

## Social protection and adaptation to climate change in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects

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### Abstract

Depending on the desk review of cogent extant literature and documents, the paper interrogates the relevance and legitimacy of social protection as climate change adaptation mechanism in a developing society like Nigeria. Situated against the undoubted threat of climate change in the country, the paper advances the argument that social protection remains a key adaptation tool especially for poor, rural and agricultural households. Based on the above, it critiques existing attempts at social protection in Nigeria and makes a case for multiple strategies and multi-sectoral approaches to climate change adaptation with social protection in the core. While social protection may be a universal climate change response, the paper argues for its contextualization in the case of Nigeria to achieve socio-cultural sensitivity and more crucially adapt it to extant norms, values and practices in the society. Therefore, there is need to mainstream climate change issues including social protection into policies and regulations as well as incorporating the views and perspectives of the vulnerable into these. In addition, such policies and programmes should be informed by the local knowledge and practices of groups in the society. The paper concludes that with the infusion of the above, social protection could overcome structural challenges in Nigeria and emerge as an attractive adaptation option to climate change.

**Keywords:** climate change, adaptation, vulnerability to climate change, challenges to social protection.

## Proteção social e adaptação às mudanças climáticas na Nigéria: Desafios e perspectivas

### Resumo

Dependendo da revisão documental da literatura e documentos existentes convincentes, o documento questiona a relevância e a legitimidade da proteção social como mecanismo de adaptação às mudanças climáticas em uma sociedade em desenvolvimento como a Nigéria. Situado contra a inquestionável ameaça da mudança climática no país, o documento avança o argumento de que a proteção social continua sendo uma ferramenta chave de adaptação, especialmente para famílias pobres, rurais e agrícolas. Com base no exposto, ele critica as tentativas existentes de proteção social na Nigéria e defende estratégias múltiplas e abordagens multissetoriais para a adaptação às mudanças climáticas com proteção social no centro. Embora a proteção social possa ser uma resposta universal às mudanças climáticas, o documento defende sua contextualização no caso da Nigéria para alcançar a sensibilidade sociocultural e adaptá-la de forma mais crucial às normas, valores e práticas existentes na sociedade. Portanto, é necessário integrar as questões de mudança climática, incluindo a proteção social em políticas e regulamentos, bem como incorporar as visões e perspectivas dos vulneráveis a eles. O documento conclui que, com a infusão do exposto acima, a proteção social pode superar os desafios estruturais na Nigéria e emergir como uma opção atraente de adaptação às mudanças climáticas.

**Palavras-chave:** mudança climática, adaptação, vulnerabilidade às mudanças climáticas, desafios à proteção social.

### 1. Introduction

While there is no longer the imperative to convince people even in the developing world of the obvious deleterious impact of climate change on human society and existence as we know it, there is still the challenge of devising measures through which society can effectively respond to it. Therefore, while the relatively high level of development in science and technology (including robust infrastructure capital) equip the developed societies of the world to approach climate change mainly from the angle of mitigation, the rest of the world especially countries in Africa are saddled with developing reliable adaptation strategies towards climate change at least in the short and medium run course in development cycles.

In Nigeria, while the policy on climate change and institutional response remain largely at the primary level, the impact of climate change on various segments of the population especially those who are at the margins of socio-economic development has become evident and calls for action. One of the reliable means of dealing with the impact of climate change especially on marginalized, poor, rural dwelling and even agricultural dependent members of the population is through social protection which is gradually emerging as a popular strategy in other parts of the world.

Social protection is undoubtedly a critical tool for climate change adaptation especially among resource poor and agricultural households. Therefore, there is no gainsaying that a good understanding of the role of social protection is very imperative in coming to terms with climate change in Nigeria. In utilizing social protection especially among rural and agricultural households in the developing world, there is need for both cautious and sensitivity to the undesired outcomes of social protection policies.

Hence, the wrong application of social protection can encourage behavior or agricultural practices susceptible to vulnerability to climate change. In fact, studies by Panda (2013) in India and even Weldegebriel & Prowse (2013) in Ethiopia suggest this tendency. In view of the foregoing, this paper examines the effectiveness of social protection to climate change adaptation in Nigeria. While there is no doubting the relevance of this strategy, the paper examines the peculiar challenges in adoption of social protection in Nigeria and how these can be overcome in order to enhance effectiveness of social protection.

There is no argument about the fact that climate change adaptation calls attention to the need for a multiple strategy and multi-sectorial approach. Therefore, for a country like Nigeria where a good number of the people are involved in seasonal occupations and precarious employment in both rural and urban areas the relevance of social protection remain largely incontrovertible.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The paper depended essentially on the desk review of the extant literature and documents for its information. Inclusive criteria utilized in the selection of the reviewed articles and other publications include Nigeria; Social Protection; Climate Change; Climate Change Adaptation; Vulnerability to Climate Change; Social Institutions in Climate Change Adaptation. However, extreme-dated literature i.e., those published before the year 2000 were excluded.

Given the dependence of the paper on literature/documents the analyzed was anchored on the thematic method. In other words, the paper adopted the thematic analysis of data (see, Braun; Clarke, 2006) in making sense of the information collected from the literature. This entails that the analysis was anchored on the themes identified in the study and which were used as discussion sub-themes. In effect, the findings are discussed below in terms of the following subthemes under the results and discussion section: conceptualization of social protection; utility of social protection in a developing society like Nigeria; issues and challenges to effective social protection in Nigeria.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *3.1 Conceptualizing social protection*

Generally, social protection is conceptualized in terms of systematic and coordinated actions and responses to the adverse effects of climate change. Hence, Nino-Zarazua et al. (2012, pp. 164) citing Conway et al. (2000) define social protection as set of “public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk and deprivation which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity and society”. In reality social protection through time has been mainly associated with assets and cash transfers aimed at cushioning the adverse effects of climate change. It is often advisable to see social protection as composed of three dimensions viz.

- Social assistance which is usually financed by public taxation and exist in the form of public policy instruments which seek to address poverty and vulnerability;
- Social insurance which like any other form of insurance is a contributory scheme meant to protect workers/dependents from hazards including those that are work-related;
- Labour market regulation which exists in the form of legal and regulatory frameworks often at the behest of the state aimed at ensuring minimum standards of employment and safe-guarding workers' rights.

From the above dimensions, social protection even though acquiring more currency and renewed popularity since the era of contemporary concerns with the climate and encompasses forms of action seen as consistent with addressing social and economic vulnerability, risk and deprivation from diverse causes in human society. However, the extant literature shows that the majority of donor-supported social protection programmes are in the form of social insurance schemes targeted at providing cash and asset transfers to beneficiaries who are deemed to have met clearly established poverty and vulnerability criteria (Davies et al., 2008; Farrington; Slater, 2006; Tanner et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010; Wood, 2011). It is important to understand that there is a big difference between cash and asset transfers; this difference is in terms of whether the transfer is targeted at productive purposes or on the other hand aimed at consumption or towards meeting the daily needs of individuals, families or households.

Hence, cash transfers are usually used to address short-term consumption needs or day-to-day needs especially with reference to rapid onset of disasters like flooding, droughts, earthquakes etc. On the other hand, asset transfer and Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) are meant to influence behavior and elicit desired change in the beneficiaries that reflect policy ends. In other words, they are long term schemes related to defined policy outcomes. The idea of CCTs is that the payment of cash is 'conditional' upon the performance of the beneficiaries in relation to long term development goals. These goals may be in the form of the cultivation of drought resistant crops, investment in flood varieties.

For instance: during a field trip to the Oyedega community in Ibaji near Idah in Kogi State, it was discovered that the members of that flood prone community had discovered a specie of rice popularly called 'swim rice' which can do well in flood inundated plains unlike the conventional specie that the community was used to. However, during interaction, the community members admitted that lack of fund has made it difficult for most farmers to switch over to the new rice which not only resists flood but enables them cultivate rice twice within a planting season – interaction in the month of October 2014. In the views of one of the farmers and a clan head.

*Our people do not have the money for the new swim rice. Even when you have money, the rice is still scarce, and you will spend a lot of effort in order to get a small quantity. We wish the government will help us with this, at least we can be sure of good harvest in spite of the floods (Oyedega Community - 8th October 2014).<sup>1</sup>*

Therefore, the payment of cash is motivated by the desire to see a change in behavior or attitude which corresponds to a long term policy target. In a way, ordinary cash transfer may be considered an emergency or immediate response to a disaster or severe privation while CCTs represent well-articulated schemes driven by policy goals and often embodied in the systematic response to risks and vulnerability. Be that as it may, both cash and food transfers have been shown to act as safety – net for households or families whose incomes and assets or entire livelihood are severely affected as a consequence of extreme weather events like flooding and droughts. In fact, as Deshingkar et al. (2005) show the scheme has worked well in India where the food-for-work programme has provided reliable safety –net during food shortages and famine.

In spite of its unquestionable popularity and merits over asset transfer, cash transfer has also been criticized on the grounds that it could often encourage laziness and inhibit behavior change that reduces or negates behaviour modification. However, this criticism is countered by the fact that CCTs are usually conditional upon behavior modification, or the adoption of policy driven change in the way things are done. Despite the above issues, scholars with eyes on human rights may see cash transfers as that which respects the rights of households and give them the freedom to choose. In other words, cash transfers put critical decisions regarding household needs and investments in the hands of the household whose members are ideally in the best position to assess and decide on which needs are most pressing or most necessary at any point in time.

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<sup>1</sup>Opinion of a 66-year-old male farmer. These sentiments were expressed in the course of interaction/field work for another related project on climate change. The usage here is just for emphasis since the present paper is different and is purely theoretical.

But simple cash transfers, in spite of the argument about choice and freedom embody heavy elements of risks since there is no guarantee that cash transfers would be productively or wisely spent. Actually, the risk in this makes the CCTs very popular and often more easily embraced by development agencies and even governments in the adaptation strategies for climate change. One of the most insightful criticisms of cash transfers and even CCTs is provided by Teichman (2007) who argues that these schemes represent at best very limited or circumscribed methods of addressing the structural and historical factors behind both poverty and vulnerability to environmental change.

Be that as it may, social protection is anchored on using such schemes as asset transfers, cash transfers and other forms of social protection to reduce both general poverty and vulnerability to climate change (Davies et al., 2008; Tanner et al., 2009; Bene, 2011; Wood, 2011). The ostensive value of social protection is based on its touted ability to address poverty and the gender dimensions of climate change. As a matter of fact, it is argued that women as a demographic category of the general population are often at the forefront of adverse climate events and are equally expected to anchor the adaptation strategies of families and households.

Another critical form of social protection is through the provision of insurance which is becoming popular in the area of agriculture. In this form of insurance, there is the transfer of the risk of income and asset losses as a result of adverse climate event. The development of this form of insurance has been associated with the growth of microfinance services and especially micro-insurance schemes which cover various variability of business and entrepreneurship. This form of insurance provides reliable cushion against the loss of assets like land, livestock, housing and food stocks to environmental and economic shocks (Heltberg et al., 2009). Crop insurance is perhaps the most popular form of insurance among agricultural households. However, while the insurance against actual crop losses can be really costly and more often than not unpredictable, the rise of index-based insurance has become favoured. Index-based insurance extends insurance coverage in relationship to pre-established index of rainfall or soil moisture which allows both the predictability of risks and more critically the payment of compensation in a transparent manner (Heltberg et al., 2009).

### *3.2 The utility of social protection in a developing society like Nigeria*

Evidence abounds to show that social protection provides an important broad strategy for reducing vulnerability to climate change induced poverty or deprivation especially during periods of serious environmental stress (Awokuse, 2011; Bene, 2011; Doocy et al., 2006; Heltberg et al., 2009). While social protection appears relatively novel in the African context there is no gainsaying the fact that many donors especially in the developed parts of the world now see the use of cash and assets transfer programmes in supplementing or augmenting the income of vulnerable populations as a realistic approach to mitigation and adaptation.

However, the whole gamut of social protection is anchored on the underlying assumption that the failure to meet basic needs during adverse weather events like droughts, famine and flooding may be an outcome of the loss or devaluation of skills, assets and expected income in relation to the costs of food, shelter and other basic needs of a given group or individual. Therefore, the logical solution is to use social protection as a means of providing the affected population or group with the wherewithal that can theoretically improve their capacity to build livelihoods and access scarce resources in spite of volatile market settings (Awokuse, 2011; Devereux; Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Main et al., 2008; Wood, 2011). In other words, social protection improves the ability of groups to weather the storm of volatile market situations consequent upon adverse events and in this sense act as a reliable safety protection especially for vulnerable and resource poor groups in the population.

In spite of its promises and even perceived short-term relevance, the ability of social protection to build livelihoods and climate change resilience in advance of long term climate changes is still largely a matter of conjecture. The fact then is that there are few social protection programmes that are really explicitly designed to meet the kind of scenarios being enacted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Davies et al., 2008; Bene, 2011). In real terms questions and concerns have been raised about the ability of asset and cash transfers to address longer-term, intergenerational poverty and vulnerability. These concerns are especially pronounced in the African (including Nigeria) context where the causes of poverty and its perpetuation are more often than not attributed to structural economic and social policies of the state ranging from such issues as employment generation, economic planning, resource management to distributional justice, and social provisioning.

Even in developed nations, cash transfers as a critical component of social protection may function as a reliable means of preventing disaster-induced poverty spirals but may become ineffectual in addressing and arresting inter-generational factors that contribute to risk, poverty and vulnerability or that exacerbate the effects of

adverse weather events.

Interestingly, one component of social protection which has become relatively popular in the discourse on climate change and adaptation in Nigeria is the use of insurance programmes like crop insurance to both spread risks and reduce losses from noted climate events like flooding and drought. As attractive and commendable as this scheme appears, there is no gainsaying the fact that its albatross lies in the decades of mistrust of the general public with insurance and the promises of insurance; a distrust which is expectedly high among rural dwellers and farmers. However, even in the developed parts of the world the usage of insurance may ultimately encourage the desire amongst farmers to now invest in climate-sensitive crops and even indulge in farming on such sites as flood plains and even deltas susceptible to adverse weather events.

### *3.3 Issues and challenges to effective social protection in Nigeria*

Though social protection promises quite a lot, the extant literature cautions against seeing it as the be-all and do-all of adaptation even among agricultural households. Therefore, Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux (2010) for instance argue that conventional cash transfer programs may fail to compensate for the loss of incomes and assets that result from such things as price inflation, seasonal cycles and price spikes. One of the critical challenges of social protection is to evaluate its impact in the long run. Thus, while the benefits are undoubtedly immediately after adverse climate event or following the cycle of deprivation following a major climate event, the long term effect on agricultural practices and household lifestyles remain conjectural i.e. to what extent do the strategies make beneficiaries less susceptible to future vulnerability?

Generally, vulnerability should be understood as exposure to hazards or events that undermine the ability to adapt (Adger, 2006; Fussel, 2007; Smit; Wandel, 2006). But for farming or agricultural households such social protection measures as asset and cash transfers influence ability to manage vulnerability over-time. As cases in India and Bangladesh suggest (see, Coirolo et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2013) government can devise a number of specific or peculiar social protection programs that are instrumental in helping poor and vulnerable populations prepare for and recover from extreme climate events. Therefore, given the relative novelty of social protection in Nigeria the challenge would lie in mainly in empirically establishing social protection programs that are effective, acceptable and portend the capacity to enable vulnerable populations recover from or prepare for extreme climate events.

As evident in the extant literature, another dimension of social protection involves the use of regulation i.e. legislation of rights that guarantee minimum standards of employment and wellbeing especially in times of environmental and economic shocks (Chhotray; Hulme, 2008). The right based approach is often supported on the ground that they provide reliable and more crucially legally-enforceable range of entitlements that can guarantee the access of the poor and vulnerable to income and employment opportunities in spite of the environmental and economic shocks. While the argument for the rights-based approach seem unassailable, it is important to realize that the approach is largely a formal sector response i.e. it is largely tenable in the context of the formal sector.

However, given that the informal sector is a big chunk of the economy in the developing regions of the world, the extent of the effectiveness of this approach and its reliability in the face of wide ranging or widespread shocks remain dubious. More so, legally enforceable rights are realities measured or circumscribed by the extent to which rule of law governs relationship and transactions in the public domain. Therefore, in countries like Nigeria with a known history of abuse of the rule of law especially by the government and its agencies, the effectiveness of the rights-approach becomes really questionable (consider the fact that over 70% of the labour conflicts in the public sector of Nigeria are caused by the unwillingness of the government to honour agreements reached with organized labour including collective agreements emanating from collective bargaining) and far – too distant to the threshold of public believability to be a reliable option.

## **4. Conclusions**

There is no gainsaying the fact that climate change and its consequences pose serious threats to development policies and investments in a wide range of fields including health, agriculture and insurance (Boyd et al., 2009; Brooks et al., 2009; Klein et al., 2007). Therefore, incorporating or mainstreaming climate change issues into policies is now an urgent priority. In spite of the above, identifying specific modes and channels through which ‘climate-proofing’ of policies can be achieved is still poorly understood (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2008; Boyd et al., 2009; World Bank, 2010).

There is evidently no gainsaying the fact that the way and manner plans of action and adaptation strategies are framed in developing nations do not in real sense factor-in the concerns and interests of the vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. At best what obtains is the assumption of the right to know what is best for the vulnerable by the state and its agencies. This is quite true in the case of Nigeria as in many other developing nations. In terms of national policy frameworks and climate change response, there has been a prominent top-down approach in Nigeria which focus essentially on the ability of experts and special government agencies like the NIMET and the NEMA to articulate and enthrone responses assumed to reflect the needs of the vulnerable and the larger society (Anugwom, 2013).

This method has meant the neglect of the age-long tradition and knowledge systems of the people on climate change response that may have further enriched and guided science in framing out appropriate response and adaptation strategies. While climate change has become more widespread and intense in its impact, a lot of what is new nowadays is the growing awareness and sensitivity of humanity to the phenomenon. But this does not in any way take away the reality that rural people and farmers have for decades been experiencing negative climate variability and have over time evolved systems of response or strategies, no matter how crudely framed or unscientific that address this concern.

For social protection to work, the state and its agencies need to radically retune the way they have always done business by reaching out and incorporating target populations into the policy making process. To assume to know what is best or what works out best for a given group in the population is to adopt a short-term perspective that undermines both sustainability and ownership of adaptation strategies. Perhaps, more prominent in undermining the effectiveness of social protection in Nigeria is the noted weakness of public institutions in the country. Social protection can hardly work or achieve tangible results without reliable institutions or state agencies.

The experience of India, Mexico and Nicaragua strongly shows that the capacity to deliver targeted cash and conditional cash transfers programmes (by implication social protection) is highly dependent on the capabilities and resources that the implementing agencies have (Deshinghar et al., 2005; Todd et al., 2010; Maluccio, 2010). While there is no arguing the fact that Nigeria boasts a significant capacity for domestic resource mobilization for social protection programmes, the ability of extant agencies of the state to effectively anchor social protection programmes is incidentally unpromising. Therefore, for social protection to become a feasible alternative or effective response/adaptation strategy in Nigeria, there is need for a thorough-going radicalization of the agencies of the state and the integration of local people and vulnerable populations into the policy process and practice.

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*Kenechukwu N. Anugwom*: Study design, writing, reading, grammatical and scientific corrections, submission and publication. *Edlyne E. Anugwom*: writing and scientific corrections.

## **7. Conflicts of Interest**

No conflicts of interest.

## **8. Ethics Approval**

Not applicable.

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