broader thesis which opines that community-driven development initiatives, when implemented in highly unequal or patronage-based societies, are especially vulnerable to elite manipulation.⁴⁰

The scope of impact extended beyond financial misappropriation. Elite capture in NUSAF-3 eroded public trust in state-led social protection, exacerbated intra-community tensions, and reinforced existing hierarchies of exclusion. Vulnerable groups, particularly children, youth, and persons with disabilities, were often sidelined in decision-making processes or denied access to livelihood grants.⁴¹ Moreover, the co-optation of grievance redress mechanisms by local elites further constrained accountability, rendering formal complaints ineffective or retaliatory.

38 Kasekende E (2022) 'Elite Capture and the Political Economy of Social Protection in Uganda' *Journal of Modern African Studies* 58(2):201-223.

39 World Bank (2021) 'Implementation Completion and Results Report: Uganda - Third Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF-3)' Report No. ICR00005689 Washington DC: World Bank.

40 Platteau J-P (2004) 'Community-Based Development in the Context of Within-Group Heterogeneity' *Oxford Development Studies* 29(2):225-249.

41 Hickey S & King S (2016) 'Understanding Social Accountability: Politics, Power and Building New Social Contracts'. *Journal of Development Studies*, 52 (8), 1225–1240. DOI: (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2015.1134778>)

In response, NUSAF-3 incorporated a participatory remedy framework under its ‘Strengthened Transparency, Accountability and Anti-Corruption’ (STAAC) component. This included the deployment of Community Monitoring Groups (CMGs), social audits, and collaboration with the Inspectorate of Government to enhance local oversight. While these mechanisms showed promise in some districts, particularly where civil society engagement was strong, their effectiveness was uneven and often contingent on broader political will and institutional capacity.⁴² Some scholars have, however cautioned that participatory approaches, while normatively appealing, require robust safeguards and independent facilitation to avoid becoming performative or co-opted.⁴³ Overall, the NUSAF-3 experience illustrates both the structural vulnerabilities of decentralised social protection systems and the conditional efficacy of participatory remedies. It underscores the need for hybrid accountability models that combine grassroots engagement with vertical enforcement and institutional insulation from local patronage networks.

3.3 Petty Corruption and Everyday Gatekeeping

At the micro-level, petty corruption manifests through informal payments, favouritism, or service delays imposed by frontline workers who serve as gatekeepers to social services. In Nigeria, for example, multiple reports indicate the imposition of unofficial ‘levies’ by school officials and local administrators as prerequisites for accessing school feeding schemes and cash transfer programmes.⁴⁴ These acts, while smaller in scale than grand corruption, carry profoundly exclusionary effects, particularly for rural or low-income households who lack the financial or social capital to navigate these barriers. Petty corruption not only restricts access but normalises transactional relationships within service delivery, turning citizenship rights into conditional privileges.⁴⁵ Moreover, such practices often go under-reported due to fear of

42 Booth D & Golooba-Mutebi F (2014) *Governance for Development in Africa: Building on What Works* London: Overseas Development Institute at 12.

43 Mansuri G & Rao V (2013) *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* Washington DC: World Bank at 89.

44 Cummins M (2021) ‘Cash transfers: A lifeline for children and economies in Sub-Saharan Africa’ *UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)*.
<https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/7871/file/Cash-Transfers-Lifeline-for-Children-Economies-SSA-2021.pdf> (Accessed 3 August 2025).

45 Gupta S, Davoodi H & Tiongson E *Corruption and the Provision of Health Care and Education*

retaliation or public cynicism, thereby eluding formal accountability mechanisms and reinforcing impunity at the grassroots level.

4. CRITIQUING DOMINANT ANTI-CORRUPTION PARADIGMS

It may be deciphered from the foregoing examples that social protection systems are widely regarded as cornerstones of equitable development and social justice, yet their practical implementation often expose them to a various risk, chief among them corruption, elite capture, and the distortion of intended benefits. As governments and development partners strive to build programmes that reach the most vulnerable, particularly children and marginalised populations, the realities on the ground frequently reveal persistent challenges that undermine both effectiveness and legitimacy. This section unpacks the pitfalls of conventional anti-corruption approaches and the promise of emerging innovations, whilst charting a path towards more resilient, accountable, and truly transformative models of social protection.

4.1 The Failures of Neoliberal Technocracy

In addressing the malfeasance in social protection, several initiatives are introduced by African governments. One of them is to harness the technology and fiscal innovations. The emerging technological and fiscal innovations offer promising avenues to address corruption in social protection. Ethiopia's implementation of blockchain-enabled digital payment corridors demonstrate how distributed ledger technology can enhance transparency in fund disbursement, creating an immutable record of transactions that ensures resources reach their intended recipients, particularly mothers managing household welfare.⁴⁶ Innovative fiscal mechanisms complement such technological solutions. Senegal's "*Taxe Spéciale sur les Telecoms*," which earmarks telecommunications revenues for education funding while employing audited digital transfer systems to minimise diversion risks, serves as an

Services (2000) IMF Working Paper WP/00/116, 9.

46 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2017) 'Blockchain technology in Africa: Draft report' Addis Ababa: UNECA
(https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/images/blockchain_technology_in_africa_draft_report_19-nov-2017-final_edited.pdf (Accessed 3 August 2025)).

example.⁴⁷ These approaches exemplify how the intersection of technological innovation and creative fiscal policy can create more resilient social protection architectures.

The effectiveness of these solutions lies in their dual capacity to both prevent diversion *ex ante* and enable rapid detection of irregularities *ex post*. However, their successful implementation requires careful attention to contextual factors, including digital infrastructure limitations and the need for parallel investments in institutional capacity building. Future reforms must balance technological sophistication with administrative practicality to ensure these anti-diversion mechanisms achieve their intended impact without creating new forms of exclusion through their technical complexity.

While these measures may improve administrative efficiency, they frequently exacerbate exclusion by disregarding local contexts. For instance, Kenya's E-Citizen digital platform failed to account for low literacy rates among caregivers in rural areas, effectively disenfranchising the most vulnerable households.⁴⁸ Moreover, such technocratic approaches ignore the structural violence of IMF-imposed austerity measures, which create conditions conducive to petty corruption by chronically underfunding social services.

4.2 The Epistemic Erasure of Children's Agency

Prevailing anti-corruption frameworks often conceptualise children primarily as passive recipients of social protection, neglecting their potential as active agents within accountability systems. This is contrary to the African Children's Charter's conceptualisation of children. The Charter, in article 31, recognises children not merely as passive recipients of protection, but as active agents with the right to participate in matters affecting their lives. By affirming children's evolving capacities and inherent dignity, the Charter calls for their inclusion in decision-making processes, particularly those related to their welfare and development. Ignoring this principle not only undermines the agency and rights of children, but also

47 Garcia M & Moore CMT (2012) *The cash dividend: The rise of cash transfer programs in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8897-6>.

48 Faith B et al (Eds.) (2024) 'The Digitalisation of Social Protection in Africa: The Perspective of Marginalised Workers' IDS Research Report 90. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. <https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2024.022>

perpetuates accountability gaps within social protection systems, limiting the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.

This epistemic erasure of the agency of children is evident in policy architectures that systematically exclude them from participatory oversight and feedback mechanisms, despite a growing body of empirical research demonstrating the efficacy of child-driven reporting and monitoring processes. For instance, child-centred approaches to accountability have been shown to yield unique insights into everyday malfeasance, such as extortion, absenteeism, or informal levies, particularly in environments like schools and health posts where adults may not always be present or adequately informed. Traditional, adult-oriented reporting systems are frequently ill-equipped to capture the subtleties and specificities of corruption as experienced by children, resulting in a persistent blind spot within institutional surveillance and redress frameworks. Moreover, cultural norms and power asymmetries further silence children's voices, diminishing the visibility of abuses that disproportionately affect their access to essential services. As such, by foregrounding the epistemic agency of children within anti-corruption paradigms, policy makers and practitioners can foster more responsive, representative, and ultimately effective accountability mechanisms within social protection systems.

5. TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE CORRUPTION PROOF CSSP

The need for a paradigm shift in anti-corruption efforts within child-sensitive social protection initiatives in Africa is thus acutely apparent. As the preceding discussion has illuminated, dominant technical and fiscal reforms, while innovative in design, often falter when confronted with the complex realities of exclusion, capacity gaps, and the epistemic marginalisation of children's voices. What emerges is a pressing imperative not merely to remediate isolated failures but to reimagine the very architecture of social protection systems themselves. This requires moving beyond piecemeal solutions and technocratic fixes toward an understanding of social protection as both an instrument of equity and a vehicle for deeper structural transformation and human development.

In this context, a forward-looking conceptualisation of transformative, corruption-proof, child-sensitive social protection becomes essential. Such an approach must not only safeguard the integrity of programmes, but also fundamentally reorient their purpose: to realise children's rights, empower marginalised communities, and build resilient institutions capable of withstanding both internal and external threats. The following section outlines the central tenets underpinning this transformative vision, drawing upon a synthesis of comparative practice, normative frameworks, and empirical evidence to articulate a robust agenda for social justice and developmental inclusion.

5.1 Conceptualising 'Transformative CSSP'

The term 'transformative' in the context of social protection transcends the traditional roles of safety nets and poverty alleviation. It refers to interventions that actively challenge and change the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, particularly those affecting children. The notion of 'transformative' social protection represents a paradigmatic shift from conventional welfare approaches toward a more ambitious agenda that seeks to address the structural roots of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. In the context of child-sensitive social protection, this transformation is not merely about expanding coverage or increasing benefit levels, it is about reimagining the role of social protection as a catalyst for social justice, empowerment, and institutional reform.⁴⁹

At its core, a transformative approach is anchored in the recognition of children as rights-holders and states as duty-bearers. This rights-based orientation is grounded in international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990), which obligate governments to ensure every child's right to social security, education, health, and protection from harm.⁵⁰ South Africa's Child Support Grant (CSG) exemplifies this rights-realising function.⁵¹ Enshrined in national legislation and protected by constitutional

49 Chibwana M (2021) Transformative child rights advocacy: An ergonomic conceptual framework. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 29(3), 541-562.

50 Chibwana M (2021) Towards a transformative child rights discourse in Africa: A reflexive study. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 21(1), 126-148.

51 Chibwana M (2024) Transformative Social Protection for Children in Africa: The Case of South Africa

guarantees, the CSG has become a cornerstone of the country's social contract with its youngest citizens. Its implementation through the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is supported by biometric registration, digital payment systems, and legal safeguards that reduce fraud and ensure that entitlements reach the intended beneficiaries.⁵²

Beyond legal entitlements, transformative social protection also entails a commitment to empowerment. This involves enabling children and their caregivers to participate meaningfully in the design, implementation, and monitoring of programmes. Participation is not only a democratic imperative, but also a practical strategy for enhancing programme responsiveness and reducing corruption. In Lesotho, the Child Grants Programme (CGP) incorporates community validation of targeting lists and citizen outreach days, allowing beneficiaries to voice concerns and influence programme delivery. These participatory mechanisms are complemented by grievance redress systems and mobile payment pilots, which reduce opportunities for rent-seeking thereby increasing transparency.⁵³

A transformative approach is also inherently inclusive. It seeks to dismantle the social and institutional barriers that prevent marginalised children, such as those with disabilities, orphans, or children in remote areas, from accessing support. Rwanda's Vision 2020 *Umurenge* Programme (VUP) demonstrates how inclusion can be operationalised through integrated service delivery. The VUP combines direct support, flexible public works, and early childhood development services, with a particular focus on vulnerable households. Its use of biometric registration and performance contracts (*Imihigo*) for local leaders ensures that inclusion is not left to discretion but is embedded in accountable governance structures.⁵⁴

Institutional transformation is another defining feature of a transformative approach. This involves shifting from fragmented, *ad hoc* interventions to coordinated, system-wide

and Mauritius. *The Social, Economic and Cultural Rights of Children in Africa: Challenges and Reflections from the Perspective of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, 82.

52 South African Government 'The South African Child Support Grant Impact Assessment: Evidence from a Survey of Children, Adolescents and Their Households' (Pretoria 2012).

53 Oxford Policy Management Evaluation of the Child Grants Programme in Lesotho (2013) available at <https://www.opml.co.uk/projects/evaluation-child-grants-programme-lesotho> (accessed 5 July 2025).

54 Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA) Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme Overview (LODA 2020) available at <https://www.loda.gov.rw/vup/> (accessed 5 July 2025).

responses that are transparent, accountable, and resilient. Kenya's CT-OVC, despite the earlier discussed corruption incidences, illustrates this institutional logic. The programme is supported by a robust Management Information System (MIS), mobile money transfers, and independent audits. These tools not only reduce leakage and fraud, but also enable real-time monitoring of child outcomes such as school attendance and health service utilisation. Moreover, the programme's integration with the Department of Children Services and partnerships with development agencies reflect a whole-of-government approach to advancement of children's rights.⁵⁵

Finally, a transformative approach is adaptive. It recognises that children's vulnerabilities are dynamic and shaped by broader social, economic, and environmental forces. As such, social protection systems must be capable of responding to crises, whether pandemics, climate disasters, or conflict. This requires continuous learning, data-driven decision-making, and flexible financing models. In Lesotho, for example, impact evaluations of the CGP have informed programme adjustments, including the introduction of complementary services such as school bursaries and nutrition training.⁵⁶ Similarly, Kenya's CT-OVC has evolved in response to evidence on adolescent well-being and psychosocial outcomes, demonstrating the value of adaptive learning in enhancing programme effectiveness. In sum, conceptualising social protection as transformative, requires a reorientation of policy and practice, from charity to justice, from discretion to entitlement, and from fragmentation to integration. It is a vision that places children at the centre of development and demands systems that are not only inclusive and effective, but also corruption-proof and accountable. The African examples discussed here show that this vision is not utopian. It is already taking shape across the continent, offering valuable lessons for replication as good practices within global social protection policy formulation.

55 African Child Policy Forum, Save the Children, & Overseas Development Institute. (2014) 'Child-sensitive social protection in Africa: Challenges and opportunities' Addis Ababa: ACPF <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/child-sensitive-social-protection-africa-challenges-and-opportunities> (accessed 5 July 2025).

56 Oxford Policy Management Evaluation of the Child Grants Programme in Lesotho (2013) available at <https://www.opml.co.uk/projects/evaluation-child-grants-programme-lesotho> (accessed 5 July 2025).

5.2 Tenets of Transformative Corruption-Proof Child-Sensitive Social Protection

Social protection systems are increasingly recognised as critical instruments for promoting child well-being, reducing poverty, and fostering inclusive development. However, the effectiveness of these systems is often undermined by corruption, inefficiencies, and a lack of child sensitivity. A transformative approach to child-sensitive social protection must therefore be grounded in principles that not only address the multidimensional needs of children, but also ensure integrity, transparency, and accountability in implementation. This section outlines the key tenets of such an approach, drawing on some exemplary practices, normative frameworks, and empirical evidence from the continent of Africa.

5.2.1 *Rights-Based and Normatively Anchored Design*

Transformative corruption-proof child-sensitive social protection is founded on robust legal and normative frameworks. Instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) enshrine the right of every child to social security and protection from exploitation. By reframing social protection as a legal entitlement rather than discretionary charity, systems become more equitable and resilient. Harmonising the legislative frameworks with international standards helps eliminate loopholes that enable corrupt practices. Accessible and transparent grievance mechanisms, as well as independent oversight bodies, deter abuse and provide recourse against manipulation or exclusion of marginalised children.

5.2.2 *Child-Centric Targeting and Lifecycle Responsiveness*

A transformative system must be anchored in the four foundational principles of child rights as articulated in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), namely, non-discrimination (Article 3), best interests of the child (Article 4), survival and development (Article 5), and child participation (Article 4.2). These principles compel systems to recognise and respond to the evolving and intersecting needs children face throughout their development. Protection must be tailored to each stage of childhood, addressing vulnerabilities related to nutrition, education, violence, and transitions such as migration, orphanhood, or disability. Effective programmes move beyond simplistic age or poverty

targeting and incorporate multidimensional criteria, including displacement status, gender identity, and psychosocial risks, ensuring continuity and equity across the lifecycle.

To uphold the principle of non-discrimination, targeting mechanisms must be inclusive and context-sensitive, avoiding exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect marginalised children. The best interests of the child demand that eligibility and benefit structures prioritise those at greatest risk, while survival and development require that interventions be timely, adequate, and holistic.

To mitigate corruption risks and uphold child participation, systems should incorporate transparent eligibility criteria, biometric registration, digital payments, and independent audits. Community verification processes, especially those that engage children and caregivers, can further reduce space for fraudulent claims and ensure that entitlements reach the intended beneficiaries.

5.2.3 *Decolonial and Epistemically Plural Design*

Transformative social protection must reflect and respect the diverse knowledge systems, cultural norms, and relational contexts of African children. Moving away from externally imposed, technocratic models, systems should embrace indigenous philosophies, such as Ubuntu, and prioritise community-based structures. Involving local committees, faith leaders, and youth-led networks in programme oversight increases transparency and accountability at the grassroots. Community participation in monitoring and implementation helps expose and address potential misconduct or misappropriation.

5.2.4 *Participation, Accountability, and Child Agency*

As highlighted earlier, in line with Article 4.2 and Article 7 of the African Children's Charter, placing children at the centre requires institutionalising their voices within social protection systems. Participation should be meaningful and ongoing, whether through youth councils, child-friendly grievance platforms, or participatory monitoring mechanisms. Child-led social accountability initiatives, demonstrate how empowering children as agents of change can

increase programme transparency and expose malpractice. Safe reporting channels and protection for whistleblowers further strengthen accountability.

5.2.5 *Resilience to Shocks and Adaptive Capacity*

Recognising that children's vulnerabilities are shaped by dynamic and intersecting forces, such as pandemics, climate change, and conflict, a transformative system must be shock-responsive and adaptive. Scalable interventions, flexible targeting, and contingency financing are vital. Investments in robust data, predictive analytics, and scenario planning allow for continuous learning and rapid adjustment to emerging threats, as demonstrated by digital cash transfer innovations during the COVID-19 response. Real-time monitoring, transparent disbursement mechanisms, and external audits reduce the risk of corruption during crises, when rapid action is required and oversight can be weakened. Public dashboards and digital feedback mechanisms promote scrutiny and timely correction of irregularities.

6. THE IMPERATIVE OF DOMESTIC RESOURCE MOBILIZATION FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL PROTECTION FINANCING IN AFRICA

The persistent reliance of African nations on donor funding for social protection programmes has created systemic vulnerabilities that undermine long-term programme sustainability and national sovereignty. This dependence on external financing exposes social protection systems to conditionalities that frequently align with neoliberal paradigms rather than local developmental priorities. Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) emerges as a critical decolonial alternative in this context, representing a fundamental shift toward fiscal self-reliance through the strategic generation of government revenue via taxation, social insurance mechanisms, and innovative non-tax revenue streams. This transition to DRM-based financing models offers three distinct yet interrelated advantages for social protection systems, particularly those targeting vulnerable children. First, it significantly reduces aid dependency and its accompanying constraints, which often manifest through imposed austerity measures that disproportionately shrink social sector expenditures. Second, DRM provides more predictable and sustainable funding streams for essential child grants and services, a benefit of stable social protection systems. Third, and perhaps most

fundamentally, domestically financed programmes foster greater democratic ownership and accountability.

One impediment to DRM in Africa is illicit financial flows. Illicit financial flows (IFFs) present a crippling paradox for African states, severely hamstringing domestic resource mobilisation and directly constricting the fiscal space essential for social investment. When capital leaks out through corruption, tax evasion, and other unlawful channels, governments are deprived of vital revenues that could otherwise be allocated to child welfare, health, and education. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Africa loses approximately \$88.6 billion annually to illicit capital flight, a sum equivalent to 3.7 percent of the continent's GDP.⁵⁷ This massive leakage of capital is especially devastating as the billions lost each year are nearly equal to the combined total of Official Development Aid (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows into the continent. The scale of the haemorrhage is further underscored by African Development Bank (AfDB) estimates, which place annual losses from corruption and illicit outflows at over \$580 billion, a drain that not only undermines economic growth but also exacerbates Africa's nearly \$2 trillion debt burden.⁵⁸ As such, curbing illicit financial flows is not merely a matter of economic prudence, it is a critical prerequisite for expanding fiscal space, securing sustainable funding, and ultimately ensuring that social protection systems can reach and empower Africa's most vulnerable populations.

The structural transformation toward DRM represents more than merely a fiscal adjustment. It constitutes a fundamental reorientation of social protection systems toward greater autonomy, responsiveness, and long-term viability. By breaking the cycle of donor dependency and its associated constraints, African nations can design social protection programmes that truly reflect local needs and priorities, particularly for vulnerable child populations. This shift aligns with broader decolonial approaches to development that emphasise self-determination and contextual appropriateness in social policy design and

57 United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), *Illicit Financial Flows fuelling conflicts and embezzling Africa's future?* <https://www.un.org/osaa/news/illicit-financial-flows-fuelling-conflicts-and-embezzling-africa%E2%80%99s-future> (accessed 10 September 2025).

58 African Development Bank, *Africa loses 580 billion dollars to corruption* https://web.facebook.com/dw.africa/posts/the-african-development-bank-afdb-says-africa-loses-over-580-billion-annually-to/1167997555364135/?_rdc=1&_rdr# (accessed 10 September 2025).

implementation. The transition, however, requires careful consideration of national capacities, economic contexts, and governance structures to ensure that DRM mechanisms are both effective and equitable in their implementation.

6.1 Exemplary DRM initiatives in African Member States

Several innovative DRM mechanisms have been deployed across Africa to strengthen child protection and welfare, each providing important lessons for policy design and replication. One such approach is the adoption of progressive taxation frameworks that specifically earmark revenues from extractive industries for social investment. For instance, Ghana institutionalised a Mineral Development Fund, dedicating 20 percent of receipts from mineral royalties to social services, thus directing resource flows toward sustainable development goals and benefiting children and communities at large.⁵⁹ The purpose of the scheme is to facilitate the socio-economic development of the communities that are affected by mining operations.

In the context of Rwanda, an innovative approach to health financing through the *Mutuelle de Santé*. *Mutuelle de santé* is a community-based health insurance that is based on solidarity where persons (families) come together and pay contributions for the purpose of protection and receipt of medical care. The initiative provides a compelling example of social health insurance supported by domestic premium contributions. It was established in order to help people with low-income access medical care at affordable cost.⁶⁰ This scheme covers approximately 90 percent of children, ensuring broad-based access to essential health services and demonstrating the potential for inclusive, low-cost health coverage in resource-constrained environments.⁶¹ Such models highlight the role of pooled domestic resources in bridging service gaps for vulnerable populations. Additionally, some African countries have leveraged sovereign wealth funds to secure and distribute the proceeds of natural resources for future generations. Botswana's Pula Fund exemplifies this strategy, with returns from the

59 Mining Community Development Scheme (MCDS) <https://www.mdf.gov.gh/beneficiaries/mcdfs-20/> (accessed 25 July 2025).

60 CBHI Scheme : <https://www.rssb.rw/scheme/cbhi-scheme> (accessed 25 July 2025).

61

fund used in part to finance universal child benefits.⁶² By institutionalising long-term, stable sources of funding for welfare initiatives, such sovereign wealth mechanisms help to insulate priority social spending from economic volatility and commodity cycles, strengthening the sustainability of child-focused interventions.

7. CONCLUSION

The imperative to secure the welfare of Africa's children necessitates a paradigmatic shift from incremental reformism toward a foundational re-envisioning of social protection systems. Contemporary donor-dependent and fragmented frameworks have demonstrably failed to deliver sustained and equitable outcomes, thus underscoring the urgency for a holistic transformation rooted in self-determination, dignity, and social justice. Central to such a transformation is the assertion that social protection ought to be enshrined as a universal right rather than a conditional privilege as espoused in international and regional child rights frameworks. This reconceptualisation calls for a decisive departure from temporally constrained and externally financed interventions, advocating instead for the establishment of robust, domestically resourced systems. These systems should be informed by indigenous epistemologies, responsive to community-identified needs, and administered with accountability mechanisms embedded within the fabric of local governance. Universal child grants, financed through progressive taxation and sovereign wealth funds rather than external aid, can serve as the foundational instrument in this undertaking. However, the true realisation of social protection extends beyond economic redistribution. It necessitates the elevation of children from passive beneficiaries to active agents, ensuring the integration of their perspectives in policy formulation and implementation.

The most effective bulwark against corruption and administrative inefficiency may be found within the continent's own traditions. By revitalising and adapting indigenous mechanisms of communal oversight for modern administrative contexts, states can cultivate

62 Wills SE, Senbet LW & Simbanegavi W (2016) 'Sovereign Wealth Funds and Natural Resource Management in Africa' *Journal of African Economies*, 25(suppl_2), ii3–ii19. Oxford Academic.

accountability structures that supplement and, where necessary, supersede hierarchical bureaucratic regimes. The collective stewardship of child welfare, anchored in communal responsibility, enhances the responsiveness and resilience of social protection systems, bridging the gap between statutory norms and lived realities. This approach transcends poverty alleviation, aiming instead to restore public trust and reconstruct the social contract. A decolonial framework for social protection resists paternalistic paradigms of charity in favour of distributive justice and collective responsibility for the realisation of each child's full potential. Through the integration of domestic resource mobilisation, community-based vigilance, and participatory child engagement, African states are positioned to design social protection architectures that not only mitigate adversity, but also foster sustainable hope and opportunity.

The challenge at hand is therefore both philosophical and operational. It requires the reframing of social protection from being perceived as a fiscal burden to being acknowledged as a strategic investment in national development, from a passive safety net to an enabling platform for human flourishing. Realising this vision will ensure that every African child is afforded protection as an inalienable right. The time for such a transformative agenda is immediate, recognising that the future trajectories of Africa's children are contingent upon actions undertaken in the present.