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Introduction¹

The Ugandan government has been implementing a cash transfer programme called “Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment” (SAGE) since 2011. Cash transfers are social policies aimed at helping targeted beneficiaries (e.g. vulnerable children, single mothers, old people, disabled people, etc.) by providing them with a small but regular direct transfer payment.

Creating a cash transfer programme in Uganda had been under consideration since the early 2000s, and was more firmly introduced in 2010 with the support of the Department for International Development (DFID), the British development agency. The Ugandan government, sceptical of cash transfer programmes, had prevented implementation before that date. It had prioritized infrastructure development and the promotion of economic

¹ This paper is based on a Master's thesis in political science defended in May 2018 at Sciences Po in Paris. Research focused on the political issues at stake in the policy-making and implementation processes of a cash transfer programme in Uganda. About 30 interviews were conducted with political, administrative and voluntary leaders who took part in its making, together with beneficiaries. Fieldwork took place from mid-January to mid-March 2018 and I am grateful to the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) in Nairobi for its support.

growth (Hickey & Bukenya, 2016) since the National Resistance Movement (NRM)² took power in 1986. Following a developmentalist and neoliberal approach, the state aimed to promote an orthodox macroeconomic policy. Social protection policy was seen as opposed to this developmentalist philosophy, generating mistrust and disapproval for fear it might fuel a “dependency culture”. This belief was expressed not only in opinion polls but also by numerous political and administrative leaders, in particular in the Ministry of Finance³. Yet, a lobbying campaign led by DFID and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development convinced the Ugandan presidency to partially shift from the logic of economic development to the fight against poverty.

Many scholars have highlighted the advantages of cash transfers compared to usual development policies. Some emphasize the simplicity and effectiveness of these policies as they can cover a large population and have visible effects (on schooling, employment, health, poverty, etc.) at a low cost (generally less than 1% of GDP, even in developing countries). Others insist on the political potential of cash transfers, for example separating social protection and waged labour, socially and politically re-enhancing poor people, and more generally carrying an emancipatory potential compared to normative and coercive traditional development policies.

My research findings widely qualify this optimism and the illusion that cash transfers would have radical transformative effects on beneficiaries. In Uganda, both characterized by its authoritarian regime and neoliberal policies, the implementation of cash transfers not only uses these modes of governing but also reproduces them. Drawing on Béatrice Hibou’s work (2013a, 2013b, 2017) on political domination and neoliberal bureaucratization, I argue that Uganda’s SAGE programme contributes to the exercise of power through two different (yet bounded) repertoires: bureaucracy, and paternalism. I also argue that beneficiaries and administrative agents interpret differently the SAGE programme, which conveys and illustrates different conceptions of political legitimacy.

SAGE programme as “neoliberal bureaucratization”

The implementation of the SAGE programme has caused bureaucratic issues, considering the fact that Uganda experienced the collapse of its administration and later the implementation of neoliberal economic policies.

Identifying potential beneficiaries was a problem during the first phase of the programme (2011–2015) because there was no national identity file registering every citizen. SAGE programme agents had to go to every targeted village and establish, with local authorities, the list of all the people aged more than 65 who met the programme criteria. The identity and age of individuals were then confirmed by poorly formalized and widely improvised procedures. If people had no official identification documents, officers could “use the vetting

² President Museveni’s party and party in power.

³ See Hickey & Bukenya (*op. cit.*) and interview with the Policy and Advocacy Advisor, ESP, Kampala, 07/02/2018 and 08/02/2018.

process of the community, to confirm, ‘this one is 65 years old, let’s put him in.’ It was a community registration process.”⁴

In the less ambiguous cases, local authorities could orally attest the age of an individual. In other cases, another person known and trusted to be approximately the same age could attest it. In the most difficult cases, the potential beneficiary could be submitted to questions aimed at proving his or her age, as explained by an IT Officer: “We can ask them some historical questions, like ‘who was there in that year, which president,’ etc., then if they’re able to answer, we can assume the person is a national and is more than 65.”⁵

The government decided to extend the programme from 15 pilot districts to 55 districts for the second phase (2015–2020), without, however, increasing the budget accordingly. Yet, administrative rationalization was introduced, the main example being the closing of the 15 district offices and the creation of 7 regional centres. More importantly, the targeting method was reformed, as only the 100 oldest people per sub-county⁶ were selected as beneficiaries. It considerably reduced the number of beneficiaries (proportionally to the geographical coverage) and also greatly complexified the identification and registration procedures.

At the same time, the Ugandan government decided to create a national identity registration file, thus formalizing and bureaucratizing identification and registration procedures. Any citizen who wants to benefit from SAGE needs to obtain an identity card first, which is used as proof of their age. This entails providing precise personal information but also registering biometric data (fingerprints and retinal scan). During payment sessions, beneficiaries are now requested to provide their identity documents and biometric data, while during the first SAGE phase they were only asked to present an impersonalized card provided by the administration. This second phase of bureaucratization, which according to the policy designers rationalised the management of beneficiaries, substantially complexifying administrative procedures from the beneficiaries’ viewpoint.

All these changes resulted from budgetary constraints to a great extent, but they can also be understood as “a process of rationalization, a will of calculability and predictability, a search for neutrality and objectivity ... typical of bureaucracy” (Hibou, 2013a: 5). The new management style is part of the exercise of domination, as means – such as bureaucratic technologies and procedures – prevail over the main goal: making sure that elderly people benefit from the SAGE programme. As a consequence, bureaucratic technologies produce indifference and “euphemize the political and social complexity of poverty, perpetuating the relations of domination that are the basis for its acceptance” (Hibou, 2015 : 105)

⁴ Interview with the Operations Adviser of ESP (Expanding Social Protection) agency, Kampala, 06/02/2018.

⁵ Interview with the IT Officer of the ESP office for the Central Region, Kiboga Town, 05/03/2018.

⁶ Districts are usually divided in two or several counties, themselves divided in sub-counties.

Paternalistic ideas and coercive practices

The exercise of power also uses symbolic repertoires and practices that are specific to Uganda. Those repertoires, as mentioned above, are paternalism and neoliberal developmentalism. In the SAGE programme, they translate into two sub-repertoires: assistance and investment. While they may seem partly contradictory, these two sub-repertoires are ambiguously intertwined by SAGE agents, therefore laying ground for arbitrary decisions, such as stigmatizing discourses and coercive practices.

The logic of assistance emphasizes “vulnerability” and “exclusion” to justify public aid provided to beneficiaries. Thus, the programme is meant to alleviate physical deficiencies due to the beneficiaries’ age; for example, the fact that they can barely work and sustain themselves, but also their specific needs in terms of health (medication, medical check-ups). Therefore, the SAGE programme could be compared to a pension system adapted to the informal sector: “Some old people lived at a time when contributory social security was not very common, many of them didn’t work in the formal sector, they worked in the informal sector. Those are people who are old now, they didn’t have that chance of contributing so those are the people we are targeting because now they’re too old to work.”⁷

Conversely, the logic of investment is grounded upon a developmentalist rhetoric whereby the invested money must have a transformative effect by enabling beneficiaries to launch an “income-generating activity” (petty trade, animals rearing, etc.). Yet, the logic of investment also comes from suspicions about grants being wasted in fuelling handouts and dependency. Such discourses are tied to a neoliberal imaginary whereby beneficiaries need to be active and productive; they should not just “consume” money but rather “(re-)invest” it in “lucrative businesses”⁸ to generate additional revenues.

These two logics are contradictory. The SAGE programme is theoretically unconditional, leaving beneficiaries with a complete freedom to spend the money. However, programme agents actually expect them to use it in certain manners they consider worthier than others. Many patronizing and stigmatizing discourses express this perception. For example, rumours state that the programme money finances alcoholism or polygamy. More generally, such discourses deny the beneficiaries’ ability to know what is good for them and to act consequently: “Majority, before they were trained, before capacity was built on how to use this money, that was a gap before, yes... All the money that use to come, they use it for drinking purposes, buying women in the community, marrying more women, you know? And they were not using it to what exactly that money was meant for. So we came up with an idea that we should build their capacities on livelihood programmes or what exactly they’re supposed to use this money for.”⁹

Whether such assumptions are true or not, the important point to stress here is that these stigmatizing discourses tend to foster paternalistic attitudes and may translate into coercive practices. Beneficiaries are closely monitored by Parish Chiefs (local administrative agents)

⁷ Interview with the director of ESP, Kampala, 13/03/2018

⁸ Interview with the Community Development Officer for Kiboga district, Kiboga Town, 08/03/2018.

⁹ Interview with a member of the Platform for Labour Action NGO, Kampala, 30/01/2018.

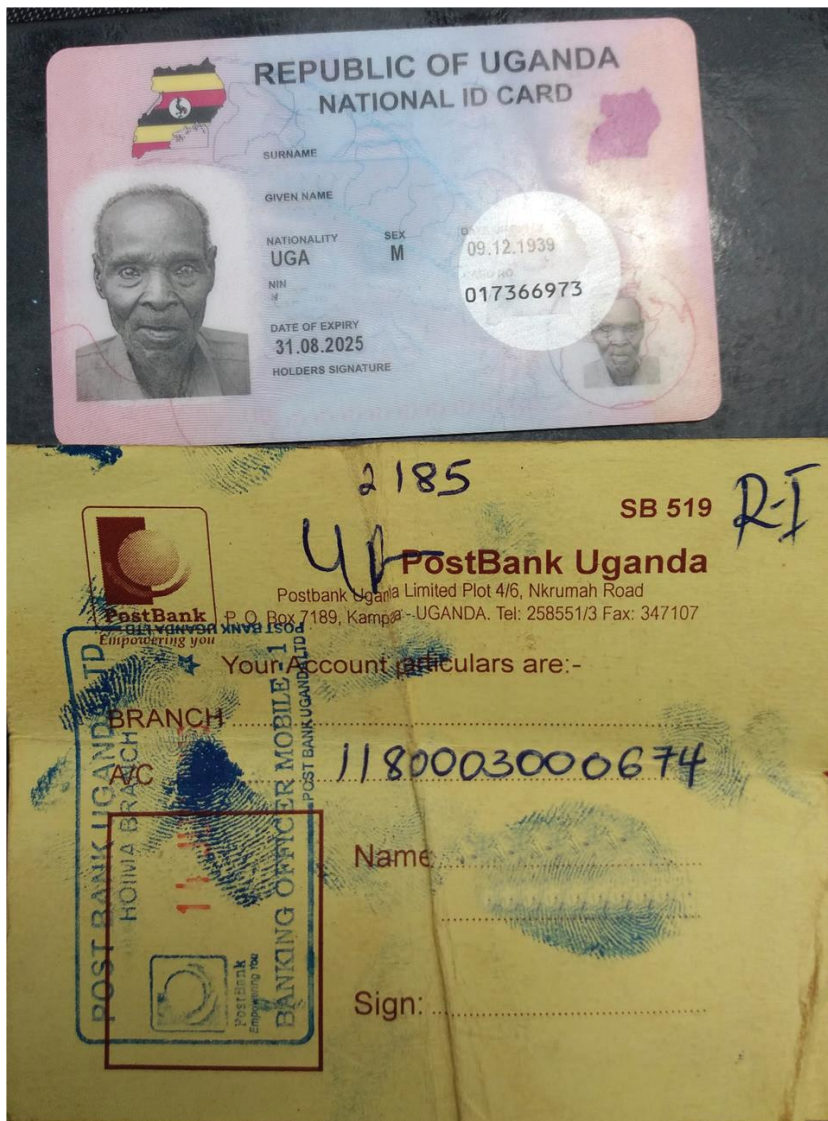
on an individual basis to figure out “how they have gained out of this programme”¹⁰. For instance, they will visit beneficiaries at their home if they suspect that the money is used in ways they consider inadequate. Another example is about “prepayment addresses”. Before payment sessions, beneficiaries are gathered and SAGE agents tell them about the good and bad ways to spend the grant, in order to “educate” them and give them what they call “financial literacy”: “What we do in the prepayment address is to try to guide you that when you get your money, try to use it in a way that benefit yourself, don’t waste it, because you’re vulnerable”¹¹.



Picture 1: Beneficiaries receiving their money at the payment desk.
Photo: Ronan Jacquin (March 2019).

¹⁰ Interview with a Parish Chief of Kibiga sub-county (Kajjere parish), Kiboga district, 06/03/2018.

¹¹ Interview with the SAGE Programme Regional Coordinator, Kiboga Town, 05/03/2018.



Picture 2: Beneficiary's identity card and beneficiary card (delivered by the bank). Photo: Ronan Jacquin (March 2018).

Whereas no formal conditionalities constrain beneficiaries' behaviour (contrary to other cash transfers programmes in Latin America), paternalistic views lead SAGE agents to adopt coercive attitudes towards beneficiaries, by denying their financial autonomy and using moral guidance on the use of money.

Feedback effects of the SAGE programme on beneficiaries: Between silence and claim

What are the feedback effects of bureaucratization and paternalism in authoritarian regimes (Hibou, 2017)? How do beneficiaries experience these two forms of governing and how do they deal with them? I will use an event that occurred when I was doing fieldwork to answer these questions. This event concerned delays in payment – a regular problem since the

beginning of the second SAGE phase. During my stay in the Kiboga district, beneficiaries had not received payment for 6 months, from September 2017 to February 2018. Ultimately, in February, they were given 50,000 UGX, which equates to two months grants only, leaving four months unpaid.

According to all my interviewees, these delays are the main problem of the SAGE programme. Obviously, they caused generalized concern and discontent, which, in some cases, translated into complaints and requests for explanation. Some beneficiaries were only given vague answers, as they were asked to be patient, or even not answered at all. My others recounted stigmatizing remarks like “Do you work for the government?” or “What have you done for the government?”, which cast them as “assisted” people and implied that their voice was not legitimate. Beneficiaries interpreted these remarks as a sign of their powerlessness and an indication that they should rather remain silent because, “anyways, old people are never seriously listened to.” Consequently, most beneficiaries opted for resignation and silence in the face of what they experienced as an injustice.

This event also sheds light into the conceptions of political legitimacy that the SAGE programme in general, and delays in payment in particular, carry about. Indeed, for people responsible for implementing the programme, rules and regular bureaucratic schemes – seen as clear and consistent despite some failures (especially delays) – are positive signs of transparency and accountability from the administration towards beneficiaries. This is, in short, an expression of the power and strength of the “bureaucratic imaginary” (Hibou, 2013a : 17) – as shown also by Florence Brisset-Foucault (2016) in her study of the Ugandan “radio polity”.

Yet, beneficiaries’ reactions reveal that many aspects of the programme are considered unfair or inefficient, for instance the obligation to hold an identity card (which is quite hard to obtain and requires accurate personal information, like the exact date of birth) or the physical distance to the pay point, which causes some beneficiaries to use part of the SAGE money for transport or to face a long and tiring walk. Delays in payment are blamed because they reflect a lack of efficiency and predictability from the state; they have a bad impact on beneficiaries: difficulty to fulfil some basic needs, personal debt, waged labour as a last resort to make ends meet, etc. Unlike programme agents, beneficiaries do not use transparency or the impersonality of rules as criteria for the legitimacy of the programme and of social justice more generally, but efficiency, simplicity and predictability (Hibou, 2013).

In conclusion, despite their promises, cash transfers prove to be greatly dependent on the social and political context in which they are being implemented. In the case of Uganda, they not only reflect the neoliberal bureaucratization and paternalism that undergird the exercise of power, but they also contribute to reproducing them. Besides, cash transfers shed light on and illustrate different conceptions of political legitimacy, social justice and citizen expectations towards the state.

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