

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Governance

TRUST TRADITIONS WORK WELL IN A MODERN WORLD

Independent studies of non-State social protection services in six African countries unanimously conclude that informal systems based on mutual trust often achieve equal or more effective governance than highly regulated operations.

Almost entirely without documentation or administrative overhead, mutual help organisations or Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) know what services are most needed, form their own groupings, select their own leaders, decide their own contribution levels, sanction members, make and enforce their own rules, prioritise and apply their own budgets, and fully account (face-to-face) to every member for every cent and every action.

Further, research by nine separate teams coordinated by PASGR confirms the direct link between the quality of governance (accountability, transparency, relevance, responsiveness, resource application) and

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the quality of results (crisis averted or remedied, cost-effectiveness and user satisfaction). In all these respects, CBOs often govern and perform to the satisfaction of their members. Using a report card system that enabled 5,040 beneficiaries and members to assess the quality of services they receive from their organisations, more than 70% indicated high satisfaction – significantly higher than many Afro-barometer results of citizen-assessment of government services.

Most crucially, small CBOs are responsive and accountable most directly to the target of their services – the beneficiaries. Larger NGOs more often do the bidding of remote principals and donors.

Full statistical details and analysis on this –

from more than 30 diverse study sites in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda – are available from PASGR.

POLICY CHALLENGE

While there is merit in integrating these small organisations into comprehensive national social protection service systems, great care should be taken not to undermine the traditional governance methods which make CBOs uniquely capable of knowing and responding to community and member needs, precisely tailored to the priorities of specific groups and individuals.

Any edict which imposes rigid conventional governance mechanism on self-help groups could be destructive, with significant political and welfare risks. If mutual help organisations and other small non-State actors are forced to conform to more modern conventions through blanket regulation, they will devalue, dissent, disobey or disband. If they are encouraged (and enabled) to conform voluntarily, through skills support and practical incentives, no “enforcement” will be necessary.

The priority is not to impose any rigid governance mechanisms in the name of modernisation. The CBO system is not broken. It does not need to be fixed. It is the rest of the national social protection services system that needs to change: in its perception of informal governance mechanisms, in its respect for essential importance of trust traditions, and in its willingness to engage CBOs – supportively – on a case-by-case community level for any intervention.

Policy should focus on improving informal governance mechanisms built on mutual help, and “trust” the people to identify and use the benefits wisely – accountably, transparently, responsively, democratically and effectively.