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# **Lessons learned on social protection responses to Covid-19 in Botswana**

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### **Note on exchange rates**

The value of the Botswana Pula in relation to the US dollar depreciated in March/April 2020, from about USD 0.09 to about USD 0.08 (i.e., USD 1 bought about BWP 11 prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns, then about BWP 12.5). The Pula strengthened against the dollar in late 2020 and 2021 before depreciating in 2022. In October 2022, the Pula was worth USD 0.074 (i.e., USD 1 bought about BWP 13).

### **Note on language and nationality**

The country is Botswana. The language is Setswana. Although there are ethnic minorities and minority languages in Botswana, it is commonplace to refer to citizens as Batswana (plural) and a single citizen as a Motswana.

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# Lessons learned on social protection responses to Covid-19 in Botswana

## Abstract

*Governments across Southern Africa responded to Covid-19 in both similar and contrasting ways. Most governments rapidly imposed lockdowns, but the severity and duration of these varied. Many governments introduced emergency social protection measures, but these varied in terms of reach, generosity and form.*

*The government of Botswana's social protection response reflected its historic acknowledgement of responsibility for the mitigation of poverty – through feeding schemes rather than cash transfers – as well as its concern for the welfare of the urban middle and working classes.*

*Having imposed a lockdown, the Government introduced temporary but substantial wage subsidies, which might be considered a form of short-term unemployment insurance benefitting the minority of the population in formal employment in the private sector.*

*The Government distributed substantial food baskets to the poorer majority of the population. This wide and impressively prompt distribution of food parcels in Botswana contrasted starkly with the failure of the South African state to distribute food at the same time.*

*This achievement was offset, however, by the suspension of some existing feeding schemes. The volume of food distributed did not suffice to meet the additional need. Moreover, Botswana's workfare programme was also disrupted by the lockdowns.*

*Unlike in South Africa, the government of Botswana did not supplement its existing cash transfer programmes or introduce a new emergency cash transfer scheme (except, on a very small scale, for informal business owners).*

*This does not mean that there was no discussion of social protection policy reform during the pandemic. On the contrary, Botswana was awash with proposals for reform, some of which predated the pandemic, whilst others emerged in part in response to the emergency. Various suggestions emanated from international agencies interacting with one or other government ministry.*

*Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic affected neither the direction nor pace of social protection reform in Botswana. It seems that no prominent member of the Government championed the expansion of social protection, whilst neither opposition parties nor civil society exerted significant pressure for major reform. International agencies' lobbying for reform proved ineffective.*

*Underlying this is the enduring and widespread commitment within Botswana to the norms and values that underpin Botswana's existing, conservative system of social protection. These rest, above all, on the idea that assistance from the state should be linked, wherever possible, to the goal of people achieving self-reliance through productive work, and thereby being able to fulfil their responsibilities to wider society. These norms and values rendered the government of Botswana unable to respond more fully to the shock of the Covid-19 lockdown. Rather than expand its social protection system in novel ways, the Government preferred to ease the lockdown in order to return quickly to 'normality'.*

*The case of Botswana shows that even social protection systems designed to respond to some shocks may not be able to respond to other shocks. A drought-responsive system may not exhibit the flexibility required to respond to a pandemic-related lockdown.*

## **1 Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic had direct and indirect effects across much of Africa. Directly, it led to raised morbidity, mortality and strains on public health care, especially in North and Southern Africa. Indirectly, it caused economic hardship, through both national lockdowns and the contraction of global trade.

In Botswana, the direct effects of the pandemic were delayed. Whereas neighbouring South Africa experienced major waves – with high death rates – in mid-2020, and again at the very beginning of 2021, Botswana experienced its first and modest wave in early 2021 before a severe wave in July and August 2021. Despite the high death rate in July/August 2021, Botswana's official death rate remained below South Africa's. The indirect effects of Covid-19 in Botswana were, however, immediately severe. The combination of a severe national lockdown with the dent to the global economy and commodity prices meant that the economy of Botswana suffered a sharp contraction – of 8.5% between 2019 and 2020. The severe lockdown restricted farmers from accessing their fields and livestock. Botswana were even prohibited from shopping for food without a permit.

In response to its lockdown and economic contraction, the government of Botswana moved quickly to introduce wage subsidies for formally-employed workers, using funds reallocated from other budgets. A total of BWP 833 million was paid out between April and June 2020, with a much smaller sum paid out

over the following six months to companies in the tourism sector. The total expenditure amounted to approximately 0.5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In contrast, the government's social protection measures aimed at poor and vulnerable individuals and households were very modest. In contrast with neighbouring South Africa, Botswana did not supplement existing social grants, i.e., it did not expand 'vertically' its social protection system. Nor did the government introduce any new emergency social grant programmes, i.e., it did not expand its system 'horizontally' – as South Africa, Namibia and some other African countries did. The government of Botswana did oversee an extensive once-off emergency feeding programme, but – as in South Africa – the benefits of this were offset at least partly by the suspension of school feeding schemes and workfare programmes. Overall, net additional expenditure on social protection in 2020 probably amounted to only 0.1% of the GDP. South Africa, in contrast, spent an additional 1% of the GDP on social protection in 2020 (and the same again on wage subsidies and expanded unemployment benefits).

There are many reasons why Botswana's reluctance to expand social protection was surprising:

- The country's social protection system evolved out of disaster relief during droughts. It also retained some flexibility, expanding in response to shocks. It might therefore have been expected that the social protection system would expand in response to shocks other than droughts.
- The country had a well-established system for delivering social protection – both in cash and in kind – to a large number of citizens through a variety of programmes. It might have been expected that there were few technical or administrative obstacles to expanding social protection either vertically or horizontally.
- The governing party's and hence official national ideology have long emphasized compassion and a concern for the poorest members of society.
- Even prior to Covid-19 there were strong calls for the expansion of social protection in Botswana, as elsewhere across the global South. A draft National Social Protection Framework (NSPF) had been under discussion since 2017.
- Whilst the governing party had won every election since before Independence in 1966, its hold on power remained tenuous, providing a strong electoral incentive to please the voters. In elections just prior to Covid-19, the governing party had been re-elected in large part on the basis of increased support among urban voters, who were especially vulnerable to the indirect economic effects of Covid-19.
- The likely economic impact of the pandemic was evident within weeks. As early as 24 April 2020, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development

(MFED) predicted a 13% contraction in GDP and a 22% decline in government revenues.<sup>1</sup>

- A number of reform options were on the agenda. In early May 2020, pushed by United Nations (UN) agencies and others, the government appointed consultants to draft a National Social Protection Recovery Plan (NSPRP), together with plans for its implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The consultants' report was published in early July, presumably after some discussion in government. The NSPRP proposed the permanent introduction of a general child grant and employment guarantee scheme, a new Temporary Social Support Grant and various other reforms (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020). In August, the government finally approved the 2018 NSPF (Republic of Botswana, 2018) and requested that an implementation plan be developed (Fidzani, 2022). In November 2020, President Masisi appeared to endorse these proposals in his State of the Nation Address.
- Finally, Botswana's neighbours provided a variety of options for social protection reforms in response to Covid-19, including not only the broad and expensive package in South Africa but also once-off cash distribution in Namibia and emergency programmes targeting the urban poor in Zambia.

This working paper examines the reforms that were implemented in Botswana in response to Covid-19 in 2020-21 as well as the proposals that were not effected, and offers an explanation of this pattern of uneven response, drawing on comparisons with neighbouring countries in Southern Africa. Section 2 provides a review of pre-Covid social protection in Botswana. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the challenges posed, directly or indirectly, by Covid-19. Section 4 surveys the reforms that were effected in response to Covid-19 and assesses their impact. Section 5 provides a detailed analysis of short- and long-term reforms of Botswana's payment system for cash transfers in the context of the global trend towards payment digitalization. Section 6 provides insights into beneficiary perceptions of the government's social protection response to the pandemic, based on preliminary research conducted in 2022. Section 7 analyses the impact of Covid-19 on longer-term social protection reforms in Botswana, including the role of international organizations.

This paper is based on ongoing research on and in Botswana. Review of published and grey material and press reports were supplemented with interviews with officials in the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD)

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Botswana, Economic Briefing by Honorable Minister of Finance and Economic Development, 24 April 2020, cited in the terms of reference for the National Social Protection Recovery Plan (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020: 53).

and in districts and sub-districts, who implement policies, as well as with officials in several other ministries and key informants in the private sector. Preliminary research was also conducted among members of the public. We are especially grateful to the Permanent Secretary in the MLGRD for his assistance in facilitating our research.

One of the striking characteristics of the state in Botswana is the generally high level of dedication, insight and work ethic of officials. It is therefore puzzling that it is difficult to access consistent data on social protection programmes – and (as others have noted previously) there appears to be no aggregate recent data on the cost or beneficiary numbers for some programmes. Also, the quarterly surveys introduced by Statistics Botswana in 2019 have not fulfilled their original promise of reliable and regular data.

## **2 The pre-Covid-19 social protection system**

Botswana's social protection system has been reviewed in recent years in a series of studies. The World Bank conducted or commissioned reviews in 2013 (World Bank, 2013) and 2022 (Guyen et al., 2022). In addition, the 2020 National Social Protection Recovery Plan (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020) provides details of the existing provision of social protection (as well as proposals for reform, discussed below). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is funding an ongoing review (Fidzani, 2022). Some of the country's individual social protection programmes have been evaluated, including the Orphan Care Programme in 2016 (by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), *Ipelegeng* (BIDPA, 2012), and the Vulnerable Groups Feeding Programme (Mokoro Ltd., 2019). The World Bank's 2022 review by Guyen et al. provides considerable detail and recent data.

### **2.1 History, character and policy-making**

In the decades following independence in 1966, Botswana built a system of social protection that can be described as a 'conservative welfare state' (Seekings, 2017a). On the one hand, a high proportion of the population benefits from one of the feeding schemes, the elderly and orphans receive cash payments, there is a substantial public works programme and there is a modest programme of support for the ultra-poor ('destitutes'). Overall, more than one half of the population live in households that benefit from one of the programmes, and poverty and malnutrition rates have been reduced significantly. The reach and effects of social protection in Botswana are substantially larger than in most African countries. On the other hand, benefits are parsimonious or provided in kind, the means test for some of the cash transfer programmes is severe, and none of the programmes are statutory (i.e., based on legislation). Social protection for the poor is framed more as charity than as a right. Coverage or reach might be extensive for some



programmes, but total public expenditure is modest compared to other countries in the region.

The conservatism of Botswana's system is evident in comparison with its neighbour, South Africa. Social protection in these two countries exhibit some similarities, notably in their common emphasis on social assistance rather than social insurance, and their shared inclusion of 'residual' elements (in that some programmes are means-tested or otherwise target the poor). Both countries retain extensive workfare and feeding schemes alongside cash transfer programmes. In other respects, however, they differ. Even though GDP per capita in Botswana surpassed South Africa's in 1998-99, and coverage or reach of social protection is similarly extensive, benefits in Botswana have always been much lower than in South Africa. When the Old Age Pension (OAP) was introduced in Botswana in 1996, benefits were set at BWP 100 per month – compared to ZAR 410 in South Africa at the time (when the exchange rate was approximately parity). More than twenty-five years later, in the 2022 budget, Botswana's pension benefit was raised from BWP 530 to BWP 630 per month. South Africa's old age grant paid ZAR 1,985 per month – i.e., two and a half times more (given the exchange rate of BWP 1 = ZAR 1.3). Similarly, Botswana's *Ipelegeng* public works programme paid most of its participants BWP 567 per month, whilst the minimum wage on South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme was two and a half times higher in 2022. The government of Botswana has resisted calls for a Child Support Grant along the lines of the South African programme (Chinyoka, 2019). The result of this is that, whilst South Africa spent about 3.5% of its GDP on social assistance (including workfare) pre-Covid, Botswana spent less than 1% of its GDP (excluding substantial expenditure on stipends for university students).

The character of Botswana's social protection system reflects its origins in drought relief in an arid but largely agrarian society. Botswana's independence in 1966 coincided with the worst multi-year drought to affect the territory in living memory. The British colonial officials who had governed the Bechuanaland Protectorate had been largely paralysed in the face of the drought, but the new democratically-elected government of independent Botswana quickly established close ties to the recently-established World Food Programme (WFP), ensuring a massive operation of drought relief for the citizens and even their cattle. Drought relief entailed three major programmes: workfare for able-bodied adults, supplementary feeding schemes for children and other vulnerable groups, and additional support for destitute people who were unable to support themselves through work and were not being supported by their kin. The partnership between the government of Botswana and the WFP was to endure for almost thirty years. The WFP supported – through the Ministry of Local Government – not only emergency relief during droughts but also feeding schemes and workfare programmes that persisted during non-drought periods. When the WFP reduced

and eventually (in the 1990s) ended its support for Botswana, the government assumed more, and eventually full, responsibility for these programmes.

Over time the programmes evolved. Support for elderly destitutes led to the introduction of universal old-age pensions in 1996. As AIDS ravaged the country, the government expanded provision for orphaned children (Chinyoka, 2019). Provision for other destitutes was expanded in 2002. By the early 2000s, when diverse international organizations began to promote cash transfer programmes across Africa, Botswana already had a system of social assistance which provided benefits in kind and/or in cash to more than half of the population. Only one major reform ensued: In 2008, workfare schemes were consolidated and extended to urban areas through the *Ipelegeng* programme. Despite proposals from international organizations in the early 2010s, Botswana has not introduced a child grant along the lines of South Africa's Child Support Grant or Namibia's various child grants. The apparent assumption behind this is that children are provided for either through their families or through feeding schemes. Orphans are provided for because they lack parents who could assume responsibility.

Botswana's leaders developed a welfare ideology that justified the evolving system of social protection. The country's first president, Seretse Khama, articulated a doctrine that emphasized the reciprocal responsibilities of citizens and the state, with the state having taken over some of the responsibilities of chiefs prior to Independence. Society – through the state – had a responsibility to its poorest members. As Khama put it once, citing a Setswana proverb, 'a lean cow cannot climb out of the mud, but a good cattleman does not leave it to perish'. This was not an egalitarian ideology: Charity towards the poor was parsimonious. Nor was charity unconditional: Disadvantaged individuals had a responsibility to do what they could to help themselves and their dependents, through work (Seekings, 2016). This doctrine evolved under Khama's successors to include a growing concern with the threat of dependency on public provision. Dependency was viewed as bad in part because it was seen as negating reciprocity: The needy beneficiaries of public provision were not fulfilling their responsibilities to do as much as they could to contribute not only to their individual welfare but also to the community (Seekings, 2017b). This mix of reciprocal responsibility and concern over dependency was reflected in successive statements of 'national' or Tswana values (Republic of Botswana, 1997, 2016). This doctrine may have been shaped by the WFP in the decades of its participation in Botswana, but it was formulated (and reformulated) prior to the onset of major engagement with social protection among international organizations in the 2000s. Whereas South Africa's social protection programmes exhibit the enduring imprint of the norms and policies of Britain and its dominions, Australia and New Zealand, Botswana's social protection programmes reflect primarily indigenous African conditions and traditions (Seekings, 2020b).

The expansion of public provision was also in the political interests of the governing Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Whilst the BDP has won every election since before Independence, it has at times faced strong competition. Drought relief served to consolidate the BDP's support in rural areas. The introduction of old-age pensions in 1996 followed soon after the 1994 elections, when the BDP's share of the vote had dropped to a bare majority. The expansion of workfare under *Ipelegeng* in 2008 served to shore up support for a new BDP leader (and national president) in urban areas (Hamer, 2016). Despite facing multiple strong challenges in the 2019 elections, however, the BDP government did not choose to expand social protection further, presumably because it assesses that there are limits to the electoral value of expanding social protection. Indeed, self-styled liberal and social democratic opposition leaders seem to share the ruling party's conservatism with respect to social protection (Hallink, 2019).

## **2.2 Social protection programmes**

Botswana's current social protection system comprises a variety of cash and in-kind support programmes, as well as workfare, social services, and targeted interventions for specific social or demographic groups. This section provides an overview of the country's main social assistance programmes, including social cash transfers, feeding schemes and public works. Table 1 summarises provision, with data (wherever available) for the 2019/20 year, i.e., the year immediately prior to Covid-19.

Additional social protection programmes, aimed at improving access to education and employment opportunities, include tertiary sponsorships and scholarships, youth employment and job creation programs, and community-based early childhood development schemes. These are described in more detail by Guven et al. (2022). The Government also funds various support schemes for the agricultural sector and for people living in rural areas, including the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP), see BIDPA (2003), the Agriculture Credit Guaranteed Scheme (National Development Bank, 2022a), the Livestock Management and Infrastructure Development Programme (LIMID), see Republic of Botswana (2019), and the Integrated Support Programme for Arable Agriculture Development (ISPAAD), see National Development Bank (2022c).

*Table 1: Overview of social cash transfer programmes in Botswana.*

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Launch</b>	<b>Targeting</b>	<b>Beneficiaries<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Benefit value</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Old Age Pension	1996	Universal, age 65 years and older	126,424	P530/month cash (increased to P630 in 2022)	BWP 736 million in 2019/20
Orphans and Vulnerable Children Grant	1999/2009	Categorical, age 18 and under, orphaned or in need of care	20,146 in 2021/22	P600-P700 food basket, other in-kind benefits	BWP 246 million in 2019/20
Disability Allowance	2015	Categorical, age 18 and older, medical declaration of disability	7,805	P450/month cash (increased to P550 in 2022)	BWP 35 million in 2019
War Veteran's Pension	1998	Categorical, age 65 and older, fought in WWII, and surviving dependents	1,270	P600/month cash (increased to P700 in 2022)	BWP 10 million in 2019/20
Destitute Persons' Allowance	1980/2002	Means-tested	38,973	P500-650 in-kind, P300/month cash, additional services	BWP 332 million in 2019/20
Vulnerable Group Feeding	1988	Categorical, vulnerable children, women, sick and destitute; no means test	307,225	Take-home food rations	BWP 714 million in 2017/18
School feeding programme (primary)	1997	Categorical, primary school pupils in government schools	390,294 in 2018/19	Cooked meal daily	
School feeding programme (secondary)	1997	Categorical, secondary school pupils in government schools	183,896 in 2015/16	Two cooked meals daily (+1 if boarding)	BWP 308.5 million in 2017/18
Community Home Based Care	1995	Categorical, means-tested with same criteria as Destitute Persons' Allowance	1,252	P500 food basket/ P1,200 oral tube feeding, additional services	BWP 15 million in 2018/19
<i>Ipelegeng</i> (workfare)	1978/2008	Age 18 years and older, able-bodied, 'lottery system', limited to 1 month	70,000/ month	P567/month (casual labourers)/ P651/month (supervisors) cash	BWP 635 million in 2019

The government distinguishes between social protection programmes that support the ‘living standards of those who are unable to support themselves, for reasons of age or infirmity’ and developmental programmes, including *Ipelegeng*, ISPAAD and LIMID, amongst others, which are being restructured to achieve greater effectiveness and reduced dependency on the government.<sup>3</sup> The flagship developmental programme is the Poverty Eradication Programme, which assists poor people to establish small enterprises.

## 2.2.1 Social cash transfer programmes

There are five main social cash transfer programmes in Botswana, all of which aim to support specific groups identified as particularly vulnerable. These are the Old Age Pension (OAP), a grant for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), a Disability Allowance (DA), and the Destitute Person’s Allowance (DPA). There is also a special pension for war veterans (WVP) and their dependents, but this now has few beneficiaries. Some of these programmes offer a combination of cash and in-kind benefits (OVC grant and DPA), while others disburse benefits exclusively in cash (OAP, DA and WVP).

The OAP is a universal, non-means tested monthly cash transfer available to all Botswana citizens aged 65 years and older. The programme is administered by the MLGRD. Eligible pensioners are required to register either with the Pension Officers at the District Commissioners Office or with their local Post Office, in order to access the grant. Payments are made in cash through the nationwide network of Post Offices or directly into beneficiaries’ personal bank accounts. In rural and remote areas pensions and other social grants are also paid in cash at the local *kgotla* (i.e., village assembly) (Morgan & Radibe, 2015). In 2019/20, i.e., prior to the onset of the pandemic, 126,424 beneficiaries were receiving the OAP, translating into 5.5% of the population (Guvén et al., 2022). In the same year, out of BWP 8.8 billion allocated for social protection, BWP 4.7 billion was set to be spent on Botswana’s various social assistance programmes. Of this, 7% was allocated to the OAP (UNICEF, 2019).

Provision for orphans and vulnerable children in Botswana started with the 1999-2001 Short-Term Plan of Action (STPA) on Care of Orphans, following which a draft National Policy on Orphans and Vulnerable Children was finalised in 2009 (White & Devereux, 2011). Subsequent proposals by various international organizations and academics to introduce a broader Child Support Grant programme, similar to neighbouring South Africa’s programme, have not been

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<sup>2</sup> Beneficiary numbers for 2019/20, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the 2022 Budget Speech by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development.

successful. Support for vulnerable children is thus limited to the categorically-targeted OVC benefit which is available to children under the age of 18 who have lost both parents or the single responsible parent, live in an abusive environment or a poor family with limited access to basic services, are the head of their household, live with parents who are ill or outside family care, or are HIV-positive (Republic of Botswana and UNICEF, 2016). There is no added means test to access the OVC benefit, which consists of a monthly food basket valued BWP 600-700 and is paid via the ‘Smartswitch’ smart card, as well as a school uniform and other educational and in-kind benefits (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). The number of beneficiaries of the OVC benefit has been declining for several years, dropping from over 50,000 beneficiaries in 2005 to about 24,000 in 2019/20. The programme received only 8% of the MLGRD’s budget for social assistance in 2019/20. This may be associated with the effectiveness of the anti-retroviral treatment programme and other related interventions which have reduced the number of orphans in Botswana. However, the sole focus on orphaned children excludes the 77% of children who are multidimensionally poor and live in households without access to financial support from the government (UNICEF, 2019).

In 2015 the government introduced a new disability allowance. Beneficiaries must be citizens of Botswana and affected by a ‘severe and profound disability confirmed by a medical doctor’. In the 2019/20 financial year, BWP 34.9 million was spent on Disability Allowance payments to 7,805 beneficiaries (0.3% of the total population). The programme only reaches a fraction of the approximately 91,000 individuals with disabilities in Botswana (United Nations, 2020).

The War Veteran Pension was introduced in 1998 with the objective of providing pensions to veterans of World Wars I and II, as well as to their surviving spouses, and their children up to the age of 21. The value of the monthly benefit was BWP 600 in 2019 (Statistics Botswana, 2021b) and is set to be increased by an additional BWP 100 in 2022/23 (Serame, 2022). The number of beneficiaries has been in constant decline due to the decreasing number of surviving veterans, standing at just 1,270 in 2019/20.

The Destitute Persons Allowance (DPA) has its origins prior to Independence, as a system of discretionary support for the destitute, i.e., poor people whose families were unable to support them. The policy was formalized in 1980 as the National Policy on Destitute Persons of 1980 and was revised in 2002. It provides minimum assistance to individuals who lack assets, income and the capacity to work, either permanently or temporarily. As per the 2002 National Policy on Destitute Persons (Republic of Botswana, 2002), a destitute person is defined as ‘an individual who, due to disabilities or chronic health condition, is unable to engage in sustainable economic activities and has insufficient assets and income sources’. Individuals can apply for the allowance themselves by completing a registration form and submitting it to the Department of Social Services and

Community Development, or their closest Botswana Post Office branch. Alternatively, an application may also be submitted on behalf of someone else. Applicants are also required to submit proof of nationality in the form of a certified copy of their *Omang* card, passport or birth certificate (Republic of Botswana, 2022a). The programme is means tested. Support is not provided to anyone who owns more than four livestock units or has an income above P300 per month.<sup>4</sup> Applicants are assessed by a social worker who conducts a visit to the applicant's home and approves them on either a temporary or permanent basis.

Beneficiaries – and, where applicable, their dependents – receive food rations that are designed to supply not less than 1,750 calories per adult per day, based on World Health Organization standards. In addition, they are exempt from paying for certain publicly provided services such as medical fees, school fees, water charges, service levy and electricity. Needy children of school-going age living in destitute households also receive a school uniform, toiletries, other personal clothing, and (in some cases) access to free school transport. The value of these in-kind benefits amounts to approximately BWP 500-650 per month. Shelter is provided in cases where beneficiaries are found to be homeless, and funeral expenses for destitute persons are covered as well. In addition, beneficiaries receive a cash benefit of up to BWP 300 per month (Statistics Botswana, 2021b).

The programme is implemented by MLGRD's Department of Social Protection in partnership with the private sector and local authorities. The food component can be collected at local grocery stores using a digital voucher that is loaded onto a biometric 'Smartswitch' card. This card is also used for a number of other social assistance programmes in Botswana and replaced the previous paper-based voucher system (Fidzani, 2022). In 2019/20 the programme had almost 39,000 beneficiaries and a total budget of BWP 331 million (mostly spent on in-kind support) (Fidzani, 2022). Overall, the Destitute Persons programme received more than 13% of the MLGRD budget in 2019/20 (UNICEF, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> The 2002 policy specifies an income threshold of BWP 150/month, but this was overridden by a ministerial directive. It is widely believed among officials that even this new threshold remains too low.

## 2.2.2 Feeding schemes

Botswana has operated a set of feeding schemes since Independence. These now comprise:

- the Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme (VGFP),
- nationwide school feeding schemes for primary and secondary schools, and
- the Community Home Based Care (CHBC) programme.

The VGFP distributes meals and nutritional supplements to malnourished individuals. The program is implemented by the MLGRD, the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the Ministry of Basic Education, through health care clinics. It provides monthly home rations to vulnerable children aged 6-60 months, to pregnant and lactating women, and to tuberculosis and leprosy patients from poor households. The ration consists of *tsabana* (a mixture of white sorghum and soya beans), *malutu* (maize meal), beans and sunflower oil, and can be collected by beneficiaries from local clinics (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). There is no means test to access support under the VGFP. The programme had 307,225 individual beneficiaries in 2019/20 (Fidzani, 2022). A UNICEF-supported assessment in 2019 estimated that only 14% of the VGFP rations reach the intended beneficiaries. The assessment further highlighted inefficiencies resulting in poor targeting and inappropriate procurement and distribution, short shelf life of certain products, and sharing of food rations across the family, i.e., food not reaching the intended beneficiaries (UNICEF, 2020).

Botswana has an extensive school feeding programme which is managed by the MLGRD and provides meals for pupils in government and government-aided schools across the country. Pupils receive a mid-morning meal equivalent to 1/3 of a child's daily nutrition needs, consisting of ingredients such as samp, beans, sorghum meal, beef, stew, vegetables, fruits, tea, and other agricultural produce (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). Children in Remote Area Districts (RADs) receive a second daily meal, and boarders and secondary schools are eligible for a third meal (Cirillo & Tebaldi, 2016). The meals are prepared on-site by dedicated cooking staff, with cooking gas and other supplies provided by the government. In 2018, 3,296 cooks, 500 food handlers and packers, and 30 monitoring staff were employed under the programme. Pupils usually receive their meals in the school hall or an outside space, as most schools do not have a dedicated eating space or cafeteria (GCNF, 2020). According to the latest available government data from 2012/13, the primary school feeding programme had 268,761 beneficiaries, while a more recent review (Fidzani, 2022) puts the number at 390,294 in 2018/19. This would represent near universal coverage of government primary school pupils. In 2018, programme expenditure stood at USD 30.1 million (GCNF, 2020). The secondary school feeding scheme had 183,896 beneficiaries in 2015/16, with expenditure totalling BWP 308.5 million (USD 30.2 million), or 0.16% of GDP in 2017/18 (Guyen et al., 2022).



The Community Home Based Care programme is implemented by the Government in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and, in some cases, the private sector. It was established in 1995 and provides material, psychological, counselling, and spiritual care to terminally ill individuals who are cared for by their families in their own homes. The CHBC was developed in response to the increasing number of terminally ill patients at the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when hospitals were increasingly unable to accommodate patients. It was later expanded to individuals with other chronic diseases, such as cancer or severe diabetes.

Beneficiaries are usually identified by medical practitioners and referred through a community worker or social worker for assessment, and approved by the District or Town Council (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). Eligibility is based on the same criteria used for the Destitute Persons Allowance (as laid out in the Revised National Destitute Policy of 2002 (Republic of Botswana, 2002)) and includes Botswana citizens who are unable to engage in sustainable economic activities due to disabilities or chronic ill-health conditions and have insufficient assets and income sources. The same income threshold as used for the Destitute Persons Allowance is applied. Beneficiaries receive a food basket valued between BWP 500 and BWP 1,200 depending on the needs of a patient. Benefit delivery is done via the Smartswitch card, which can be used to purchase food items at local grocery stores. Both the annual budgetary allocation and the number of beneficiaries were relatively stable in the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The budget amounted to approximately BWP 15 million per year, providing support for close to 1,300 beneficiaries annually (Fidzani, 2022).

### **2.2.3 Workfare**

Workfare plays an important role in Botswana's social protection system. Workfare for drought relief was formalised in 1978 under the Labour Intensive Public Works Programme, and was reformed as the poverty-reduction *Ipelegeng* programme in 2008 (Seekings, 2017a). Today the programme is administered by the MLGRD and implemented at a local level by district and urban councils (Nthomang, 2018).

Rather than offering permanent employment, *Ipelegeng* offers beneficiaries part-time work opportunities for a maximum of one calendar month at a time. Participants who have completed their 1-month cycle may re-apply for the programme. Beneficiaries are selected by the Village or Ward Development Committees, most of which keep a register of applicants and allocate places by rotation. Projects undertaken by beneficiaries include environmental cleanliness; construction and maintenance of public facilities, roads and drift fences; cleaning of streets; cutting of grass; and community policing. The programme also supports other initiatives such as the Crime Prevention Volunteers and Special Constables

(under the Botswana Police Service), wildlife and waste management volunteers, and custodians of monuments. These special programmes generally have a longer duration and beneficiaries are employed for a period of 3-24 months (Fidzani, 2022).

The monthly wage amounts to BWP 567 for casual labourers and BWP 651 for supervisors, for a six-hour working day. From 2012/13 beneficiaries also received a free daily meal valued at BWP 8, sourced from small local businesses with the aim of generating additional employment and economic activity at local level (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). Nthomang (2018) notes that the wage rate offered by *Ipelegeng* is higher than the prevailing market rate for low-skilled workers in agriculture, for example. This has made the programme attractive, including to the non-poor, which has led to targeting and inclusion errors, and increased the number of applicants for the limited number of placements. At the same time, Mogomotsi, Mogomotsi and Badimo (2018) pointed out that the wages are still too low to help beneficiaries escape poverty, especially given the short-term nature of the programme. A 2012 programme evaluation by UNICEF found that beneficiaries rarely acquire practical and professional skills during their participation in the programme, and that the programme failed to promote sustained economic development or help beneficiaries escape the cycle of poverty and ad hoc employment.

The number of beneficiaries is limited to the quotas allocated to each district and, within them, each village. The quotas have been increased slowly, but not in the most recent period. In 2019/20, the countrywide quota was close to 70,000 per month. Quarterly Multi-Topic Survey (QMTS) data suggest that 15% of households in Botswana benefitted from *Ipelegeng* in 2019. The majority of them were located either in urban villages or rural areas, with only 10% in urban areas (Statistics Botswana, 2021b). Further, the United Nations Botswana (2020) Common Country Review found that *Ipelegeng* accounted for one in every ten employed persons in Botswana (as of Quarter 1 of 2020). A total of BWP 635 million was budgeted for the *Ipelegeng* programme in 2019/20 (Matambo, 2019). The bulk of the budget (91%) is reportedly spent on beneficiary wages, while the remainder is used to buy equipment and cover administrative costs (Nthomang, 2018).

*Ipelegeng* participants are widely perceived to do very little actual work. Supervision is poor in some cases, depending on the capacity of the local authorities. The government of Botswana has slowly moved to reform (or ‘re-engineer’) *Ipelegeng* to make it more developmental (see sections 4 and 7 below).

## 2.3 The distribution of coverage and benefits

The administrative records of the MLGRD tell us how many people benefitted from each of the government's programmes, but not who these people were or how significant the benefits were, e.g., in terms of reducing poverty. To probe further we must make use of survey data. The most recent available survey data on the distribution of coverage and benefits in Botswana come from Statistics Botswana's 2015 Multi-Topic Household Survey (BMTHS, accessible through the World Bank's Atlas of Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE) dataset) and its first Quarterly Multi-Topic Survey (QMTS) conducted in the third quarter of 2019, i.e., shortly before Covid-19.

Some analysis of the data collected in the 2019 QMTS has been published by Statistics Botswana. Data were collected through a dedicated module on safety nets. Respondents, in more than 3,200 households, were asked whether anyone in the household benefitted from any of thirteen government programmes in the preceding twelve months. More detailed questions were asked about benefits under the OVC programme. Statistics Botswana found that about 57% of households benefitted from one or other programme. Slightly more than half of the beneficiary households were female-headed. Some programmes clearly targeted rural areas. These included the RADP and the Poverty Eradication Programme (PEP), and also *Ipelegeng* and the Destitute Persons Programme.

Coverage rates in cities and towns, urban villages and rural areas are shown in Table 2 (calculated using data from Statistics Botswana (2021a)). Feeding schemes had the broadest coverage, in that the proportion of households that benefitted was larger for feeding schemes than for the other programmes. More than 40% of households benefitted from school feeding and almost 24% from the VGFP over the preceding twelve months. About one in six households benefitted from the OAP and the same proportion benefitted from *Ipelegeng*, over the preceding twelve months. All other programmes had very limited reach. All of the listed programmes had broader reach in rural areas than in urban villages, and least reach in cities and towns. *Ipelegeng*, for example, reached 26% of rural households but only 6% of households in cities and towns. Overall, Statistics Botswana report that 58% of the country's households benefitted from one of Botswana's social assistance programmes over the preceding twelve months. In rural areas the proportion was 68%, in villages 59% and in cities and towns 40%.

*Table 2: Proportion of households benefitting from programmes over the past 12 months, by type of area, 2019.*

	<b>Cities and towns %</b>	<b>Urban villages %</b>	<b>Rural %</b>	<b>Total %</b>
<i>Ipelegeng</i>	6.4	10.7	26.0	14.9
Destitute Persons Programme	0.9	3.4	7.6	4.2
School feeding	30.1	43.8	45.9	41.5
VGF	12.9	23.6	30.8	23.7
NSP	0.6	3.8	6.4	3.9
CHBP	0.1	0.8	1.1	0.8
RADP	0.0	0.2	2.9	1.1
LM&ID	0.2	0.6	1.3	0.7
PEP	0.2	0.5	3.2	1.3
Disability Package Allowance	1.1	1.4	2.0	1.5
WW2 Veterans Allowance	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
OAP	5.8	14.3	24.6	15.9
OCP	0.9	1.8	3.0	2.0

Unfortunately, we have not been able to access the complete microdata. We cannot assess how access to programmes in 2019 varied by income quintile. The QMTS may have asked about benefits, but we cannot assess the adequacy of these.<sup>5</sup> The Statistics Botswana briefing also reports on programmatic coverage in 2019 compared to 2015, and the overall picture seems to be of little change over these four years.

The 2015 data have been analysed more fully by the World Bank with a number of indicators reported in the Bank’s ASPIRE database. ASPIRE reports coverage and benefits by category of programme, corresponding to the major programmes (but, as ASPIRE emphasizes, excluding minor programmes).<sup>6</sup> The 2015 data clearly confirm, nonetheless, that social assistance – defined to include feeding schemes as well as public works programmes (including *Ipelegeng*) and pensions

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<sup>5</sup> BMTHS asked about benefits (over past 12 months) from each of 11 programmes in cash or in kind (in section 7, Q71-74) and income from each of 6 programmes (Q61-62); respondents were asked the value of the benefits as well as whether they had received any. QMTS asked respondents whether anyone in their households had received benefits from each of 13 named programmes over the past 3 months; it is unclear whether respondents were asked the value of the benefits – but no such data are reported in the briefing published by Statistics Botswana.

<sup>6</sup> The mapping of programmes onto categories is listed in the ASPIRE spreadsheet ‘EXP Program Inventory’. It lists Botswana’s Destitute Provision Programme under ‘unconditional cash transfer’ but does not report on this in the actual ASPIRE dataset.

– reaches widely, especially among poorer households and in rural areas. Overall, 52% of households benefitted from at least one social assistance programme; 61% of rural households and 47% of urban households benefitted. Of the major programmes, public works programmes (including *Ipelegeng*) mostly targeted poor households. School feeding and OAPs benefitted higher proportions of poor than of non-poor households, but were much less precisely targeted than public works programmes were (see Table 3).

ASPIRE also allows a comparison of the 2015 data with data from the preceding national household survey, conducted in 2009-10. (Data from earlier surveys, in 1993-94 and 2002-03, do not appear to be available and have not been used in ASPIRE). Between 2009 and 2015 there appears to have been a significant contraction of social assistance.

Even without any analysis of the micro-data from these successive surveys, it is evident that the social protection system in Botswana provides a very limited safety net. Excepting the school and vulnerable group feedings schemes, at most one in three households benefitted from any cash transfer programme. As we saw above, the benefits from either *Ipelegeng* workfare or the OAP were parsimonious.

*Table 3: Proportion of households benefitting from programmes over the past 12 months, by income quintile and urban/rural location, 2015 (in %).*

	Pre-transfer income quintile					Urban/rural		Total %
	Q1 %	Q2 %	Q3 %	Q4 %	Q5 %	Urban %	Rural %	
Contributory pensions	3	2	3	5	6	4	3	4
All social assistance	70	69	59	40	24	47	61	52
Public works ( <i>Ipelegeng</i> )	20	20	13	6	1	9	18	12
Social pensions	29	30	22	11	4	16	28	20
School feeding	32	41	35	24	15	27	35	30
In kind (VGFP)	14	21	14	5	2	9	18	12

## 2.4 Social protection reform processes prior to Covid-19

Across most of Africa, processes of reform have almost always been shaped, and have often been initiated and driven, by international organizations. Botswana is unusual in Africa in that successive governments – all formed by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) – have maintained a proud independence from international organizations. The initial design of its social protection system might

have been influenced by the WFP, which provided extensive support for three decades following independence in 1966, although it is hard to discern how much the WFP influenced the government of Botswana rather than vice-versa (Seekings, 2021). Following the withdrawal of the WFP in the 1990s, however, the government of Botswana not only funded its social protection programmes fully out of its national revenues, but also was self-confident in its own ideological approach.

This has posed considerable challenges to international organizations which, in the 2000s or 2010s, embraced social protection and sought to promote their preferred models or approaches in Botswana, as they did elsewhere. The efforts of international organizations have often run aground on the rocks of ambivalence within the government of Botswana, including at times the MLGRD which is responsible for most of the social protection programmes. The international organizations have generally proceeded cautiously in their advocacy work, holding back from the kinds of strong advocacy they have deployed in other countries. Even when the government appears to have embraced a reform recommended by international organizations, it often turns out that the reform has been appropriated and transformed for purposes not intended or foreseen. Moreover, government officials have been alert to even modest differences between the recommendations of different international organizations, weakening the organizations' collective influence.

The World Bank was the most active of the international organizations in Botswana in the decade prior to Covid-19, despite having only a minimal office in Gaborone. Its engagement with social protection intensified significantly in Botswana – as across the rest of Africa – in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis of 2008-09. The World Bank assessed that existing safety net or social protection programmes in Africa were too ad hoc, and was determined to encourage governments to integrate safety nets into their regular strategies to reduce poverty (and manage risk). The Bank published a series of studies promoting social protection in Africa, including studies by Garcia and Moore (2012) and Monchuk (2014). Monchuk's study drew on the Bank's assessments of social protection in more than 25 African countries, including Botswana.

Monchuk (2014) identified Botswana as the only African country studied to have an established and comprehensive national safety net system, funded entirely from domestic revenues. But – with the exception of old-age pensions and school feeding schemes – coverage remained low, omitting most poor people. The World Bank assessed also that Botswana was only moderately crisis-ready, presumably meaning in response to crises such as the global economic crisis of 2008-09, rather than the crises of drought that had regularly affected Botswana.

In late 2013, the Bank published a new assessment of social protection in Botswana conducted by the Bank's own researchers in partnership with the

Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (BIDPA). The report described Botswana's system of social protection as 'mature and complex' but with 'a number of features that are suboptimal': Social assistance was too limited (leaving large gaps in coverage), too fragmented, too focused on benefits in kind, too generous, and too poorly targeted. Fortunately, 'these weaknesses, however, could be corrected over the next few years and by 2016 Botswana could emerge with a modern, effective and efficient social protection system, capable of eliminating absolute poverty'. The report recommended specific reforms including especially the introduction (by 2016) of a 'new family-based last resort anti-poverty program, tentatively called the Family Support Grant (FSG)' that would reach between 24% and 36% of the population (World Bank, 2013).

The government of Botswana proceeded to request, in 2014, that the World Bank support the modernization of the country's social protection system. The following year, however, the government of Botswana suspended the project, ostensibly whilst waiting for the adoption of the country's 11<sup>th</sup> National Development Plan (NDP11). Even after the NDP11 was approved, in late 2016, the project did not resume. Despite this, Bank staff conducted multiple missions to Botswana between 2016 and 2019, providing technical support funded by the World Bank. Technical support focused first on drafting a National Social Protection Framework (NSPF), constructing a Single Social Registry, improved means-testing at the household level (through a Proxy Means Test (PMT)) and developing a Social Intermediation Strategy (SIS) to make better use of social workers in helping households to rise out of (i.e., graduate from) poverty. This was later supplemented with assistance in designing and costing a 'scalable last resort cash transfer program' (as proposed in the Bank's 2013 study), reforms to the *Ipelegeng* workfare program ('to enhance its focus on disaster risk reduction and a scalable disaster response'), other administrative reforms, reforms to social protection for young children and the 'development of a graduation strategy' (World Bank, 2013).

The NSPF was drafted by World Bank staff in 2016-18 in consultation with (in Botswana) an inter-ministerial Social Protection Technical Steering Committee. The apparently final draft, completed in January 2018, incorporated three key messages in the World Bank's work that were consistent with the government of Botswana's preferences (World Bank for the Republic of Botswana, 2018). First, and despite substantial government expenditure and clear commitments to social protection (including in NDP11 and Vision 2036), 'outcomes are not commensurate with the amount of spending'. Poverty – and vulnerability to poverty – remained widespread. Secondly, programmes needed to be more precisely targeted. Thirdly, the NSPF emphasised 'helping beneficiary households to reach self-sufficiency and to no longer need assistance', i.e., the objective of graduating beneficiaries out of poverty.

The apparently final draft of the NSPF also incorporated several of the specific reforms that the Bank had been promoting or supporting. It strongly emphasized the importance of a Social Registry, with standardized (or ‘harmonised’) application processes and assessment forms (including improved means-testing, perhaps using the PMT that had already been piloted in three areas). This draft NSPF also proposed a shift from individual to household targeting and the consolidation of programmes from a focus on individuals to a focus on households. It further envisaged the expansion of contributory safety nets (i.e., social insurance).

The draft NSPF also recognized the importance of social work in the government of Botswana’s approach to, or model of, social protection. The draft discussed at length the importance of graduation through a ‘goal directed approach to social work, through provision of Social Intermediation Services’:

Social intermediation services (SIS) are a methodology that seeks to reach the poorest segments of the population to facilitate their access to programmes and services adequate to improve their living conditions. An SIS provides information, orientation and psychosocial support. It is a methodology that is based on results, as the intervention is tailored to a set of goals defined for each household.

Social intermediation services support the poor to overcome information and other barriers, via a holistic, systemic and household-based approach. The core of social intermediation services is case management to help families set goals and facilitate, advocate for, and monitor their access to services. ... SIS programmes systematize and structure case management around a set of predefined goals and minimum standards and a household plan developed in collaboration with and agreed to by the household. The approach focuses on goals and relies on action as the change strategy. In addition, the approach provides a time limited provision of psychosocial support – intensively initially and on a declining basis over time. The SIS approach will rely on a set of structured tools, including inter alia standardized application forms, individual/household development/treatment plans, and guidelines for assessments, and home visits. (World Bank for the Republic of Botswana, 2018)

This discussion focused on the possibility of enhancing the efficacy of social work.

The draft NSPF also reflected some of the concerns that were shared by other international agencies. It presented a lifecycle model of risks, and envisaged a shift from food to cash. It also expressed strong concern about the persistence of



stunting among children. Social protection should be ‘nutrition-sensitive’: ‘There is considerable potential to improve the design and targeting of existing programmes so that they can better contribute to improvements in health and development, a potential that is not yet fully realized’. The draft did not, however, propose the introduction of new social grant programmes or the expansion of existing social grant programmes.

The draft NSPF clearly accepted the direction of and limits to the reforms that the government of Botswana was prepared to consider. This was evident also in the incorporation of some sentiments that were widespread within the government of Botswana, but which raised eyebrows among many of the international agencies. The draft expressed concern over ‘double-dipping’ as well as ‘dependency’. The Framework declared that:

At the core of the SIS approach is the principle of mutual obligation. This implies a shift from defining benefits in terms of entitlements towards a definition of benefits as temporary or conditional assistance for those capable of work. Common to all approaches is the principle that the state commits to provide employment services and/or skills training services and, in return, the beneficiaries commit to job search and/or other employment activities. An important input into development of the individual/household plan is a profile of each potential worker to determine the skills and/or barriers to work. This will include an assessment of their potential capacity for entrepreneurship. At the same time, the GoB [Government of Botswana] will assess labour market programmes to determine which have been effective in reducing dependence on welfare and which need upgrading and/or reformulation. (World Bank for the Republic of Botswana, 2018: 12-13)

The objective of graduating households out of poverty would be achieved through enforcing beneficiaries’ obligations. Beneficiaries would leave programmes not only if or when their incomes rose above the means-test threshold but also if they failed to fulfil their own commitments:

Consistent with the principle of mutual obligation, beneficiaries will be required to work towards fulfilment of the goals identified in their household contract. The criteria for graduation will be fulfilment of the household contract. With respect to work, beneficiaries who fail to make efforts towards goal achievement could be subject to possible suspension of benefits. (World Bank for the Republic of Botswana, 2018)

There would be ‘a renewed emphasis on self-reliance’ whilst ‘households with youth or adults who can work, will be required to participate in *Ipelegeng*’.

The draft Framework envisaged that reforms would proceed through two five-year stages, with a review at the end of the first stage. A National Social Protection Steering Committee, chaired by the Permanent Secretary in MLGRD, would oversee reforms. In practice, the government of Botswana appears to have done little between early 2017 and 2019 apart from (slowly) piloting some of the proposed reforms. By the end of 2019 it had become clear to the World Bank that they had reached a crossroads: To keep moving forward – and to realise the potential of their existing technical assistance (especially with the piloting of the Single Social Registry, improved management of *Ipelegeng* and the introduction of a PMT) – the Bank would need to engage more deeply.

Other UN agencies appeared to be less forceful in pressing for the kinds of social protection reforms that they advocated strongly elsewhere. UNICEF employed a social protection officer in its Botswana office and published briefs on the social protection budget of the government of Botswana. But UNICEF seems to have held back from any strong advocacy of the idea that a larger budget should be allocated to social cash transfer programmes for poor children. UNICEF’s briefs, for example, gently pointed out that the overall trend in expenditure on social protection was flat in real terms (i.e., taking inflation into account). The 2017 brief cautiously suggested three takeaways:

Investments in social protection programmes should be protected at all times and budget cuts should not threaten Botswana’s progress on income security for children and their families. To protect beneficiaries from the loss of purchasing power caused by inflation, the Government may consider indexation of social benefits. Increased public allocations for enhancing social protection floors could be considered as an integral part of comprehensive social protection systems. (UNICEF, 2017: 7)

The brief reported further that ‘most deprived children live in households that are not covered by social protection programmes. ... Cash transfers in various forms are among the most effective ways of providing social protection to individuals and households, to prevent them from falling into a poverty trap.’ The poverty trap was ‘worrisome and indicates a high probability of inter-generational transmission of poverty’. UNICEF expressed the hope that the NSPF would ‘play an essential role in identifying and addressing the current exclusion and inclusion errors, as well as to provide a more comprehensive safety net to vulnerable children and their families.’ (UNICEF, 2017: 4)

UNICEF did endorse many of the recommendations from the World Bank, including improved information management and a Single Registry to facilitate improved targeting. But UNICEF was unusually deferential, even holding back from supporting the Bank’s earlier suggestion that some kind of a child-oriented social grant should be introduced.

At the end of 2018 UNICEF commissioned an evaluation of the VGFP. UNICEF appears to have shared the World Bank's concern that the significant expenditure on this programme resulted in less of an improvement in child nutrition than was expected. The report was completed in August 2019. One of the striking findings from the report was that there were no reliable data on expenditure on the programme. But, UNICEF found, 'only 14 per cent of the Vulnerable Groups Feeding Programme (VGFP) rations reaches the Intended beneficiaries' (Mokoro Ltd., 2019). This was a searing indictment of the programme. UNICEF concluded that there were strong arguments for replacing the food rations with cash transfer interventions. UNICEF appears to have generally held back from any strong advocacy for a child grant along the lines of the Child Support Grant in neighbouring South Africa or the grants that they had promoted strongly elsewhere (including, notably, in Kenya and Lesotho – see Davis et al. (2016)).

The other international programme that worked on social protection in Botswana was the UNDP. As part of a global campaign, the UNDP convened a major conference at the Gaborone International Convention Centre in March 2018 on the theme 'Leave No One Behind: The fight against poverty, exclusion and inequality'. The conference in Gaborone was opened by Botswana's President (Ian Khama), who told participants that the conference theme dovetailed with his government's 'standing commitment to ensure that all our citizens can enjoy dignified livelihoods free of poverty' – exemplified by the Poverty Eradication Programme that he himself had initiated.

Following elections in late 2019, a new Minister of Local Government and Rural Development was appointed. The new minister had a long background in the ministry and was widely seen as an unusually strong champion of reform. But there was little to show for this before the onset of Covid-19 – and lockdowns – in early 2020. There appeared to be significant support within the Government for some reforms, including the Social Registry, improved means-testing and strengthened social casework. *Ipelegeng* was probably the dominant concern within Government. But the predominant motivation within Government was to use these technological and administrative reforms to eliminate 'double-dipping' and chronic 'dependency', with the goal of limiting rather than expanding the reach of social protection.

In summary, reforms of social protection were under discussion prior to Covid-19. The draft NSPF set out a number of reforms on which the Government and World Bank appeared to concur. The various international agencies – including the World Bank, UNICEF and the UNDP – all appear to have stepped back from their earlier and usual advocacy of bolder reforms (such as some kind of child support grant). The reforms on the table focused on improving the existing system rather than expanding social grants.

### 3 The challenges posed by Covid-19 and the lockdowns

Covid-19 posed two challenges to Botswana. During 2020, a severe lockdown followed by international isolation meant that there were few cases, very few deaths and little pressure on the public health system. But the lockdown and international economic environment meant that the economy contracted very sharply, resulting in increases in unemployment and poverty, although these increases were smaller than might have been expected. In 2021, the medical challenge of Covid-19 intensified, with Botswana suffering from a significant wave in the early part of the year and a very serious wave mid-year. The economy, however, rebounded rapidly from the recession of the previous year.

The government of Botswana, following the lead of its neighbour South Africa, declared a national lockdown in anticipation of, rather than in response to, a major wave of Covid-19 cases. In the course of March, South Africa reported its first cases of Covid-19, then declared a national state of disaster (including restrictions on bars and restaurants and the closure of schools and universities) and then a full countrywide lockdown with effect from midnight on 26 March, before anyone had died. In Botswana, President Masisi closed his country's schools after classes ended on Friday 20 March, long before the country recorded its first confirmed case of Covid-19.<sup>7</sup> On 31 March, Masisi announced that a countrywide lockdown would come into effect from midnight on 2 April. He undertook to provide financial assistance to business and their employees, but did not provide any undertakings with respect to social protection.<sup>8</sup>

The lockdown in Botswana was even more severe than in South Africa. In South Africa, people were permitted to go to shops to buy necessities. In Botswana, this was prohibited. People were not allowed to leave their homes without a permit issued by the District Commissioner. This posed huge problems for anyone with a farm, as well as for urban consumers.

The severe lockdown seemed to pre-empt a major wave of Covid-19 cases and deaths, in contrast to South Africa. Whilst South Africa had reported a total of 138,000 cases (and more than 7,000 deaths) by 28 June, Botswana reported less than 100 cases (and only 2 deaths).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-botswana-idUKKBN21I2XS>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.parliament.gov.bw/index.php/covid-19-updates/393-president-masisi-declares-state-of-public-emergency-regarding-outbreak-of-coe-vid-19>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/botswana?country=BWA~ZAF>. [2023, October 17].

South Africa began to ease its restrictions on 1 May. Botswana, which was yet to experience any wave, soon followed suit in lifting restrictions. The lockdown was lifted in part on 8 May. Botswana was one of the first countries to begin to reopen schools. In-person classes resumed for senior students at the end of May, with other students returning to class over the following weeks. Even though the numbers of cases and deaths remained very low in comparison to South Africa – even in proportion to their populations – the government of Botswana did again close schools in Gaborone for two weeks from 30 July.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1 below shows that Botswana escaped South Africa’s first wave in mid-2020 and experienced South Africa’s second wave – Botswana’s first – only after a delay in early 2021. During 2020, most cases in Botswana originated in South Africa. In early 2021, local transmission became dominant. Local transmission in Botswana exploded in a very severe wave in mid-2021. This was much more severe than South Africa’s concurrent third wave. In early 2022, both Botswana and South Africa experienced a further and more modest wave.

Despite not experiencing any major wave, Botswana’s State of Public Emergency was extended for a second six months at the end of September. At the end of March 2021, amidst the country’s first wave, the State of Public Emergency was extended for a third period of six months.<sup>11</sup> In mid-2021, amidst a severe wave, restrictions were reimposed on public gatherings, travel, sale of alcohol, etc. Schools were closed on 16 July. It was reported that sixty-four teachers had died. Schools were initially supposed to reopen on 17 August, but the President announced a delay of three weeks due to high rates of illness and death.<sup>12</sup> Botswana’s neighbours Namibia and Zambia also closed their schools during this wave, although South African schools had reopened.<sup>13</sup> Some restrictions on movement and a nighttime curfew remained in force.

Whilst the health effects of Covid-19 were modest in 2020, the economic effects of the lockdown were massive. Prior to the pandemic, Botswana’s economy had been expected to grow by about 4% in real terms in 2020. Covid-19 (and ensuing

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<sup>10</sup> See Brookings Institute briefing. Also: <https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic-botswana-schools-reopen-amid-concerns-over-preparedness/6190578.html>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/29/c\\_139406630.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/29/c_139406630.htm); [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-04/02/c\\_139854019.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-04/02/c_139854019.htm). [2023, October 17].

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/14/c\\_1310059914.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/14/c_1310059914.htm); <https://allafrica.com/stories/202107150190.html>; <https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/botswana-president-masisi-delays-reopening-of-schools-as-covid-19-infections-rise-95916d4e-9cd3-5675-bcc4-5d98a6cb70c7>. [2023, October 17].

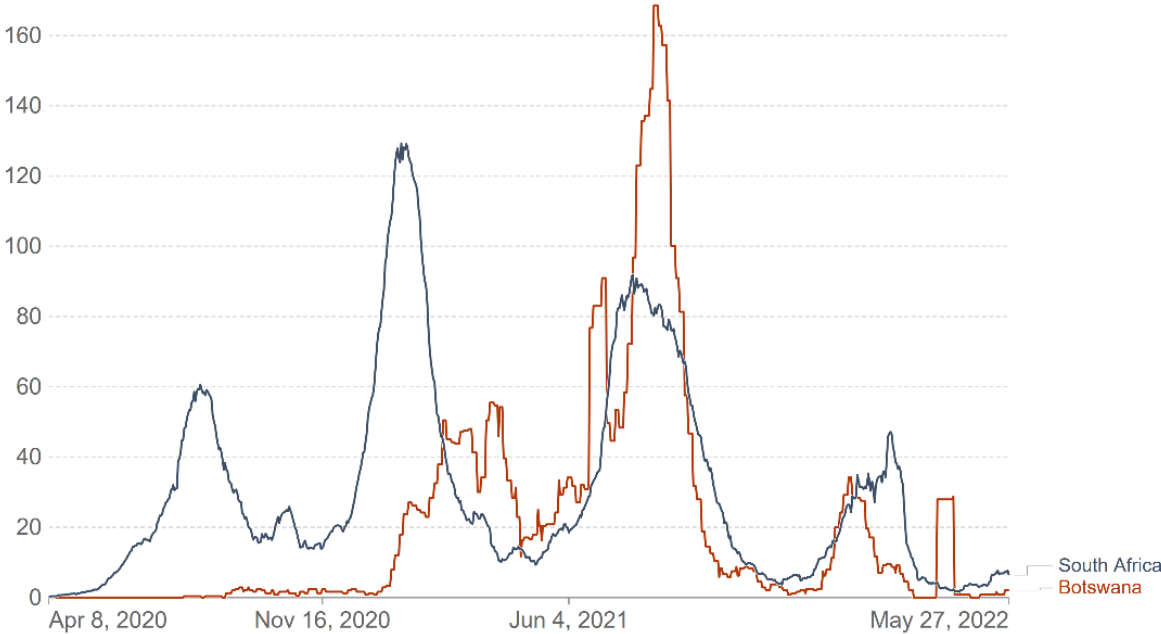
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/covid-19-restrictions-are-keeping-32-million-children-out-of-school-in-east-southern-africa-20210727>. [2023, October 17].

lockdowns) prompted the International Monetary Fund to predict that Botswana’s economy would instead contract by as much as 10% in 2020 – more even than South Africa’s – and would not recover its 2018 level of GDP per capita (in real terms) until 2023. The IMF’s predictions proved to be a little exaggerated: The economy shrank by only 8% in real terms between 2019 and 2020 before rebounding fully in 2021, fuelled by the mining sector (World Bank, 2022). Economic contraction in 2020 nonetheless entailed serious hardship for many households. The recovery in 2021 did not benefit everyone.

### Biweekly confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people



Biweekly confirmed deaths refer to the cumulative number of confirmed deaths over the previous two weeks. Due to varying protocols and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death, the number of confirmed deaths may not accurately represent the true number of deaths caused by COVID-19.



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

**Figure 1: Confirmed Covid-19 deaths per million people in Botswana.**

The impact of recession is reflected in data from the QMTS conducted by Statistics Botswana. The QMTSs were initiated in 2019 to provide more regular data than had been available hitherto through intermittent household surveys, the last of which had been conducted in 2015. The first QMTS, in 2019 Quarter(Q)3, included a full set of modules. Thereafter, it seems, the plan was to include some modules – including a labour force module – in every QMTS, whilst other modules would be included by rotation. A second and third QMTS were fielded in 2019 Q4 and 2020 Q1 but the 2020 lockdown prevented another survey until 2020 Q4, with the fifth survey fielded only in 2021 Q4.

The QMTS data suggest that the unemployment rate had been rising steadily prior to Covid-19, to 23.2% in the first quarter of 2020 (using the strict or narrow definition, limited to people who are actively seeking work) or 27.5% (using the broad or expanded definition of unemployment, which includes ‘discouraged work seekers’ who want but are not looking for work). These unemployment rates would have been higher still if participants on the government’s *Ipelegeng* workfare programme were not counted as employed. These workers accounted for almost 10% of all employed workers in the 2020 Q1 survey (Statistics Botswana, 2020, 2021a).

The first QMTS fielded after the 2020 lockdown showed that the pre-Covid trend of rising unemployment had continued in 2020, unsurprisingly. The narrowly-defined unemployment rate rose to 24.5% by the end of 2020 and to 26% by the end of 2021, whilst the expanded unemployment rate rose to 30.3% and 31.1% (Statistics Botswana, 2021a, 2022). The World Bank modelled that poverty headcount rates rose in 2020 before dropping in 2021 (World Bank, 2022).

These estimates obviously depended on the government’s social protection response. The Bank had previously used data from 2015 to estimate the effects of the government’s programmes on poverty reduction, prior to Covid-19. It estimated that social assistance (including workfare and feeding schemes), which cost 2.7% of GDP, reduced the poverty headcount rate (using the standard international poverty line) from 22.6% to 16% and the poverty gap from 7.9% to 4.6% (World Bank, 2021).<sup>14</sup>

## **4 Social protection policy responses to Covid-19**

When President Masisi announced the imminent lockdown at the end of March, he also announced measures to mitigate the effects of lockdown – but these did not include any social protection measures. As in most countries, the first measures to be announced included the establishment of a Covid-19 Relief Fund and financial support for businesses and employees (including through wage subsidies).

As elsewhere, it seems that social protection measures were considered only after the lockdown had been imposed. The government’s subsequent social protection reforms were shaped by both the character of the lockdown and the country’s existing social protection system. The imposition of a total lockdown – under which farmers were not allowed to attend to their fields (or livestock) and households were not allowed to go to local shops – meant that there was an

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<sup>14</sup> It is not clear what the Bank took into account in its estimations of the poverty rate in 2020-21.



immediate crisis of access to food. The country's long history of food relief and system of social workers meant that the obvious response was to distribute food baskets to households that were assessed as being in need of them. Assessments and then the delivery of food relief were effected reasonably quickly. The severity of the lockdown meant, however, that the pre-Covid school and clinic-based feeding programmes, as well as the *Ipelegeng* workfare programme, were partially or fully suspended. There is no evidence that the government considered supplementing the country's existing (and modest) cash transfer programmes (as was done in South Africa) or the introduction of a new programme or once-off disbursement of cash (as happened in South Africa, Namibia and numerous other countries on the continent).

Much later, in September, an Economic Recovery and Transformation Plan (ERTP) was approved (formally as an addendum to the Mid-Term Review of the Eleventh National Development Plan). The ERTP envisaged that an estimated BWP 14.5 billion would be invested over two to three years to promote structural economic reforms. Businesses were also offered soft loans under a BWP 1.3 billion Industry Support Fund. These were not accompanied by any further significant social protection initiatives.

#### **4.1 Financing: the Covid-19 Relief Fund**

The President's establishment of a Covid-19 Relief Fund was in line with what South Africa and other countries did at the same time (Devereux, 2021). The government contributed BWP 2 billion (USD 180 million, about 1.1% of GDP), which was re-purposed from various other government funds. The private sector, development partners, philanthropists, and individuals were encouraged to make additional contributions, both financially and in kind. Despite multiple mechanisms for making donations (through mobile service providers as well as banks) and pressure on government employees to donate a part of their salary, private donations proved modest, amounting to only a fraction of the government's contribution. By the end of August, BWP 127 million had been received or pledged through the banks, and BWP 113,515 through mobile service providers, whilst the value of in-kind donations stood at BWP 63 million (Auditor General, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

Two-thirds of the Fund (BWP 1.5 billion) had been disbursed by September 2020.<sup>15</sup> Of this, BWP 268 million had been spent on medical supplies, Covid-19 testing, personal protective equipment and temporary Covid-19 staff. More than half (over BWP 800 million) had been allocated to the wage subsidy scheme

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<sup>15</sup> <https://news.thevoicebw.com/govt-spends-p1-5-billion-from-covid-19-relief-fund/> [2023, October 17].



between April and June. Food relief had been allocated BWP 350 million. Small sums were spent on other activities, including the repatriation of citizens and students who had been studying abroad.<sup>16</sup> The Auditor-General later reported that much of this expenditure had not followed standard procedures and could not be verified. The MFED admitted that it had been ‘a little difficult’ to obtain regular progress reports from other ministries and that its requests for reports had often been ‘silently ignored’. The audit also found that procurement had not complied with requirements. Personal protective equipment and other medical supplies had not been purchased at market rates (Auditor General, 2021).

Back in April 2020, the government had envisaged various other expenditures through the Fund, including on the loan guarantee scheme for businesses affected by Covid-19, building up the country’s strategic grain reserves, supplying water to residents in drought-affected areas, and financing Covid-19 related burials. The original guidelines also made provision for medium-term interventions, mostly in the form of support for the agricultural sector (Republic of Botswana, 2020b). It appears that these envisaged expenditures were not yet, or not fully, effected.

## **4.2 Food distribution**

Given Botswana’s long history of feeding programmes, it is not surprising that it relied heavily on food baskets to mitigate the impact of the lockdown. As social workers had been playing a role in implementing policy on targeted benefits, the task of assessing households’ need for food baskets was entrusted to the social workers, and was administered by the district councils. Botswana’s considerable experience ensured that the food basket programme was implemented smoothly (albeit imperfectly).

The total lockdown took effect from midnight on 2 April 2020. Like South Africa, Botswana adopted a highly militarized response. No one was permitted to leave their homes without authorization from the local District Commissioner. Soldiers and police manned roadblocks. A National Emergency Operations Centre was established, located in the Ministry of Defence, Justice and Security, and coordinated by a major-general.

It is not clear precisely when the government decided to distribute food baskets, but it appears to have been in the second week of the lockdown. When the MFED published procedures for the wage subsidies and other interventions, on or about 9 April, food relief was not covered. Soon after, however, the MLGRD distributed guidelines for the contents of food baskets and instructed district councils on the procedure and criteria for assessing households’ needs. Unemployed social work

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<sup>16</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202008280368.html> [2023, October 17].

graduates would be contracted temporarily to assist with home visits for household assessments. The assessment criteria, based on the 2002 National Policy on Destitute Persons, entailed the completion of a standard questionnaire (recording the number of people in the household, their education and employment status, and so on)<sup>17</sup> – although the scope of the food relief operation would clearly extend far beyond eligible destitutes. On or about 14 April – i.e., two weeks into the lockdown – the government appointed a retired bureaucrat as national ‘Co-ordinator of Social Protection Packages for Covid-19 Pandemic’.<sup>18</sup>

By then, the district councils had already begun to organize this massive food relief operation. The Councils mobilized large numbers of council employees to assist their Social Welfare officers in the procurement and distribution of food supplies whilst the permanent and temporary social workers assessed households. In one (small) district, assessments began on or about 13 April (and were reported the following day). They accelerated somewhat over the following three weeks before tailing off after 5 May (see Figure 2). In this district, social workers recommended that food baskets be provided for two out of three assessed households.<sup>19</sup> Nationally, just over 300,000 households had been assessed and 244,000 had been recommended for assistance by 30 April (Masisi, 2020a).

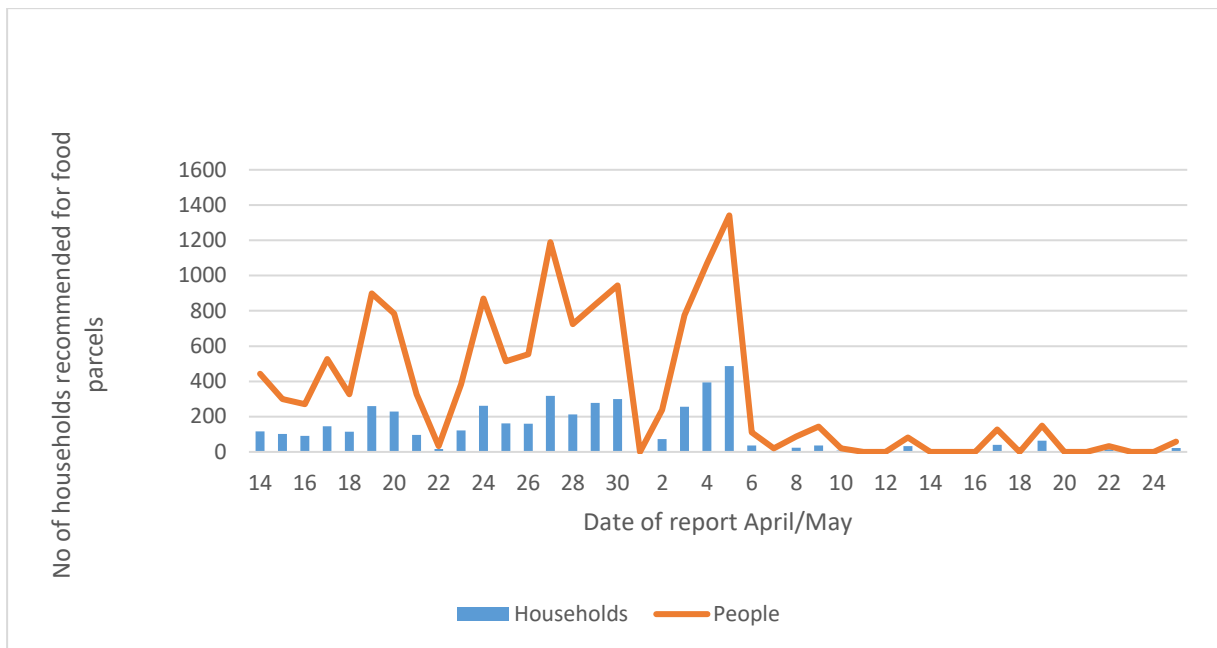
The actual distribution of food baskets depended on the procurement of the required supplies and the establishment of distribution mechanisms. District Councils established separate teams to organise each operation. Procurement was not straightforward. Existing procurement procedures for regular programmes, or even occasional drought relief, were clearly unworkable given the urgency of relief. Moreover, the guidelines for food baskets circulated by the MLGRD listed an unusually long set of contents, including not only staples (maize and sorghum meal, bread flour and rice, beans and cooking oil), but also milk, sugar, tea, some meat and vegetables, tomato sauce and even mayonnaise, as well as non-food necessities such as toothpaste, sanitary pads and soap. The volumes of each depended on the size of the household (as recorded in the assessment process). In practice, most district councils adapted the national guidelines in light of local constraints.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202004150519.html>; <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/food-baskets-in-lieu-of-income-lost-in-lockdown/news>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sundaystandard.info/gabriel-seeletso-returns-to-the-govt-enclave/>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>19</sup> Data provided by Chobe District Council.



*Figure 2: Household assessments for food parcels in Chobe District, April/May 2020.*

In place of the usual but slow procurement procedures, revolving around competitive tendering, officials worked with the local wholesalers and supermarkets, as well as local shops in individual villages. On occasion, officials had to organise truckloads of supplies from Gaborone. Distribution was generally effected through local businessmen with their own transport, but district council drivers and other officials also assisted. Council officials recall that they worked very long hours and weeks during this crisis period.<sup>20</sup> As part of the government’s efforts to support local farmers during the pandemic, the Ministry of Agricultural Development and Food Security assisted with the procurement of fresh produce, meat and eggs from local producers.<sup>21</sup>

The actual distribution of food baskets lagged behind assessments. By the end of April, fewer than one in six of the households across Botswana as a whole that had been assessed as needing food baskets had actually received them: Just over 47,000 out of 300,000 households (Masisi, 2020a). The proportion was higher (at about one-third) in the one district for which we have detailed data. The press

<sup>20</sup> This paragraph is based on interviews with district council officials across Botswana in August and September 2022.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/business/govt-taps-local-farmers-for-food-baskets/news> [2023, October 17].

reported that distribution in some areas was delayed due to shortages of and/ or insufficient quality of food.<sup>22</sup>

The food relief scheme was initially set to run for three months (from April to June 2020), although it was not specified whether food would be distributed on a monthly basis or as a once-off intervention. In late April, President Masisi assured citizens that his government would ‘scale up the distribution process of food packages and this assistance will continue until the situation regarding the containment of Covid-19 is fully under control’ (Masisi, 2020a). Following the gradual relaxation of lockdown rules in early May, however, the government backtracked. The relief programme co-ordinator first stated that the second round of food distribution would entail smaller food baskets and more restricted eligibility.<sup>23</sup> Later, the envisaged second round was dropped altogether, amidst uncertainty and concern over both the reach and cost of the first round. The programme was formally terminated in July.<sup>24</sup> The first and only round of food basket distribution appears to have been completed in May. In the one district for which we have detailed data, almost all households that were recommended as needing a basket had received their basket by 20 May.

According to one official report, a total of 537,466 households had been assessed and 429,255 households had received assistance by July.<sup>25</sup> But other official reports apparently indicated different numbers. Auditors raised concerns over both the reach and the cost. An initial amount of BWP 115 million was allocated to the food relief programme for the month of April (together with BWP 26 million for the recruitment of temporary social workers).<sup>26</sup> The initial funding was later supplemented with a further BWP 200 million,<sup>27</sup> bringing the total budget to

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/rotten-covid-19-relief-food-supplies-spark-anger/news> [2023, October 17]; <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/news-details.php?nid=56166>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/news-details.php?nid=56516>

<sup>24</sup> In September 2020, it was reported that food supplies intended for the second round of food distribution in Francistown had started to rot and had to be disposed of. While this appears to have been an isolated incident, there are no reports or other forms of evidence in the public domain that indicate that the promised second round of food distribution ever took place. <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/francistown-mayor-admits-fcc-misled-nation/news> [2023, October 17]

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.bocra.org.bw/sites/default/files/covid19-docs/NEOC%20BULLETIN%20ISSUE%2076.pdf> [2023, October 17].

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.thepatriot.co.bw/business/item/8125-economy-hard-hit.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.bocra.org.bw/sites/default/files/covid19-docs/NEOC%20BULLETIN%20ISSUE%2076.pdf>

approximately BWP 350 million.<sup>28</sup> Gentilini et al. (2022) later reported that the government had disbursed BWP 431 million in food hampers by March 2021 – i.e., more than the BWP 350 million figure released by the government – but it is unclear where and how this information was obtained. It is also unclear what this figure for total expenditure covered. Some (and probably most) districts overspent their initial budget allocations. It is not clear whether they were subsequently bailed out, in full or in part. A cost of about BWP 1,000 per food basket sounds broadly correct.

The distribution of food by the government of Botswana was far from perfect. Most households appear to have been assessed, but only a small proportion received their food baskets during the first month of lockdown, i.e., by early May. Civil society organizations distributed some food during this period. This was probably crucial to some particularly vulnerable households, but the total volume appears to have been small relative to the need or the subsequent state-run programme. There were also inevitable allegations that the assessment of need was coloured by political interference and favouritism.<sup>29</sup> Also, it was unclear whether households of foreign nationals qualified for assistance;<sup>30</sup> in practice, few seem to have received baskets.

Despite these weaknesses, the speed and reach of food distribution by the state in Botswana was impressive, especially in comparison to neighbouring South Africa. Assessments were completed in early May and food baskets were eventually distributed to a large majority of the country's population, mostly (it seems) in early and mid-May.<sup>31</sup> In South Africa, the government distributed between two and three times as many food parcels as in Botswana – but the South African population is twenty-six times bigger. Relative to the population, ten times as many food baskets were distributed in Botswana than in South Africa. Moreover, the majority of food baskets distributed in South Africa were funded and delivered by civil society (Seekings, 2020c).

Botswana also compared favourably to South Africa in terms of the disruption of pre-existing feeding schemes. In Botswana, both school- and clinic-based feeding schemes (primarily for school-age and pre-school children respectively) were disrupted because schools were closed and clinics were inaccessible under the lockdown. More than 366,000 schoolchildren temporarily lost access to the daily

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<sup>28</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202008280368.html> [2023, October 17].

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/many-go-hungry-despite-covid-19-food-basket-programme/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/mogoditshane-council-requests-food-parcels-for-foreigners/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>31</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006220470.html> [2023, October 17].

meals provided under Botswana's school feeding programme due to the national school closures in April and May 2020 (UNICEF, 2020).<sup>32</sup> Schools in Botswana, however, were closed for a much shorter time than schools in South Africa. Whilst we have been unable to access precise data on the disruption of school and clinic-based feeding schemes in Botswana during the lockdown, we estimate that the volume of meals that were not provided under lockdowns amounted to, at most, one half of the food parcels that were provided. By comparison, in South Africa the total volume of meals not provided through the school feeding programme in the first three months of the lockdown was double the total volume of food distributed by state and civil society. The difference between Botswana and South Africa widened as the South African government delayed reopening its school and preschool feeding programmes – eventually doing so only when civil society organizations successfully challenged the government in court.

In Botswana, feeding schemes were resumed sooner, but the numbers of beneficiaries over the year never recovered fully. The number of beneficiaries of the VGFP dropped from 307,225 in 2019/20 to only 276,067 in 2020/21. In 2021/22 the number of beneficiaries increased marginally to 287,555 but still remained below pre-Covid levels (Fidzani, 2022).

### **4.3 Wage subsidies**

Wage subsidies of one kind or another were implemented quickly and widely across Africa, including in Botswana.<sup>33</sup> Eligible employers could claim 50% of the wage of each eligible employee, with a minimum subsidy of BWP 1,000 per month and a maximum of BWP 2,500 per month. Businesses applying for the subsidy had to be tax-registered, produce a wage bill for the period starting in December 2019, and make a commitment not to retrench employees as a result of the pandemic. Qualifying businesses had to apply on behalf of their employees and submit a separate application for each month of the scheme. The application forms were made available on the Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS) website and could be submitted via the e-services portal. The subsidy was available for employees who were citizens of Botswana, had a valid *Omang* ID card, and were working in one of the economic sectors identified as being particularly affected by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. In practice, businesses in all sectors were eligible for the scheme, except for the following:

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<sup>32</sup> Supplies of food in schools were repurposed for food baskets.

<sup>33</sup> Similar wage subsidy schemes for formal sector workers were implemented in Benin, Cape Verde, eSwatini, Gabon, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa (International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, 2021).



- Suppliers of water and electricity,
- Post and communications,
- Food (both wholesale and retail),
- Banks, insurance, pension funds, stock exchange, fund management and medical aid,
- Parastatal companies, government, businesses with direct government shareholding, NGOs receiving government funding, and
- Health and pharmaceutical services (BURS, 2020).

As in most other African countries that implemented wage subsidies, informal workers were excluded from the scheme. The subsidy was initially set to run for a period of three months (April – June 2020) but was later extended for businesses and employees working in the tourism sector. By the end of April 2020, a total of 12,440 companies had applied for the wage subsidy, 12,413 of which had been approved. This amounted to payments totalling BWP 233.7 million, covering 165,681 employees in the month of April (Republic of Botswana, 2020d).

Overall, BWP 833 million was paid out during the first phase of the programme, i.e., from April to June 2020.<sup>34</sup> Under the extension (announced at the end of September) for the tourism sector, which was devastated by the collapse of international travel, subsidies were paid from July to December 2020. A total of about BWP 130 million was paid to almost 1,000 tourism companies during the 6-month extension period. This brings the total amount paid out under the wage subsidy programme from April to December 2020 to somewhere between BWP 933 million and BWP 976 million, paid to 20,701 companies.<sup>35</sup> The scheme was funded through the Covid-19 Relief Fund and administered by Botswana’s tax administration (the Botswana Unified Revenue Service, BURS).

The subsidy programme was similar to South Africa’s Covid-19 Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) and lead to similar issues with regard to pay-outs. By June 2020 over 100 complaints about non-payment of employees by their employers, as well as employees applying for the subsidy through multiple companies, had been received.<sup>36</sup> The MFED eventually published a list

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.sundaystandard.info/covid-wage-subsidy-was-costly-political-mess/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/burs-goes-after-covid-19-crooks/news> [2023, October 17].; the figures in this report are a little different to those in the report in the preceding footnote.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/ghost-employees-enjoy-wage-subsidy/news> [2023, October 17].

with the names of companies who had benefitted from the subsidy, as well as the respective amounts, on its website (MFED, 2020). However, this information was only published for the month of April 2020 and did not contain the names of the employees or their respective salary categories. In March 2021, the MFED announced that it had recovered BWP 20 million from companies who had accessed the subsidy fraudulently and that the companies in question had been handed over to the Botswana Police Service for investigations and possible criminal prosecution.<sup>37</sup> Although reconciliation of the subsidy payments was still ongoing at that point, about 856 companies had been found to have claimed for ‘ghost employees’ or failed to pass the funds on to their workers (BancABC Botswana, 2021). A more recent media report alleged that the extent of fraudulent claims could be much higher but that ‘the investigations [had] been quietly shelved because the government doesn’t have the resources (in personnel, time and money) to carry out the investigations’.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the Covid-19 Response Plan, which funded the immediate pandemic response, the government approved a budget of BWP 1.3 billion for the so-called Covid-19 Industry Support Facility (ISF) in September 2020 (National Development Bank, 2022b). The ISF was funded through the Covid-19 Relief Fund, and various amounts were allocated to sector-specific support schemes, mostly in the form of unsecured ‘soft loans’ to businesses affected by the lockdown. This included:

- BWP 100 million (USD 9.09 million) for the agricultural sector, administered by the National Development Bank (NDB),
- BWP 200 million (USD 18.2 million) for the tourism sector, administered by the NDB,
- BWP 300 million (USD 27.29 million) for medium- to large-scale businesses with an annual turnover of BWP 10-50 million, administered by the Botswana Development Corporation (BDC),
- BWP 300 million (USD 27.29 million) for small- to medium-scale businesses with an annual turnover of up to BWP 10 million, administered by the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA),
- BWP 300 million (USD 27.29 million) for general business, administered by the NDB, and
- BWP 100 million (USD 9.09 million) for informal businesses.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/burs-goes-after-covid-19-crooks/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.sundaystandard.info/covid-wage-subsidy-was-costly-political-mess/> [2023, October 17].



These considerable budgetary allocations for economic sectors cannot be considered as social protection, with the exception of the support for informal workers (see below).

Further relief programmes offered support for small numbers of people in specific sectors. The Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sport and Culture Development (MYESCD) supported professional athletes and sport administrators as well as visual and performing artists and their promoters or curators. Successful applicants received BWP 2,500 per month for April, May and June (Botswana FA, 2020).<sup>39</sup> Unlike the regular Covid-19 wage subsidy programme, payments were made directly into the personal bank or mobile money accounts of successful applicants.<sup>40</sup> Most payments were made in June although some athletes had reportedly still not received their payments in August.<sup>41</sup> An additional 15,000 artists who had filed to participate in the annual President's Day Competitions<sup>42</sup> were to receive a BWP 1,000 relief payment for the same period as a result of the July 2020 event being cancelled.<sup>43</sup>

The MYESCD also announced support specifically for youth-led businesses. It is not clear what criteria were used or which businesses benefitted (but it is possible that the emergency support was limited to businesses already being supported by the Youth Development Fund).<sup>44</sup> The plan was that about 8,500 youth-led businesses would receive a BWP 1,500 subsidy, apparently per month for April, May and June, at a total cost of just under BWP 40 million.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/call-applications-covid-19-creative-sector-relief-botswana> [2023, October 17].

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/sport/players-receive-covid-19-relief-payments/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/sport/players-receive-covid-19-relief-payments/news;https://www.mmegi.bw/lifestyle/no-relief-funds-payment-yet-for-artists/news>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>42</sup> The President's Day Competitions is an annual programme administered by the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sport and Culture Development together with different Arts Associations. The Competitions are in support of the Visual Arts (fashion, pottery, painting, graphic design, photography and sculpting) and Performing Arts (theatre, poetry, comedy, different traditional dances and contemporary music) (Republic of Botswana, 2022b).

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/lifestyle/covid-19-relief-package-for-artists-finally-gets-nod/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/586680571451150/posts/opening-remarks-delivered-to-the-north-west-districtfull-council-session/3157012641084584/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>45</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202005180852.html> [2023, October 17]; (Masisi, 2020b).

In his State of the Nation address in November 2020, President Masisi declared that a total of BWP 19.4 million had been paid by September to a total of just over 10,000 artists, athletes and youth. Just over 9,000 artists had received the lion's share of BWP 14.3 million. BWP 3.5 million had been paid out to 889 athletes. Only BWP 1.5 million had been paid out to 340 youth (Masisi, 2020b).

## 4.4 Informal Sector Stimulus Fund

The lockdown caused considerable financial hardship to households that had been dependent on informal sector livelihoods (such as street trading) that were prohibited under lockdown. While most of the funding for sectors hit by the lockdown and recession was reserved for formal sector enterprises, informal traders and Small Medium and Micro-sized Enterprises (SMME) owners could access support through a BWP 100 million Informal Sector Stimulus Fund (ISSF), administered by the Local Enterprise Authority (LEA). The ISSF provided for once-off cash payments of BWP 1,000 to informal businesses.

Businesses had to be owned by a Botswana national in possession of a valid *Omang* card, and had to have been in existence and operational before the lockdown. Formally employed individuals in government, parastatals and private sector enterprises, as well as part-time informal entrepreneurs were therefore not eligible to receive support under the ISSF (Local Enterprise Authority, 2020a). Applicants also had to register on the LEA's new national SMME database. Establishing a national register of SMMEs, including informal businesses, was an additional objective of the ISSF. Such a register would assist the government in designing appropriate support interventions in the future, and to draw informal businesses closer to mainstream economic activities.<sup>46</sup>

Registration could be done through by LEA offices<sup>47</sup> or online<sup>48</sup> or through an Unstructured Supplementary Service Data service using any local mobile network.<sup>49</sup> The LEA would then notify eligible applicants via SMS, following which applicants could submit their actual application at their local LEA office or via email (Local Enterprise Authority, 2020a). Applicants had to prove that they had been operational prior to the pandemic by submitting documents such as a

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/business/door-opens-for-covid-relief-to-informal-sector/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>47</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheGazettebw/photos/a.10152524117652620/10158366868217620/?type=3&rdr>

<sup>48</sup> <https://smeregistration.lea.co.bw> [2023, October 17].

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/business/door-opens-for-covid-relief-to-informal-sector/news> [2023, October 17].

hawker's licence, an affidavit, tribal authority letter, membership of a local informal business association, or Government department letters (Local Enterprise Authority, 2020b). In addition, applicants had to submit a certified copy of their *Omang* card as proof of citizenship.

One of the challenges encountered during the roll-out of the scheme was the fact that most informal business owners did not have a formal bank account into which the funds could be paid. The LEA thus resorted to offering several payment options, including payment into bank accounts for banked applicants, and funds transfer via e-wallet and the MyZaka mobile money service for unbanked individuals. Applicants could select their preferred payment option on the application form and would be paid within seven working days, according to the LEA's implementation guidelines. In cases where eligible businesses were owned by several co-owners, only one payment to the representative of the business who completed the registration on behalf of the business was made (Local Enterprise Authority, 2020a). The vast majority of payments were made via First National Bank (FNB)'s e-wallet service.

The programme was launched in May 2020. Without good data on the extent of the informal sector, the Ministry of Finance estimated that there were between 150,000 and 200,000 informal businesses. The Ministry of Finance budgeted BWP 100 million, i.e., enough for 100,000 businesses. By June, the LEA had received 30,929 applications, of which 97% had been approved and received the BWP 1,000 grant. Most of the successful applicants were women.<sup>50</sup> Informal sector businesses were initially required to have registered by the end of May 2020, but the deadline was later extended until the end of October (Local Enterprise Authority, 2020b) and then beyond November. One apparent reason for the extensions was the slow take-up. In 2022, the LEA announced that 47,831 people had applied, of which 47,029 had been approved.<sup>51</sup> Less than BWP 50,000 had been spent on the programme. The Ministry of Finance suspected that the programme should have been advertised more widely and for longer. The LEA suggested that the unspent budget might be used to improve infrastructure (such as market stalls and food courts).<sup>52</sup> The Ministry of Finance appears to have resisted this, insisting that the budget be limited to the BWP 1,000 payments.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://guardiansun.co.bw/Business/smmes> [2023, October 17].

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.sundaystandard.info/lea-spends-p47-million-on-informal-sector/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>52</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202011160627.html> [2023, October 17].

## 4.5 Workfare

Workfare had long been a cornerstone of Botswana's drought relief and social protection strategies. Historically, workfare programmes had expanded in response to the shocks of drought, before contracting when harvests improved. Rising urban unemployment led to the reinstitutionalisation of workfare through the *Ipelegeng* programme from 2008. Under and even after the lockdown, *Ipelegeng* was largely suspended. This pillar of social protection thus fell away precisely when it was needed most,<sup>53</sup> provoking some criticism within Botswana.

*Ipelegeng* work was immediately suspended when the lockdown was imposed in April. Workers who were already working were paid out at the end of April, including for the days when they had not worked because of the lockdown. The regular *Ipelegeng* programme remained suspended until September. The Vice President and the MLGRD denied that *Ipelegeng* was being discontinued permanently (Republic of Botswana, 2020d).<sup>54</sup> The only exception to the suspension were the Special Constables, those deployed to upkeep national monuments, Wildlife volunteers, and Crime Prevention volunteers. The 700 Special Constables who were still deployed were paid through the *Ipelegeng* budget, at their normal public officer rates. Crime Prevention Volunteers, who are employed for 3-6 months without rotation, continued to be paid at the regular *Ipelegeng* rate.

In mid-May, the MLGRD announced that it would partially resume the programme. It would engage people to clean schools as they were being reopened. By 5 July, a total of 455 people had been recruited.<sup>55</sup> A total of 20,260 school cleaners had been engaged by January 2021.<sup>56</sup> It was also announced in May that 4,800 'Covid-19 Scorpions' would be engaged to enforce Covid protocols at local and village level. The funds for both new initiatives would be re-purposed from the existing *Ipelegeng* budget. *Ipelegeng* resumed fully in September 2020. The Covid-19 prevention protocols meant that the working day was reduced from six

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<sup>53</sup> Devereux (2021) and Gentilini et al. (2022) report that the government continued to pay beneficiaries while the programme was suspended, essentially making it a temporary unconditional cash transfer. A similar approach to modifying public works programmes was taken by Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda and South Sudan. Our research suggests that *Ipelegeng* participants were paid when they were not working only in the month of April.

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/news-details.php?nid=57069>

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/news-details.php?nid=57069>

<sup>56</sup>

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3699069726842325&id=148228411926492](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3699069726842325&id=148228411926492) [2023, October 17].

to four hours. Between the end of April and September, the *Ipelegeng* programme therefore operated at a small fraction of its usual level of 70,000 people per month.

The employment of the Covid-19 Scorpions generated further controversy, over the pay scale to be used. The MLGRD initially announced that they would be remunerated at B3 scale, which was considerably higher than the regular wage paid to *Ipelegeng* workers.<sup>57</sup> Whereas *Ipelegeng* paid BWP 567 per month, the B3 scale paid between BWP 4,000 and BWP 5,000 per month.<sup>58</sup> Having already filled some of the available positions, however, the government backtracked on its B3 salary promise, claiming that this had been announced by mistake and that the posts had not been budgeted for (Molale, 2020). This prompted criticism from Members of Parliament (MPs) (especially the MP for Francistown West) and the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions.<sup>59</sup> The MLGRD responded by announcing that the 2,683 Scorpions who had been hired countrywide would be funded temporarily out of funds allocated for vacant posts or, if necessary, the existing *Ipelegeng* budget.<sup>60</sup> Just two weeks after this announcement, the government announced that the Scorpions' contracts would be terminated. When the Botswana Federation of Public, Private and Parastatal Sector Unions (BOFEPUSU) and the opposition Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF) threatened legal action against this decision (BOFEPUSU, 2020), the MLGRD revoked its decision to terminate the Scorpions' contracts and instructed local authorities to keep all Scorpions in employment for the duration of their contracts.<sup>61</sup> The MLGRD further confirmed that funds to remunerate the Covid-19 Scorpions – at B3 scale – would be procured with the help of the MFED, rather than being repurposed from the *Ipelegeng* budget.<sup>62</sup> The 10-month contracts that had been awarded to the Covid-19 Scorpions came to an end in March 2021.<sup>63</sup> Some local councils proceeded to advertise online new positions for Scorpions.<sup>64</sup> The posts

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.thegazette.news/news/moswaane-rallies-scorpions-to-resist-being-downgraded/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.weekendpost.co.bw/28173/news/govt-withdraws-termination-of-covid-19-scorpions-contracts/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.thegazette.news/news/moswaane-rallies-scorpions-to-resist-being-downgraded/> [2023, October 17].

<sup>60</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202007160596.html> [2023, October 17].

<sup>61</sup> <https://twitter.com/mmegionline/status/1293504987503501313> [2023, October 17].

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/COVID-19+Scorpions+keep+jobs%2C+Ipelegeng+returns.-a0632708490> [2023, October 17].

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/news/covid-19-scorpion-contracts-in-limbo/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.govermeta.com/XX/Unknown/228066054771715/Tlokweg-SUB-District-Council;> [https://jobsbotswana.info/?post\\_type=noo\\_job&p=49163;](https://jobsbotswana.info/?post_type=noo_job&p=49163;)



were advertised at B5 salary scale, i.e. up to about BWP 4,000 per month. It is not clear whether these positions were ever filled. A newspaper report in May 2021 suggested that at least some of the positions may have been withdrawn due to insufficient funding.<sup>65</sup>

The government's reticence to expand the *Ipelegeng* workfare programme whilst the economy was in recession in 2020 was surely rooted in its pre-Covid ambivalence over the programme. The programme had been criticised within and outside government for its lack of developmental impact: *Ipelegeng* participants were widely viewed as unproductive whilst they did not appear to acquire any significant skills but rather became dependent on the programme. In July 2020, the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development announced that the government was in the process of reviewing and reforming *Ipelegeng* 'with a view to making it more productive and worthy of the budget it attracts on a yearly basis' (Republic of Botswana, 2020c). The proposed reforms were approved by the cabinet in August.<sup>66</sup> The reformed programme – to be piloted first near Ramotse – would entail engaging workers for a period of months to work with trained artisans on the construction of housing for destitutes.<sup>67</sup> The goal was to train unskilled workers so that they could support themselves thereafter.

This programme includes a new skills training programme that hires a small number of volunteers (18 at a time) and engages them for a minimum of six months on a construction project, with the aim of improving both their artisanal skills and their work ethic. The initiative is administered through a three-way partnership between the Botswana National Productivity Centre, the MLGRD, and the Construction Industry Trust Fund (CITF).<sup>68</sup> The first project of this new three-way partnership was a one-bedroom house in Otse (to be built for a registered destitute person in Otse village), which was at 90% completion in late July 2022. With pilot programmes set to start in the Central District this year, the MLGRD is optimistic that the new version of *Ipelegeng* will have mass appeal in

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[https://jobswbotswana.info/?post\\_type=noo\\_job&p=49282;](https://jobswbotswana.info/?post_type=noo_job&p=49282;)  
<https://www.jobs4bw.com/temporary-covid-19-scorpions-city-of-francistown/>. [2023, October 17].

<sup>65</sup> [https://thepatriot.co.bw/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-Patriot-02-05-2021\\_web.pdf](https://thepatriot.co.bw/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-Patriot-02-05-2021_web.pdf) [2023, October 17].

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/COVID-19+Scorpions+keep+jobs%2C+Ipelegeng+returns.-a0632708490> [2023, October 17].

<sup>67</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202007160596.html> [2023, October 17].

<sup>68</sup> The CITF is a special fund established in 1991 to supports the Ministry of Employment Labour Productivity and Skills Development's broader strategy by 'rapidly producing the skills required to meet the large demands arising from proposed and on- going projects within the country' (CITF, 2022)

both rural and urban areas. This is despite the fact that wages are kept at the BWP 636 monthly rate, despite the 8-hour workday requirement (regular *Ipelegeng* volunteers typically only clock in from 7-11am). With a heavy monitoring and evaluation component, the government intends to evaluate the merits of the program when all current pilot programmes in the field are completed before a potential national scaling up.

## 4.6 Other relief measures

In addition to the main social protection responses to Covid-19 outlined in the previous sections, Botswana introduced a number of additional measures to cushion its citizens and the economy against the economic impact of the lockdown. Acknowledging the importance of water provision and sanitation services in preventing the spread of the virus, the water supply to over 37,000 yards, that had been disconnected from water provision due to outstanding water bill debts with the Water Utilities Corporation, was restored. Payment of the outstanding bills was postponed until after the initial lockdown period, as per an announcement by the Minister of Land Management, Water and Sanitation Services. Further, the government procured water tanks and assisted with the organization of water transport to water-scarce areas, in collaboration with private companies.<sup>69</sup>

To encourage the use of mobile money, the Bank of Botswana raised the daily transaction limits on mobile money accounts, as well as the monthly aggregate transaction limit, and encouraged mobile money providers to lower or waive transaction fees. In an effort to reduce the use of – potentially virus-transmitting – cash, commercial banks also committed to reducing the charges for digital transactions by at least 25% (Bank of Botswana, 2020). Further, the Bank of Botswana introduced a repayment moratorium on both business and personal loans to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on borrowers. Banks were given the mandate to offer their clients modified repayment schedules, as well as payment holidays, for a period of 3-6 months, considering each application within their respective lending policies (Republic of Botswana, 2020a). Some banks extended the repayment moratorium period beyond the initial six months on a case-by-case basis (Bank of Botswana, 2021). In June 2020, the value of loans that had been granted payment moratoria amounted to BWP 7.3 billion, dropping to BWP 5.6 billion in December 2020. This represented 11.4% and 8.5% of all gross loans and advances respectively. By the end of 2020, a total of 7,850 bank loans had been granted a payment holiday, with commercial/private sector loans

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<sup>69</sup> <http://www.dailynews.gov.bw/news-details.php?nid=55646>

accounting for 78.5%, and household loans accounting for 12% (Bank of Botswana, 2021).

Additional support measures for businesses included the option to defer up to 75% of quarterly tax payments between March and September 2020 to the following year (International Monetary Fund, 2020), a waiver of the training levy for a period of six months,<sup>70</sup> a loan guarantee scheme worth BWP 1 billion, 80% of which was underwritten by the government with the remaining 20% covered by participating commercial banks (BECI, 2022), and the expedited settlement of Government Purchase Orders and VAT refunds to companies (Republic of Botswana, 2020a).

## 4.7 Assessment and discussion

Covid-19 posed massive challenges in Botswana. Whilst the health crisis was delayed, the severity of the lockdown imposed in April 2020 caused an immediate crisis of food security. The deep economic recession meant that food insecurity persisted through 2020. These economic challenges were probably more severe than anywhere else in Africa, although they proved shorter-lived than had been expected, as the economy rebounded strongly in 2021.

The responses of the government of Botswana (summarised in Table 4) exhibited both similarities and striking differences to responses in neighbouring countries. The most important similarity was the rapid provision of massive wage subsidies to employers, benefitting primarily lower-wage employees. This subsidy provided significant relief, mostly to better-off, urban households. Minor programmes provided support for athletes and artists. The total cost of these programmes came to about 0.5% of GDP. By comparison, the budget for South Africa's wage subsidy programme was close to 1% of GDP. South Africa has a much larger private sector and benefits were paid out for a longer period (six months).

In contrast to some of its neighbours, Botswana neither introduced a special social cash transfer for vulnerable individuals or households, nor did it supplement existing social grants. The Government did roll out, reasonably quickly, a massive food parcel operation and it provided modest support for a small number of informal businesses. Wage subsidies ensured that households that contained someone in formal employment were to some extent cushioned against loss of income, but in sectors (such as tourism) and districts dependent on these (i.e., around Kasane and Maun) that experienced extended recessions, the subsidies did not prevent extended and deep hardship. Food baskets brought temporary relief. If the value of a basket was about BWP 1,000, then the benefit of the once-off

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/business/bob-govt-free-billions-into-economy/news> [2023, October 17].



food basket programme per household was comparable to the once-off Emergency Income Grant in Namibia. The benefit was much lower than the value of vertical and horizontal extensions of social grants in South Africa and the donor-funded emergency programme in Kenya, but was substantially higher than benefits under emergency cash transfer programmes in Zambia and most other African countries.

**Table 4: Overview of Botswana's social protection responses to Covid-19 (reporting negative responses in italics).**

	<b>Timeliness</b>	<b>Benefit Value</b>	<b>Reach</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Wage subsidies	Disbursements approved in late April, presumably effected quickly thereafter	Generous for low-paid workers; averaging BWP 1,500/employee/month	In April, 165,000 employees (potentially more in May/June)	3 months (except for tourism sector, further 6 months)	BWP 833 million (first 3 months) + BWP 143 million (tourism, further 6 months) = BWP 976 million
Sectoral subsidies	Most paid in June	BWP 1,500 or BWP 2,500 per month for 3 months	10,000, less than anticipated	3 months	BWP 20 million
Informal sector support	Pay-outs started in June, continued throughout 2020	BWP 1,000 once-off	47,000, less than anticipated	Once-off	BWP 50 million
Food baskets	Some distributed in late April, most in May, some in June (but existing programmes suspended)	Baskets worth approximately BWP 1,000	Widespread, approximately 430,000	Once-off; plans for further distribution dropped	BWP 350-431 million (but savings on other programmes)
<i>Existing feeding schemes</i>	<i>Largely suspended under lockdown</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>[Widespread, approximately 900,000 beneficiaries, suspended]</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>Net savings (estimated at BWP 100 million)</i>
<i>Workfare</i>	<i>Benefits paid in April, but programme then largely suspended to September</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>[About 73,000 workfare opportunities per month, suspended for 4 months]</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>Net savings (estimated at BWP 100 million)</i>
Cash transfers	No reform	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	None

The benefit of the food basket was offset, however, by the suspension of school and preschool feeding schemes, as well as the suspension of the regular *Ipelegeng* workfare programme.

The total gross cost of the emergency programmes in Botswana came to less than BWP 500 million (i.e., less than one-third of 1% of the GDP). Furthermore, the existing workfare and school- and clinic-based feeding schemes were interrupted by the lockdown. Given that the cost of these runs at more than BWP 100 million per month (Güven et al., 2022), the net cost of emergency programmes may not have been more than BWP 250 million (i.e., little more than 0.1% of the GDP). South Africa provides an extreme comparison: The budget for the supplements to existing social grants together with the new emergency social grant in South Africa came to 1% of the country's GDP over six months.

Leaving aside the wage subsidies, the cost of emergency social protection measures in Botswana was low for three reasons:

- The Government did not consider supplements or expansion to its existing, modest social grant programmes. A government that had been reluctant to expand social grant programmes prior to 2020 did not seriously consider doing so in response to Covid-19, the sudden economic recession, and heightened food insecurity in 2020.
- Botswana has a long history of parsimonious benefits relative to South Africa. Its OAP and workfare benefits have barely more than one-third of the value of their counterparts in South Africa. The net cost of Botswana's emergency measures under Covid-19 was low in part because this parsimony is institutionalized in Botswana.
- The pre-Covid pillars of Botswana's social protection system proved calamitous in the face of a total lockdown: The workfare and existing feeding schemes were largely suspended for several months. Had the lockdown been less severe, these schemes might have been able to continue to operate in some form (for example, children collecting lunches from schools or clinics, or having deliveries by *Ipelegeng* workers).

The challenges of food insecurity under lockdown might have been a factor in the Government's easing of restrictions, which for the most part proceeded faster than in South Africa. The economy of Botswana also recovered much faster than its neighbour.

Whilst the scale of social protection measures in Botswana appears modest in comparison with South Africa, Botswana's measures were implemented somewhat faster. South Africa began to supplement existing social grants in early May. It barely managed to begin paying the new social grant by the end of May, two months into the country's lockdown. The South African government's attempts to distribute food baskets were riddled with challenges and delays. By

comparison, Botswana began to distribute food baskets in the second half of April, i.e., well within the first month of lockdown, and the operation – reaching most households – was largely complete by the end of the second month of lockdown. Botswana was able to implement an ambitious, countrywide feeding programme not simply because it had experience in running feeding programmes but more importantly because it had, at district and sub-district levels, an effective public service (working with the private sector) that was capable of implementing an unprecedented feeding programme in a very short period of time.

Both the wide reach and timeliness of Botswana's food basket distribution are evident in comparison with other countries across Africa and elsewhere. Beazley, Marzi and Steller (2021) analysed data on the timeliness of cash-based social protection responses in low and middle-income countries. Most responses were slow to be implemented (and some were never implemented). The average time to first payments was 83 days from the implementation of lockdown and 107 days from the first reported case of Covid in the country. Countries in Africa were much slower than countries in other regions. None of the fast responses were in (Sub-Saharan) Africa.

Case-studies of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone illustrate the challenges of rolling out emergency cash-based measures in African contexts. Kenya's emergency programme had reached only 50% of the targeted (poor) households by August. The vertical expansion of existing programmes in Ethiopia and Kenya was effected only in September. Sierra Leone introduced its first social safety net – in December. Ethiopia and Uganda announced emergency programmes for poor urban households but had not begun to implement them by mid-2021 (Beazley, Bischler & Doyle, 2021).

The government of Botswana did succeed in getting food to most poor, and even non-poor, households as well as wage subsidies for the non-poor, both quite quickly. Might it have achieved more if it has been open to innovation? The vertical expansion of existing social grants – as in South Africa – might have been effected quickly. New programmes – even once-off grants – are generally slower to implement. But the Government of Namibia implemented its once-off Emergency Income Grant of NAD 750 per individual with extraordinary speed. It announced its intention of doing so on 1 April and announced details on 9 April. The first payments were made on 16 April. It could do so because it already had the technologies required for this exercise. Botswana, as we shall see in the next section, did not, or was unwilling or unable to use them.

## 5 Social grant payment system reforms

The payment technologies, channels and providers used to disburse Botswana's various social cash transfers reflect the fragmented nature of its overall social protection system. Unlike in South Africa, where grants are paid through a centrally administered payment system which uses the same channels and payment technologies for all social grants, Botswana has contracted a variety of service providers who use different disbursement technologies for different grants. In terms of payment providers, the MLGRD has long-standing relationships with both private and public service providers (SmartSwitch and BotswanaPost respectively), as well as a more recent, small-scale pilot programme with Sandulela Telecom Botswana (a private company). In addition, the district councils play a role in both the application and payment processes for some (but not all) social cash transfers. Table 5 provides an overview of the various payment providers, technologies and channels used for Botswana's cash transfer programmes as of mid-2022.

As illustrated in the table below, there are various parallel payment systems for different programmes, as well as regional differences for certain grants and payment providers. BotswanaPost has by far the largest footprint with regard to its physical infrastructure, although it only provides payment services for social pensions. SmartSwitch only provides payment services for the food basket benefits offered under the DPA, OVC and CHBC programmes. These benefits are paid through a biometrically enabled smart card which can be used for payments (but not cash-outs) at participating grocery stores. Sandulela Telecom was contracted to disburse cash payments in selected areas as part of a pilot programme to test alternative private payment providers in 2016. Botswana Savings Bank (Botswana's only statutory retail bank) was appointed to replace Sandulela in 2021 and plans to make payments through debit cards which can be used to withdraw cash at any Automated Teller Machine (ATM) in the country. However, the contract has not progressed beyond the beneficiary registration stage, and interviews with government officials indicated a high level of uncertainty with regard to the roll-out and progress of this new partnership. Last but not least, beneficiaries of cash benefits (not food benefits) can receive their payments into a personal bank account held with any registered bank in Botswana. These payments are processed by the Ministry via a separate payroll.

**Table 5: Overview of the payment system for social cash transfers in Botswana in 2022.**

<b>Payment provider</b>	<b>Appointed</b>	<b>Programmes</b>	<b>Payment system and channel(s)</b>	<b>Biometric verification</b>	<b>Geographic Coverage</b>
SmartSwitch	2007	DPA (food benefit only) OVC (food benefit only) CHBC (food benefit only)	Benefits paid via a smart card, biometric verification via Point of Sale devices supplied to participating shops. Beneficiaries can only use funds to buy goods at participating stores; no cash-out possible.	Yes	Nationwide
Botswana Post	2009 (vouchers pre-2009)	OAP WVP	Benefits paid in cash at Post Office branches and Post Office kiosks located inside Choppies supermarkets (previously Sefalana supermarkets). All beneficiaries undergo biometric verification (fingerprint scan) via handheld devices. Off-site payments are delivered to remote areas using cash vans.	Yes	All districts, except Lobatse and Southern District
Sandulela Telecom Botswana	2016	OAP WVP DA DPA (cash benefit only)	Benefits paid via cash vans sent to pay points and villages once a month. Biometric verification via a smart card.	Yes	Lobatse and Southern District
Botswana Savings Bank	2021	OAP WVP DA DPA (cash benefit only)	Benefits to be paid via debit cards; beneficiaries can cash-out at ATMs, branches or agency bank outlets. Payments have not started yet; registration is still on-going; it is not clear when and whether this payment option will be launched.	No	Southern District and parts of Northern District (Mahalapye, Palapye and Serowe)
District councils	Not Applicable	DA DPA (cash benefit only) <i>Ipelegeng</i>	Payment method(s) decided by district councils. Include(s) cash, bank transfer into personal accounts and (increasingly) e-wallet payments to beneficiaries' phone numbers which can be cashed out at ATMs. Off-site payments to remote areas are delivered via cash vans.	No	Nationwide, except in areas serviced by Sandulela or Botswana Savings Bank
Commercial banks	Not Applicable	All cash benefits	Payment into personal bank account held with any bank in Botswana can be requested from the MLGRD by submitting a form and proof of bank account ownership in the form of a bank letter. This is mostly used for the OAP and WVP, but available for other cash grants as well.	No	Nationwide

## **5.1 Payment system reforms in response to Covid-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic was a turning point in terms of social cash transfer payment systems in some – but by no means all – African countries. The use of mobile payment technologies for cash transfers in response to Covid-19 was one of the defining features of the pandemic response across the African continent. Similarly, digital and mobile application and registration tools were used for various cash transfers and other social protection responses, in many cases for the first time. The trend towards digital and mobile technologies was most pronounced in new cash transfers, launched specifically in response to the pandemic. Existing social assistance programmes largely continued using their established payment infrastructure, both during and after the initial lockdowns, with only relatively minor modifications.

Unlike many of its neighbours in Southern Africa, Botswana did not introduce a special social cash transfer for vulnerable individuals or households in response to the pandemic. While South Africa launched a ZAR 350 Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant, Namibia provided a once-off Emergency Income Grant of NAD 750, Zambia expanded its existing cash transfer programme over a period of several months, and Zimbabwe introduced a Covid-19 cash transfer (albeit paltry), Botswana only provided a small-scale, once-off grant for registered informal workers and small businesses. Existing social grants, such as the OAP and the Destitute Persons Programme, continued to be paid, although with modified payment modalities for certain programmes. Recipients of food benefits via the SmartSwitch card continued to receive their transfers, despite reports of stock shortages in some local stores. This section (Section 5.1) provides an overview of payment system reforms implemented or piloted in Botswana during the Covid-19 emergency phase in 2020. Longer-term reforms, most of which had their origins in the pre-pandemic period, will be discussed in Section 5.2.

### **5.1.1 Lifting of life declaration requirement**

As outlined in Section 2, grant beneficiaries who collect their monthly payments through a proxy, or who receive their cash transfer into a personal bank account, are required to submit a life declaration form every six months. This is to ensure that proxies do not continue to collect benefits after a beneficiary has passed away, and that grants are not paid into inactive bank accounts. Failure to submit the life declaration on time results in the suspension of the beneficiary's grant until the declaration is submitted, following which arrears are paid out. According to the Department of Social Protection's Chief Pension Officer, this requirement was suspended during most of 2020 in light of the severe restrictions on movement during the lockdown(s). Beneficiaries whose life declarations were due during this period were exempt from submitting the form, and their accounts were simply marked as 'confirmed' by the MLGRD or Department of Social Protection (DSP)

officers in charge. It is not clear when precisely the exemption was lifted, but the life declaration requirement has since been re-instated.

### **5.1.2 Social distancing and crowd management**

As post offices were operating with reduced staff capacity and under social distancing requirements, only 3-10 people were allowed inside a branch at a time, with a maximum of 25 persons on the premises (BotswanaPost, 2020). While this led to payment delays and prolonged payment periods, pay-outs of grants administered by BotswanaPost (OAP and WVP) continued largely uninterrupted. According to a senior BotswanaPost official, the Department of Health provided hands-on support at branches and payment locations across the country and ensured that social distancing requirements were adhered to. The main challenge in this regard, particularly with OAP collections, was that pension pay days tend to be a social event for many beneficiaries. Informal vendors set up stalls around branches and payment locations, and beneficiaries often spend the entire day around their pay point to socialize and meet with friends and acquaintances. This increases the number of people at any given pay point beyond the actual number of beneficiaries collecting payments on a particular day.

In addition to queue management through the Department of Health, BotswanaPost also invested in the digitalization of various regular postal and payment services offered at their branches. These include bill payments, vehicle licence renewals and the purchase of prepaid airtime and electricity. While many of these services were already offered with an online payment option prior to the pandemic, systems were improved and online payments were promoted more actively than before to reduce the number of regular customers at branches, especially during grant payment periods.

### **5.1.3 Choppies kiosks and mobile payment pilot programme**

In an effort to extend its branch network, BotswanaPost had entered into a collaboration with Sefalana Holdings, one of Botswana's largest retail groups, in 2016. After launching the first four Post Office Kiosks in large Sefalana stores in October 2016, opening additional kiosks was on-going until early 2020. Initially, services offered at these 'mini post offices' only included vehicle licence renewals, money orders, stamp sales and funeral plans. From 2017 onwards, selected kiosks started offering pension pay-outs, and further services, such as bill payments, and airtime and electricity sales, and agency banking services for

Botswana Savings Bank, were added in the following years.<sup>71</sup> In 2020, however, BotswanaPost terminated the collaboration with Sefalana and entered into a similar arrangement with the retail chain Choppies. The reasons behind this decision were the limited size of Sefalana's branch network, and the fact that the retailer insisted on an exclusive contract, i.e., BotswanaPost was unable to contract with other retailers and merchants to further expand its network of kiosks.

Choppies has more than 90 stores across Botswana, and BotswanaPost announced the opening of the first 20 kiosks inside Choppies stores in the 2020/2021 financial year. The first kiosks only offered vehicle licence renewals, DSTV payments, funeral premium payments, post box renewals, and the new PosoMoney mobile payment service. In mid-2020, grant pay-outs for the OAP and the WVP were added to the range of services offered at the Choppies kiosks, in an effort to reduce crowding at regular post office branches. This move was specifically aimed at promoting pension pay-outs via BotswanaPost's PosoMoney mobile money service,<sup>72</sup> rather than the traditional cash disbursements with verification through biometric devices. The PosoMoney service was launched by BotswanaPost in 2019 and was licensed as an Electronic Payment Services Provider in 2020. It allows users to send and receive funds via their mobile phone, independent of their mobile network provider, to store electronic funds in a digital wallet, and to make digital payments to companies and providers that use the service.

The decision to pilot mobile pension payments at Choppies kiosks was made by BotswanaPost's board, despite initial scepticism from government. According to a Senior Information Technology (IT) Manager at BotswanaPost, there were concerns over additional costs to beneficiaries using the new payment method. However, these were alleviated by BotswanaPost, and the mobile payment option through PosoMoney was launched in June 2020. Pensioners were approached at branches and asked to provide their cellphone numbers, following which they could trial the new mobile payment option. According to BotswanaPost's Business Development Manager, approximately 1,000 pensioners signed up for the pilot programme, i.e., only a fraction of the over 125,000 recipients of the OAP and WVP.

Pensioners opting to receive their payments through the new mobile payment option would receive a message on their registered cellphone number, notifying them that their funds were available for collection. They could then cash out at any PosoMoney agent in the country, including at the BotswanaPost kiosks in Choppies stores. This new payment option was expected to benefit both

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<sup>71</sup> <https://www.mmegi.bw/business/botswana-post-kiosks-pilot-in-sefalana-shops-successful/news> [2023, October 17].

<sup>72</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006040135.html> [2023, October 17].



BotswanaPost (through increased uptake of its PosoMoney service) and Choppies (as grant beneficiaries would spend some of their funds on groceries after collecting them). Both BotswanaPost and Choppies had also announced plans to focus more strongly on the provision of financial products and services – including to grant recipients – as part of their respective business diversification strategies.

However, despite the initial enthusiasm, BotswanaPost soon realized that it had chosen the wrong target group for their mobile payment trial, given the low rates of digital literacy and cellphone usage among the elderly. In addition, there were various technical and regulatory challenges, including the difficulty of verifying the identity of the person collecting a mobile payment. While biometric verification is done for every regular cash pay-out at post office branches, mobile payments can be collected without biometric verification. This makes it impossible to ascertain that the grant was indeed paid to the right person. Further, once the funds have been sent to the beneficiary’s cellphone number, it is not possible to verify whether the grant has actually been cashed out. This, in turn, poses a severe challenge in terms of payment reconciliation and was therefore flagged as a major complication by both BotswanaPost and the government.

The mobile payment experiment was ultimately abandoned, but regular grant payments for OAP and WVP beneficiaries through Choppies kiosks continued. According to various sources at BotswanaPost, the collaboration has been largely positive, especially in terms of reducing the cost of transporting cash to post office branches and other pay points. The kiosks located inside Choppies stores use the float generated through Choppies’ regular grocery sales for grant payments, with reconciliation being done at store level. Further, the use of Choppies’ branch infrastructure – which is significantly cheaper than setting up new brick-and-mortar post branches – has generated additional savings for BotswanaPost. Initial challenges related to the linking of two different IT systems for payment reconciliation have largely been resolved. BotswanaPost has indicated that they might consider setting up kiosks in other retail stores – preferably Motswana-owned shops – in the future, but for the time being the focus appears to be on the Choppies partnership.

### **5.1.4 e-Wallet payments**

While the mobile payment pilot programme with BotswanaPost’s PosoMoney service remained largely unsuccessful, another payment channel expanded significantly during the pandemic. Often (mistakenly) referred to as ‘mobile money’ by government officials interviewed for this report, the e-wallet payment options offered by various commercial banks in Botswana have become an increasingly popular payment option for social grants. The e-wallet service allows bank account holders to send funds to a registered cellphone number, without

requiring the recipient to have a physical bank account. Using a One-Time PIN sent to the recipient's cellphone number, the funds can then be cashed out at any ATM belonging to the sender's banking network. Fees and modalities differ from bank to bank, with some banks allowing e-wallet recipients to keep their funds in the digital wallet for a certain period of time, use them to purchase prepaid airtime or other products, or forward them to another recipient. The most popular e-wallet services in Botswana are currently FNB's eWallet, Stanbic's Unayo and ABSA's CashSend.

With FNB holding over 50% of the market share in retail banking (Goga et al., 2021), making it by far the largest player in Botswana, it comes as no surprise that its eWallet service has become the payment channel of choice for various cash transfer programmes. According to the MLGRD's Coordinator for Strategy Management and Reforms, e-wallet payments had already been adopted by some of the district councils prior to Covid-19, but this expanded significantly during the pandemic. District councils can choose how they wish to make pay-outs to beneficiaries for the grants they administer, i.e., grants that are not paid exclusively through BotswanaPost, Sandulela or SmartSwitch. If the bank with which the council holds its account offers an e-wallet service, this can be used as an additional payment channel without having to go through a formal tender process.

The e-wallet option has been used mainly for the *Ipelegeng* public works programme, although detailed payment statistics were not available at the time of writing. In Francistown, *Ipelegeng* payments are reportedly made via the Stanbic Unayo e-wallet service, while the FNB eWallet option is used in several other (mostly urban) areas. According to a Research, Products and Innovation Manager at BotswanaPost, the PosoMoney service has not been used (or considered) for *Ipelegeng* payments, although proposals to the Ministry have been made. The main challenge with *Ipelegeng* payments is that beneficiaries frequently change their cellphone numbers, which makes it difficult to keep track of payments and ensure that funds are paid to (and withdrawn by) the right person.

FNB's eWallet service was also the main payment channel for the BWP 100 million ISSF, administered by the LEA and launched in 2020. One of the fund's project managers indicated that close to 95% of the over 47,000 payments to informal business owners were made via the FNB eWallet service, while the remainder was paid into personal bank accounts. When the BWP 1,000 grant was first announced, LEA reportedly requested proposals from various payment providers, including Mobile Network Operator (MNO)-led mobile money providers such as Orange Mobile (Orange Money) and Mascom (MyZaka). Reportedly, only FNB responded to the request for proposals, and payments to beneficiaries' cellphone numbers were therefore made from a designated FNB bank account held by the LEA. Given the versatility of the service, the fact that funds can be sent to any mobile network, and beneficiaries are not charged a

withdrawal fee, there is considerable scope to expand this payment option to other cash transfer programmes in Botswana.

### **5.1.5 Assessment and discussion**

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic did not trigger any major reforms of Botswana's cash transfer payment system. Disbursements of existing grants continued through existing payment channels and providers, albeit under Covid-19 health protocols to avoid crowding at pay points. The temporary lifting of the life declaration requirement for proxy and bank account payments ensured that payments could continue uninterrupted, but did not constitute a change in payment arrangements.

Although the decision by BotswanaPost to disburse social pensions at their new kiosks inside Choppies supermarkets fell into the early lockdown period, it appears to have been the result of longer-term strategic changes, rather than a direct response to the pandemic. Under the previous collaboration with Sefalana Holdings, recipients of the OAP and the WVP had the option to collect their pension at BotswanaPost kiosks inside Sefalana stores. The disbursement of grants through the Choppies kiosk network was thus merely the continuation of an existing business model through a new partner who had been appointed prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. It is of course likely that the need to reduce crowding at regular post office branches sped up the process of offering pension payments at the new Choppies kiosks. But it is likely that this would have been introduced as an added service, regardless of the pandemic and lockdown measures in the not-too-distant future.

The launch of the mobile money pension payment pilot programme at Choppies kiosks reflects the overall shift towards mobile payments during the early stages of the pandemic across the African continent, including for social cash transfer payments. However, the overall success of mobile payments in the social protection space was based largely on the introduction of new emergency transfers, rather than modifications to the payment arrangements for existing grants. While more than half of all new (temporary) cash transfer programmes launched during the pandemic made payments via mobile money, virtually all pre-existing large cash transfer schemes continued to use their pre-Covid payment channels (Gronbach, 2021). Only a few countries (e.g., eSwatini, Lesotho, Malawi and Nigeria) trialled or promoted the use of mobile payments for regular cash transfers in 2020, but this was mostly done as part of broader (pre-Covid) digitalization strategies. Botswana's mobile payment pilot programme appears to have been launched without giving much thought to the needs and abilities of elderly grant beneficiaries, or the administrative requirements with regard to payment collection and reconciliation. Unsurprisingly, the pilot programme was short-lived and was not a success. In other African countries mobile payments

were mostly used for cash transfers made to informal workers who were adults of working age, i.e., to younger and more digitally-literate demographic groups, rather than to the recipients of social pensions.

The increased use of e-wallet payments for beneficiaries of the *Ipelegeng* programme, as well as for the majority of payments under the ISSF, represents the main – and only – innovation in terms of payment reforms. Although this payment method had already been in use prior to the pandemic, it experienced a significant boost during 2020 and 2021. It is likely to be used by a growing number of district councils in the future, as indicated by several MLGRD officials, and may include other cash transfer programmes. Its main advantage lies in the fact that payments to beneficiaries can be made through the DCs existing bank accounts and – at least in the case of FNB’s eWallet – beneficiaries can withdraw their benefits free of charge (the fee is covered by the sender). However, the potential for greater financial inclusion of e-wallet payments is limited compared to MNO-led mobile money solutions, as it is essentially only a cash-out service. To access additional financial products and services, beneficiaries would need to open a formal account with the bank providing the e-Wallet service.

## **5.2 On-going and future payment system reforms**

While short-term payment reforms were limited to the increased use of e-wallet payments, there are several on-going plans for (or at least discussions about) broader reforms of Botswana’s cash transfer payment system. As outlined at the beginning of this section, Botswana’s grant payment system reflects the fragmented nature of its overall social protection structure. The various cash and food benefits are currently disbursed through three separate payment providers, each serving different geographic areas and beneficiary groups and using an array of payment technologies, identity verification devices, payment cards and cash-out infrastructure (see Table 5 above). Interviews with government officials and representatives of the various payment providers revealed a number of – in some cases conflicting – proposals for reforming the current payment arrangements. Most of these were highlighted in the NSPRP and focus on the replacement of in-kind with cash benefits, the consolidation of both the various cash benefits and the corresponding payment arrangements, and the move towards digital payment channels.

## 5.2.1 National Social Protection Recovery Plan: reform proposals

The NSPRP (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020), drafted by a team of UNDP consultants in 2020, was produced to assist the MLGRD in identifying and implementing a range of social protection reforms across its existing programmes. With regard to the delivery of social assistance, and particularly the various cash and food basket benefits, the plan suggests the following reforms:

- Replace the current food benefits of the DPA, OVC grant and CHBC programmes, currently paid via smart cards and redeemed at participating grocery stores, with direct cash payments, to be used by beneficiaries as they see fit;
- Introduce a cash-based child grant, similar to South Africa's Child Support Grant, replacing the current cash and in-kind benefits for OVC, pregnant and lactating mothers, and parts of the existing feeding schemes;
- Over time, transition all social assistance programmes to direct cash transfers, consistent with the MLGRD Strategic Plan's objective of 'optimizing processes and Delivery through Technology', thus providing beneficiaries with increased dignity, as well as choice and agency regarding the use of their benefits;
- Provide cash transfers through electronic and mobile payment channels, such as bank transfers, payment cards and mobile money, to reduce the costs and risk associated with transporting and handling large sums of cash;
- Work more closely with financial institutions, such as banks, mobile money and other financial service providers to establish a multi-channel cash delivery system, allowing beneficiaries to choose their preferred payment option from a range of providers (choice model), phasing out the use of proprietary, closed-loop technology; and
- Prioritize and speed up on-going improvements and expansion of the Social Benefit Registration System (SOBERS) payroll system, as well as the development of a generic Management Information System and a single beneficiary registry for all social assistance programmes.

Some of these proposals appear to have resonated with MLGRD officials interviewed for this research, and there are on-going debates within the Ministry regarding the replacement of in-kind with cash benefits, the move towards a choice model for cash transfer payments, the adoption of mobile payments, and the general streamlining and consolidation of the payment system. However, most of the proposed reforms stand in stark contrast to the existing payment arrangements, and would require significant financial resources, the re-enrolment of beneficiaries for new payment channels, tender and procurement processes

with new payment providers, the transfer of responsibilities, and extensive communication and support of beneficiaries prior to and during the transition. Most importantly, these reforms would also require a significant shift in priorities and attitudes within government, where concerns over the potential misuse of cash, and the payment of grants through the financial system (rather than selected providers) persist.

### **5.2.2 Replacing food with cash benefits**

The preference for food benefits instead of (or in addition to) cash transfers to the poorest and most vulnerable beneficiary groups is rooted in long-standing scepticism about the potential misuse of cash grants, e.g., to purchase alcohol or tobacco, or for the benefit of caregivers rather than their dependents. This is, at least in theory, addressed by the use of the SmartSwitch card for the disbursement of food benefits. The card-based model requires beneficiaries to purchase items in participating stores, rather than allowing them to withdraw the funds in cash. Stores approved for participation in the food-benefit network (which is administered by local authorities) are given a list of items beneficiaries are allowed to purchase with their cards. However, the responsibility of verifying the nature of beneficiaries' purchases ultimately lies with each shop owner. It is not possible to 'block' certain items on the SmartSwitch card, as this would require each store owner to assign an individual code to each item, which, in turn, would have to be recognized by the SmartSwitch system. In theory, it would also be possible for beneficiaries to return the items they purchased for a cash refund, thus circumventing the ban on cash-outs. Both MLGRD officials and SmartSwitch staff also cited reports of beneficiaries re-selling the items they purchased in order to obtain cash.

Further, the processing and administration of the separate food and cash components for the DPA and the OVC grant is tedious, time-consuming and prone to errors. Two DSP officials interviewed for this report mentioned that social workers sometimes forget to process the food or the cash allowance, resulting in beneficiaries only receiving part of their benefits. The fact that the food and cash components are, in some cases, disbursed by different service providers, adds to the complexity for beneficiaries. Last but not least, the use of small, local shops for the disbursement of the food benefit is expensive for both the Ministry and beneficiaries, according to a senior policy advisor in the Ministry of Finance. For beneficiaries, the prices in small, privately-owned shops are often higher than in larger retail stores, and shop owners can inflate prices for beneficiaries (there have been reports of this practice, although there are no data on the magnitude of this problem). Hence, while the current model supports small businesses and the local economy as part of a broader policy agenda, it potentially disadvantages the beneficiaries of social assistance.

Moving towards a fully cash-based benefit structure would therefore make both economic and administrative sense for most – but not all – parties involved. SmartSwitch, the provider of the smart cards and Point of Sale (POS) devices used for disbursing the food benefits, relies heavily on the MLGRD contract in terms of its operations and income. The company was founded in 2006, specifically to provide a new disbursement system for Botswana’s food benefits, previously done via paper-based vouchers. The technology was developed by Net1 UEPS Technologies, South Africa’s previous – and highly controversial – social grant paymaster,<sup>73</sup> which co-founded SmartSwitch in collaboration with Capricorn Investment Holdings. Over the years, SmartSwitch has established itself as the sole provider of food benefit payments, and built a large network of local stores equipped with its POS devices. The company invested heavily in its technological and physical infrastructure during the early years of its service contract with the MLGRD, including the biometric enrolment of all food benefit recipients, modelled on a similar exercise in South Africa. According to data provided by SmartSwitch, the company currently pays food benefits to 33,243 recipients of the DPA, 11,734 OVC beneficiaries, and 885 CHBC participants, i.e., a total of 45,862 individuals. Moving to a different disbursement system and/or provider would require the new supplier to repeat the costly and tedious enrolment drive, resulting in (most likely prohibitively) high costs to the government.

The case of SmartSwitch illustrates the difficulty of moving from a proprietary, closed-loop technology to either a single new payment provider or a choice model with a range of payment options. South Africa’s experience with SmartSwitch’s parent company Net1 is a prime example of the various challenges of such a move. These include the financial cost and logistical challenges of a nation-wide payment card swap, the difficulty of migrating a biometric verification system and conducting new enrolments, and the communication with beneficiaries, many of whom are neither literate nor competent with technology. This high degree of path dependency is not unique to Botswana but is a common repercussion of using closed-loop technologies with high initial set-up costs for cash transfer payment.

Finally, although there is an on-going discourse about giving beneficiaries more choice and dignity through cash grants, the government’s preference for food benefits has been a long-standing feature of Botswana’s social protection system and is unlikely to undergo any rapid changes.

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<sup>73</sup> See Gronbach (2017) for an account of Net1’s role in South Africa’s social grant payment system.

### **5.2.3 Consolidating and digitalizing cash payments**

The consolidation of Botswana's various cash-based benefits and their respective payment systems is desirable in terms of payment efficiency, yet as complex as the suggested transition from in-kind to cash benefits. A consolidated payment system could either be achieved by appointing a single payment provider, or by moving towards a centrally-administered choice model with various pay-out options using financial systems (e.g., bank transfers, ATM withdrawals, mobile payments).

The first – and most unlikely – option, would be to pay all social grants into beneficiaries' personal bank accounts, with the option of opening new accounts for previously unbanked beneficiaries. This has been done in South Africa (first through Net1 and Grindrod Bank, later via the Postbank), as well as in Kenya where grant beneficiaries can choose between six licensed banking providers (Government of Kenya, 2022). While this would be the simplest and most cost-efficient alternative from an administrative point of view, the low level of bank account ownership in Botswana represents a major obstacle for this option. The 2021 Making Access Possible study indicated that only 56% of adults in Botswana are banked, with only 34% of elderly individuals (above 60 years) having a formal bank account (Goga et al., 2021). The study further indicated that 72% of grant recipients continue to receive their payments in cash, while only 20% opted to receive their funds into a bank account. This was confirmed in an interview with an Elderly Benefits Commissioner at the DSP, who indicated that only 12,266 beneficiaries of the OAP, WVP, DPA and DA were paid via bank account transfers as of July 2022. The remainder was paid in cash by BotswanaPost and Sandulela, serving 102,861 and 16,628 beneficiaries respectively. Paying grants exclusively via bank transfer would thus require a massive enrolment and communication exercise, the opening of (subsidized) bank accounts for the bulk of grant beneficiaries, and extensive assistance and financial education for grant recipients. Further, beneficiaries in remote areas would either need to travel long distances to the closest ATM or continue to be paid through the current off-site cash delivery system.

Mobile payments, either via MNO-led mobile money platforms or bank-led e-wallet services, would represent the most innovative and financially inclusive option in terms of a single payment channel for cash transfers. However, they also suffer from a number of drawbacks which are difficult to overcome, particularly for the elderly, the disabled and the poorest of the poor (who constitute the bulk of grant beneficiaries). First, as illustrated by BotswanaPost's 2020 PosoMoney pilot programme, it is not always possible to verify whether payments made to a mobile account or cellphone number were, in fact, cashed out. Further, elderly beneficiaries – including the close to 130,000 OAP and WVP recipients – often lack access to a mobile phone, or do not have the digital skills (or level of literacy) required to perform mobile transactions. In addition, biometric verification is not



feasible for mobile pay-outs, as this would require mobile agents to be equipped with expensive fingerprint scanners. ATMs could potentially be fitted with biometric scanners (this was piloted by FNB in South Africa), but the technology is expensive, the roll-out would be lengthy, and beneficiaries in areas without easy access to an ATM would have to travel long distances to collect their payments. Further, beneficiaries would have to update and verify their contact details each time they change their cellphone number, which – according to *Ipelegeng* staff members – happens relatively often among younger beneficiaries.

The idea of a choice model, in which the payment system is operated through the regular financial system rather than one or several appointed payment providers, has gained popularity among policy makers and international organizations in recent years. It is compelling, as it makes use of existing financial institutions' infrastructure and payment gateways, rather than establishing and operating a separate payment system for cash transfers. However, it is based on the assumption that all grant beneficiaries have access to one of the available payment options, i.e., a scenario of full financial inclusion, ideally in combination with widespread mobile phone ownership and high levels of financial and digital literacy. While this may be the case in parts of the global North, most African countries are unlikely to achieve this in the near future, making the choice model a distant dream, rather than an immediate reality. A choice model may be feasible in urban areas with a high density of financial access points, but it is unlikely to be a viable option for beneficiaries in rural and remote areas.

The fourth – and most probable – scenario would involve the expansion of payment services provided by BotswanaPost, including payment provision in all districts, as well as for all (or at least most) cash benefits. The processing of applications and (biometric) enrolment of beneficiaries could also be taken over by BotswanaPost, at least for grants not requiring assessment by a social worker. The Post already has a nationwide footprint with 132 branches, 20 kiosks and 85 postal agencies, including in many rural areas, and was in charge of all social pension payments in the country prior to the appointment of Sandulela for the Southern District in 2016. BotswanaPost provides biometric verifications for all pay-outs, and its systems are aligned with the MLGRD's requirements. In fact, BotswanaPost submitted a proposal in response to a tender in early 2022, in which it proposes to take over payments of the DPA and the DA, in addition to the OAP and the WVP. According to a BotswanaPost official, their services would include applications for payments into beneficiaries' personal bank account, which are currently processed by local authorities. In light of the slow progress of the 2021 MLGRD contract with Botswana Savings Bank (which has not proceeded beyond the planning/enrolment stage of its debit card-based system), an extension of the current payment structure operated by BotswanaPost might indeed be on the cards. It would move Botswana closer to the likes of South Africa, Uganda and

Lesotho, where the national postal agency plays a central role in disbursing social benefits.

It remains to be seen whether BotswanaPost's bid for the payment of additional grants is successful, and how the MLGRD will proceed in terms of its contracts with Sandulela and Botswana Savings Bank for payments in the Southern District. However, given the slow progress of overall social protection reforms in the country, more radical reforms – both with regard to the payment system and the shift from in-kind to cash benefits – are unlikely to be implemented in the short term.

## **6 Beneficiary views of Covid-19 relief measures**

To better understand the experiences of ordinary people with Covid-19 relief packages, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries and program implementers of social protection programs in three different districts in Botswana. This was done during a week-long field engagement in June 2022. Efforts were made to obtain both rural and urban experiences, conducting interviews in Kanye, Ramokgonami and Mahalapye (rural), as well as our main urban site of the capital city, Gaborone. In the rural districts, respondents were recruited through the help of administrators and program implementers from the MLGRD, while respondents in Gaborone were approached by researchers at their hawking sites. Consent was obtained verbally, and interviews were conducted in Setswana. No personal identifiable information of participants was collected.

The goal of this exercise was threefold: firstly, to corroborate widely-circulated anecdotes about the unsystematic assessment of eligibility for food parcels, and secondly, to get a signal, however noisy, of public opinion on how the various hard lockdowns affected the livelihoods of Botswana who are not, ordinarily, covered by any publicly-financed social safety net. Lastly, the intention was to obtain insights on whether respondents felt the government had done enough to:

- shield them from the economic shocks of the loss of income during the lockdown, and
- set them up for productive activity after the lockdown was lifted.

## 6.1 Food distribution

Overall, we find that the vast majority of our sample received a food basket. This was consistent across both rural and urban respondents. The exceptions to this were households where one member was a government employee, and, in the case of Gaborone, residents of the affluent Phakalane Golf Estate. Non-citizens in our sample did not receive food assistance from the government, a choice one Motswana who worked in the sports industry before the lockdown felt was ‘discriminatory’:

That was one big mistake that our government did. If you do a lockdown and people can’t go and fend for themselves, but then you start discriminating people, how do you think they’ll live? I even remember that time, the Red Cross tried to help the Zim[babwean] people...and there was a stampede, and they ended up stopping everything because they couldn’t control it. That food basket was discriminatory (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

A Zimbabwean stall-owner, who only began hawking foodstuffs after the lockdown was lifted, confirmed the lack of access to food parcels to be his experience.

Respondents relayed that early into the April 2020 lockdown, government social workers colloquially known as ‘Mma Boi[pelego]’ from Village/Ward Development Committees began their door-knocking registration and eligibility assessment of households. Accounts differ on the rigor of assessment, with some respondents reporting thorough questioning about sources of household income and number of employed members, while others reported not being asked anything at all. Respondents also reported a high amount of profiling by social workers during screening.

They would look at our houses. We told them, ‘You don’t have to look at the house; we can’t eat the house, what we need is food here’ (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

Almost everybody [got a food basket] except those who were not wise enough...you’re not working, and you’ve got a single son who’s working, and then you say, ‘I have a son who’s working.’ Neighbours had to appeal for you so that you would be provided for (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

You had to struggle to get those food parcels. Some had long received them while we were still waiting. It took about three weeks from the time they assessed us until the food arrived (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

On average, the food hampers – which included staples such as mealie meal (12.5kg), rice (10kg), sugar (10kg), condiments, beans, cooking oil, canned meats,

and beef (1kg) – lasted for about 2-3 weeks. Some (3) respondents report being made to sign off on parcels that were incomplete:

We were made to sign off on the list of items in the basket even though there were lots of missing items on the list (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

All they asked was for us to verify if the basket contained every item on the list. They later came back and brought all the missing items (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

Respondents who did receive the full parcel perceived the food parcels to be sufficient for their household size and needs at the time.

## **6.2 Once-off ISSF grant**

All but two out of the 16 small-scale traders/hawkers we interviewed applied for and received the BWP 1,000 ISSF grant. The waiting period between the time of application and approval varied from as short as two weeks to as long as three months. Payment was received electronically via bank account deposit or mobile transfer. Respondents reported using the grant to replenish stock, including investing in new assets such as a cell phone to be used for airtime vending.

## **6.3 Old age pension**

Eleven OAP grant recipients were interviewed out of a group of 70 that had assembled on the first day of monthly disbursement of the grant at a *kgotla* in the rural town of Kanye. This access point has been part of a 6-year pilot operation run out of the Elderly Benefits Division of the DSP, with the goal of increasing the efficiency of privately disbursed payments. Sandulela Technologies, a South African micro-payment processing service, has been the implementing partner for the pilot operation since its launch in September 2016. Payments are disbursed from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of every month, with a reported 400-450 beneficiaries using this payment point on a monthly basis.

Chief among our priorities was to understand whether there had been any interruption to the disbursement of benefits, and what the potential take-up of the new electronic card payment system would look like. All respondents reported that there was no interruption to payments at any point during or following the 2020 lockdown. Pensioners gathered at the *kgotla*, observed Covid-19 protocols, and received their payment in the same fashion they always had pre-lockdown. This was confirmed by two field officers of Sandulela, who were considered essential workers during the lockdown.

While all respondents owned a personal cell phone, only one had a phone with internet and WhatsApp capabilities. None of them felt confident in their ability to use their phones for texting or mobile banking; they were only confident about

making and receiving calls. Participants reported receiving a smart card that would allow them to collect their payments at a Choppies supermarket or their nearest branch. None of the respondents expressed interest in changing their benefits collection point, or confidence in using the cards or their cell phone to collect payments.

‘What happens if you do not use your card?’, asked one respondent, to which an officer responded ‘nothing’ and proceeded to explain that they can still come to the *kgotla* to receive their monthly benefit.

[if it changes] I will send the children to go to the bank to do it  
(Interview, Kanye, June 9, 2022)

Ten out of the 11 participants expressed that they would prefer the pension benefit to be increased. This was despite the fact that it had been increased by BWP 100 in the previous month (May). When asked what amount it should be, three respondents said BWP 1,500, a figure the field officers explained is often promised by opposition parties to win votes. Still, some expressed gratitude for the ‘gift’ from the government:

Since it is a gift, I think it is enough (Interview, Kanye, June 9, 2022)

It’s not the same as sleeping with hunger, since we are just being given, it’s better (Interview, Kanye, June 9, 2022)

## **6.4 Attitudes towards the government response**

Participants in this study expressed mild disappointment and resignation about the state of their economic livelihoods post-lockdown. When probed to rate the adequacy of the response from the government, some respondents relayed that their perception was framed by a lack of expectation of help from the government to begin with. Informal venders expressed how they were used to relying on themselves and their personal support networks, rather than the government, for support:

I am used to struggling on my own, so I did not expect much from the government. What can you buy with BWP 1,000 to push your business forward? (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10)

I don’t think of what the government can and cannot do for me because no help has ever come. As long as it allows us to sell our wares, I am fine (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

Even now, the country has not yet recovered. The lockdown was protracted. And after that we had curfews, which were also protracted. In this country you have to stand on your own two feet – you cannot depend on elected officials... there is nothing for free in

this country, not even land anymore (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

Other respondents expressed understanding for the government's lack of more extensive support during the pandemic:

I don't want to fault the government too much because nobody expected that something like this could happen. I can only fault it for not being financially prepared for a natural disaster, which it should always be (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

The government is only human – when you make plans in a way that benefits you, things go wrong (Interview, Village, Gaborone, June 8, 2022)

Others, however, did voice criticism regarding certain aspects of the government response, including the lack of support for unemployed youth, and the assessment for food hampers:

The government could have thrown us [young people] something small, or at least helped us find something to do (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

I think the assessment for food grants should have been more thorough and more open so there was less misallocation of resources...Tenders that were given away due to the emergency of Covid – they were very mishandled and overpriced. If we had been more thorough, maybe we could have saved more and helped more people (Interview, Broadhurst, Gaborone, June 10, 2022)

Overall, the sentiments expressed by the people in our sample appear more subdued than in neighbouring South Africa, where civil society was at the forefront of pushing for social protection responses to the pandemic.

## **7 The impact of Covid-19 on social protection reforms**

The government of Botswana's efforts to mitigate the hardship resulting from the national lockdown imposed at the beginning of April 2020 focused primarily on substantial wage subsidies and food parcels. Whilst wage subsidies were of little benefit to poor Botswana, the distribution of food parcels was a considerable achievement, helping to mitigate hardship in late April and May. In neighbouring South Africa, the national government's attempts to distribute food parcels were

much less successful; it was left to civil society (with support from the private sector and provincial and local government) to step in and distribute food. In Botswana, civil society played a modest but important supplementary role, reaching some households that did not receive food parcels early enough or in sufficient quantities. But the vast majority of food relief was distributed through the state.

Botswana's successful large-scale distribution of food relief was made possible by a number of factors. First, the operation was largely decentralized to the local level, with assessment, procurement and distribution organized locally. Secondly, the assessment procedures were kept simple, serving primarily to exclude the non-poor minority rather than impose a tough means test dividing poor from poorer. Thirdly, local government officials appear to have exercised their roles professionally, with few reported incidents of corruption. Finally, and most importantly, the operation built on long experience in food relief in response not only to emergencies due to drought but also through institutionalized feeding schemes for children, destitutes and other vulnerable groups.

The food parcel operation was not flawless, however. The Government appears to have announced and then imposed the lockdown with little thought of how this would affect the poor or what the state could do to mitigate the hardship. In announcing the lockdown, the President pointed to wage subsidies but did not refer to food relief. The national coordinator of the food relief operation was only appointed two weeks into the lockdown, in mid-April. Food therefore reached poor households only after a delay, and the quantity of relief was widely seen as insufficient. Although the cost was low, the Government appears to have decided not to distribute further food on the basis of expense.

Moreover, the benefits of food relief were offset by the suspension of various other social protection programmes. Regular feeding schemes through schools and clinics were suspended under the lockdown (although there was discussion of providing food parcels for children to take home). The *Ipelegeng* workfare programme paid out benefits to workers who had started their month of employment, but was then largely suspended for several months to conform with lockdown requirements. The net effect of this was government support for the poor may have actually dropped between May and September, when regular *Ipelegeng* activity resumed.

The government also declined to introduce the kinds of emergency cash transfer reforms that were evident in several neighbouring countries. The South African government may have failed to distribute food but it did provide massive cash support. It supplemented the 18 million social grants that it already paid every month (i.e., it extended its social grant system vertically) and, after a short delay, it introduced a modest emergency grant (the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant) that soon reached 5 million more people (i.e., the South African

government extended the social grant system horizontally). The emergency grant was probably the fastest large-scale rollout of a cash transfer programme anywhere ever in the global South. In Namibia, a once-off cash transfer was implemented with astonishing speed. The government of Botswana appears not to have even considered seriously any such emergency reforms.

In sum, the government of Botswana appeared very reluctant to consider seriously any innovative responses to the Covid-19 emergency, and instead resorted to those tried-and-tested interventions that could be implemented reasonably easily under lockdown conditions.

Whilst the Government appeared cautious, civil society organizations and international organizations were inclined to activity. Firstly, local civil society organizations responded quickly to the lockdown by trying to procure and distribute food supplies. This required extensive paperwork – and queuing at undermanned government offices – to comply with lockdown regulations. Civil society organizations’ efforts were not insignificant, but they were overtaken by the government’s food parcel operation in late April.

International organizations were also concerned that the Government was underestimating the impact of the emergency. UNICEF noted (in its 2020 Country Office Annual Report) that ‘more than 366,000 schoolchildren temporarily lost access to school meals due to national lockdowns’. Moreover, ‘many deprived children live in households that are not covered by social protection programmes’ (UNICEF, 2020: 1-2). The lead in charting a more effective response to Covid-19 was taken by the UNDP, under a dynamic country representative. The UNDP, in coordination with the various other international agencies and the government, appointed three sets of consultants to prepare recovery plans for the (formal) private sector, the informal sector and social protection respectively.

## **7.1 The UNDP and the National Social Protection Recovery Plan**

Consultants were contracted in May to draft the National Social Protection Recovery Plan (NSPRP). The consultants – from the UK and South Africa, assisted by a staff member at BIDPA in Gaborone – completed their report at the end of June and it was published in early July. The NSPRP proposed a set of reforms to be implemented over either the short- or medium-term (i.e., ‘over the next five years’) and even longer-term (five to ten years). The authors framed their proposals in terms of the general ambition to ‘build back better’ after Covid-19, and the specific aspiration of the government of Botswana to move onto a path that would lead to sustainably higher living standards (as set out in Vision 2030).

The authors of the NSPRP were careful to praise explicitly – perhaps over-generously – the government for both its ‘mature and domestically-funded’ pre-



Covid-19 system and its response to Covid-19. But the NSPRP report can be read as an implicit critique of what the government had not done prior to and in response to Covid-19. The authors declared that the country needed a ‘new paradigm’ for social protection:

Botswana has been relying on a set of social assistance programmes that were established in the last century, when it was one of the poorest countries in Africa, and which are increasingly unsuited to its current status as one of the wealthiest, and in particular to its 21<sup>st</sup> century aspiration to become a high-income country by 2036. ... The new paradigm needs to go beyond poverty reduction: it needs instead to build resilience, to redistribute wealth, to invest in all Botswana so that they can contribute to and share in the benefits of growth, and to build a new social compact between the State and its citizens. In common with other upper-middle and high-income countries, Botswana needs to consolidate a social assistance system that reflects the vulnerabilities of individuals throughout their lives, and leaves no-one behind. (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020: ix).

The call to ‘leave no one behind’ echoed the UNDP’s mantra.

Some of the recommendations in the NSPRP entailed endorsement of reforms that were already on the agenda, including the production of a Single Social Registry (the authors noted that ‘the achievement of assessing two-thirds of all households in the country for Covid-19 Food Relief has also shown irrefutably that an integrated single registry is possible as well as essential’ (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020: xii)), and the adoption of new technologies of payment (the SOBERS system) and a general Management Information System. The NSPRP endorsed the recommendations of the pre-Covid UNICEF study that feeding schemes be examined carefully. It reiterated the importance of reforming *Ipelegeng* to incorporate more capacity-building.

Other recommendations were more far-reaching, even if not entirely novel. The authors suggested that Covid-19 might have provided a ‘timely opportunity’ to transform the country’s social protection policies (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020). The NSPRP proposed the consolidation of existing child-focused programmes into a universal Infant and Child Grant, paid in cash, which over time could expand into a full Child Grant by raising the age limit. It proposed the consolidation of existing disability-focused programmes into a Disability Grant (also to be paid in cash). It employed the language of rights. It proposed ‘the creation of a Ministry of Social Development and of a Botswana Social Benefits Agency’ (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020). It pointed to the possibility of expanding *Ipelegeng* into an employment-guarantee scheme. OAP benefits should be increased in line with inflation. The authors also proposed a

Temporary Social Support Grant, incorporating the existing Destitute Persons Programmes, to provide a ‘residual household-based safety net of last resort ... to provide discretionary support, through cash and food transfers, to households impacted by a serious shock’ (such as Covid-19) (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020).

Perhaps the most radical suggestion was that social protection should be ‘rights-based’:

There is currently no constitutional right to social protection in Botswana, and no legislative framework to underpin the social protection systems in the country. As social protection evolves to the kind of inclusive life-course approach proposed in this Plan, however, it should become a justiciable right, meaning it is underpinned by constitutional provisions or laws that empower citizens to claim their right to social protection through the courts if necessary (as is the case in South Africa, for example). (Freeland, Devereux & Mookodi, 2020)

This would make a fundamental break in the way that the government of Botswana saw its social protection programmes. UNICEF continued to advocate a shift from feeding programmes for ‘vulnerable groups’ to a cash transfer programme (i.e., a South African style child support grant).

## **7.2 Reforming social protection**

The Minister of Local Government and Rural Development appeared impressed by the efforts of the UNDP – and perhaps also the World Bank (see below) – to propose ways of modernising Botswana’s social protection system. Soon after the completion of the NSPRP, the Minister took the NSPF – which had been gathering dust for more than two years – to Cabinet for its approval. Cabinet formally approved the Framework in August. But it is not clear what the government was actually agreeing to when it approved the Framework. What is clear is that the government did not seem to want to act with any urgency, instead tasking the MLGRD with preparing a composite implementation plan that took into account both the Framework (drafted before Covid-19) and the UNDP’s National Social Protection Recovery Plan.

By the time that the Framework was presented to Cabinet, in August 2020, the crisis had abated, at least in the eyes of the government. Having rushed to impose a lockdown, the government of Botswana also acted swiftly to lift the most onerous restrictions in May and June (although they were reimposed temporarily in Gaborone in early August). As early as 22nd May, the Coordinator of Social Protection Packages for Covid-19 Pandemic declared that Botswana should resume fending for themselves now that the lockdown was being lifted. This point was reiterated by the Assistant Minister of Local Government and Rural

Development, Setlhabelo Modukanele: ‘Since the lockdown has been eased, this is an opportunity for Batswana to start fending for themselves, more so that there are budget constraints’.<sup>74</sup>

It is possible that the Government’s reluctance to consider innovative emergency measures was itself linked to the fact that there was already underway a process of reviewing – or modernising – social protection. This process had been initiated by the World Bank and was later fuelled by the UNICEF study of feeding schemes and then the UNDP-driven National Social Protection Recovery Plan. It is also possible that the international agencies felt reluctant to propose short-term emergency measures given that they were already lobbying for more far-reaching reforms. The result was that there appeared to be little or no debate over more innovative reforms in the period of acute and immediate crisis, between mid-March and June 2020.

This can be contrasted with the case in neighbouring South Africa. As soon as lockdown measures were announced, a loose and informal coalition of government officials, civil society activists and academics began to prepare a package of innovative, emergency extensions to the country’s social protection programmes. On the very first day of the national lockdown, officials in the Presidency tabled a concrete proposal for a new emergency social grant, which was immediately discussed in the highest levels of government. Three weeks later, the President announced that existing social grants would be supplemented and the new emergency grant would be introduced in May. When the state failed to deliver food and cash quickly, it was harshly criticized in the public media and in private. People could apply for the new grant in mid-May, using new technologies. The first payments were made at the end of May (Seekings, 2020a).

It would be wrong to imagine that either the policy-making elite or the public at large in South Africa is fully supportive of the expansion of social grants. There is well-documented ambivalence – and even hostility – to paying social grants to many adults of working age (rather than providing opportunities for employment). But the attitude of the policy-making elite in Botswana appears more hostile to social grants than attitudes in South Africa. In interviews and conversations, ministers and officials routinely denounce ‘double-dipping’ in the way that they used to denounce ‘dependency’. Both ‘dependency’ and ‘double-dipping’ are manifestations of perceived delinquency, with people claiming benefits to which they are not entitled, and are therefore violating the social compact between themselves and society. Ministers and officials are also insistent that beneficiaries need to undergo lessons or training in ‘mindset change’. This is a call taken up by

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.thegazette.news/news/cash-strapped-relief-food-programme-may-stop/>. [2023, October 17].

the president himself, in early 2021. The president appeared to be calling for the poor to embrace entrepreneurship, take initiative and embrace self-help, with the implication that their poverty hitherto was in some part the result of sloth or indolence.

In Botswana, almost every major reform of social protection since Independence has been championed by the then president or vice-president. Vice-president (and then president) Masire presided over the introduction and then institutionalization of drought relief (including each of workfare, feeding schemes and direct support for the destitute who were unable to support themselves). In the 1990s, with the support of his Minister of Finance Festus Mogae, Masire introduced old-age pensions. Mogae, who succeeded Masire as President, proceeded to introduce grants for the care of orphans and reforms to the country's destitution policy. His successor, Ian Khama, personally championed the expansion of workfare as a reborn *Ipelegeng* programme as well as the introduction of the Poverty Eradication Programme.

In the face of – and aftermath of – Covid-19 in 2020-21, however, there was little indication that the president (or vice-president) was personally invested in the reform of social protection. When the president identified 'reset priorities' in early 2021, the modernization of social protection was not on his list; 'mindset change' was on the list.

The Implementation Plan was completed in late 2020. It identified four areas of reform: social assistance reform, consolidating programmes along the life cycle, and including a new Infant and Child Grant (as also recommended in the Recovery Plan); reforms of the labour market and livelihood programmes; the introduction of an inclusive social insurance system (in a second 5-year phase); and reforms of social work, through improved 'case management' ('based on the methodology of social intermediation services'). The government then requested 'financial and technical assistance from UNDP to engage consultants to map the existing social protection programmes delivered across Ministries identified by the NSPF against the five-stage life-course model stipulated in the NSPF Implementation Plan'.

The initiative appeared to stall in mid-2022 when the external consultants, contracted by UNDP, withdrew. Whilst the mapping exercise continued, the possibility of reforms appeared to have receded.

### **7.3 The World Bank**

Ambivalence on the part of the Government did not discourage international organizations from their efforts to modernise social protection. The UNDP's initiative in early 2020 was followed by a renewed initiative from the World Bank. Prior to Covid-19 it had become clear to the World Bank's team working on social protection in Botswana that they had reached a crossroads: To keep moving forward – and to realise the potential of their existing technical assistance

(especially with the piloting of the Single Social Registry, improved management of *Ipelegeng* and the introduction of a PMT) – the Bank would need a deeper engagement. The opportunity arose in 2020 when the Bank embarked on a major new Review of the Public Social Protection System in Southern Africa. The initiation of the regional project might have been a serendipitous coincidence, but it provided the Bank’s team working on Botswana with an opportunity to sketch out a substantial roadmap for continued reform (or modernization) of Botswana’s social protection system. Their report – on Botswana Social Protection Programs and Systems Review – was published in March 2022. By then, the economy of Botswana had rebounded strongly, although it appears that the benefits were slow to trickle down to the poor (as the Bank’s own modelling suggested).

In the meantime, in April 2021, the World Bank provided a loan to the government of Botswana, part of which was to be used to support the expansion of the Single Social Registry. The loan would be used, inter alia, ‘to improve capacity to more accurately identify and assist poor and vulnerable population affected by shocks such as Covid-19’ (World Bank, 2021).

The Bank’s 2022 Social Protection Programs and Systems Review proposed the continuation of administrative reforms that were already underway (including the Single Social Registry and PMT) and a suite of new reforms to target the poor more precisely with social protection. It recommended that means-testing be introduced into the very expensive (and regressive) Tertiary Scholarship Program (‘weeding out the wealthiest beneficiaries’) to free up funds for a more developmental and better targeted Destitutes Program. The Review favoured refocusing the targeting of social protection on households rather than individuals. Focusing on households means that there is overlap (or, to use the language favoured by government officials, as noted in the Review, ‘double-dipping’). The Review pointed out that this is generally legal: ‘For example, a temporary Destitute Persons Program beneficiary is also allowed to participate in *Ipelegeng* for a period of six months’. The Review comments:

While these overlaps are appropriate in some cases and in fact allowed by law, some overlaps could be due to weaknesses as a result of lack of automated databases and a well-functioning social registry. Since Botswana has a well-established unique identification system, once the social registry is fully functional it would be possible to monitor these overlaps using the national identification number as the common key. This could then help the GoB to institute appropriate policies to maintain or eliminate overlaps. (Guyen et al., 2022: 27).

This appears to be an acknowledgement of the prevalent sentiment among government officials: There is a need to identify and remove from the beneficiary rolls anyone who is abusing the system.

Surprisingly, the World Bank's 2022 review does not seem to have been distributed widely within Botswana. Reportedly, neither the UNDP nor some senior officials in the MLGRD had seen it when we met with them in June and August 2022 respectively.

## **7.4 The prospects for reform**

The Government insists that it is committed to implementing reforms in line with the National Social Protection Framework (approved by Cabinet in 2020) and the National Social Protection Recovery Plan, drafted by the UNDP's consultants in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020. But this is hard to square with the norms and attitudes articulated by ministers, senior officials, and the president himself. The president's priority is clearly mindset change, meaning the embrace of work and an emphatic rejection of dependency on handouts. Interviews with district and sub-district officials suggest that these norms and attitudes are widespread.

There is a logic to these attitudes. The social protection system in Botswana rests on the social workers who can assess people's individual needs, whether these are escaping child abuse at home or achieving productive livelihoods. Introducing a large-scale social grant programme would be an implicit recognition that the existing approach is not working, as well as an assertion of confidence that additional social grants would not result in an increased dependency on government and even less development. The government of Botswana has not reached a point where it is willing to abandon its existing preference for discretionary social protection, and introduce large-scale cash transfer programmes. It is impatient with the discourse of rights to social protection (although officials have embraced the idea that children have rights with respect to abuse, schooling, etc.). The shocks arising from Covid-19 did not shake these attitudes.

Given this, a possibly more fruitful line of engagement would be to consider more fully how and why the current system is not working as it was imagined, and how it might become more effective. Social workers and other officials working at the local level have many practical ideas for reforms that simplify or enhance their work. The policy reform process is currently very top-down, but this need not preclude learning from below also. The World Bank and UNICEF appear to have accepted these limits to reform, but the UNDP appears wedded to the idea of much bolder programmatic expansion.

If reforms to the current suite of government policies do not result in improved outcomes – including graduation out of dependency on social protection, where appropriate, and an ensuing decline in the poverty headcount rate – then the government of Botswana will need to consider the kinds of bolder programmatic reforms proposed by the UNDP (and, in the past, by the World Bank and UNICEF).

## 8 Conclusion

Covid-19 rapidly spread across the world, inducing near-global panic. Governments locked down their populations and closed their borders. Economies contracted sharply. Both previously vulnerable groups and groups that had hitherto been economically comfortable faced sharp declines in their incomes. In response, many governments expanded their social protection systems. Gentilini et al. (2022) describe these as an ‘unprecedented’ expansion of social cash transfers, ‘the largest scale up in history’, with ‘record-level global spending’.

This global nature of the crisis does not mean, however, that Covid-19 posed identical challenges to social protection systems everywhere. The precise challenges varied from country to country, as did their duration. Social protection responses varied also, reflecting both the different challenges posed by Covid-19, the existing institutional and programmatic architecture, political pressures and constraints, national (and international) resources, and governments’ preferences. Across most of Sub-Saharan Africa, social protection reforms were modest and slow to be effected (Beazley, Bischler & Doyle, 2021). South Africa was the obvious exception to this pattern (Gronbach, Seekings & Megannon, 2022).

Botswana’s social protection system did not face exactly the same challenges as even its immediate neighbours. Botswana experienced in 2020 a particularly (and unprecedentedly) sharp economic contraction, exacerbated by an unusually severe lockdown imposed by the government. The country’s health system did not face major challenges until 2021, by which time the economy was already rebounding strongly.

The government’s responses reflected the country’s particular history of social protection, which revolved around targeted support for the poor, either at the discretion of social workers at the local level, or through feeding schemes or workfare programmes. The government provides parsimonious support for people who cannot support themselves on the grounds of age or infirmity, but aspires to empower able-bodied poor people through interventions that (based on social workers’ assessments) are tailored to their precise needs. Ideologically, most members of Botswana’s political and economic elite have long worried about dependency on government handouts.

Covid-19 appears to have had little effect on the government of Botswana’s approach to social protection. The emergency provided an opportunity for international organizations to renew their advocacy of expansionary reforms – including some kind of a child grant – but the government of Botswana appeared interested only in those reforms that accorded with its existing approach, which focused on very targeted programmes implemented by social workers at the local level. The Government remained ambivalent towards the kinds of social protection reform advocated by international organizations, both before and especially in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than expand public

provision, the government appeared determined to reduce it, by eliminating double-dipping and recasting workfare as a training exercise – involving a mindset change as well as learning new skills – that would ensure that beneficiaries graduate out of poverty.

Despite its shock-responsive origins in drought relief, Botswana's social protection system proved surprisingly inflexible in response to the shock of Covid-19 and the ensuing economic hardship in 2020-21. Programmes designed originally to respond to drought proved ill-suited to the conditions that resulted from a severe national lockdown in April and May 2020 (as Beazley, Bischler and Doyle (2021) suggest was true also in Ethiopia and Uganda). The three pillars of Botswana's social protection system have, in the past, proved effective in terms of drought relief. But only one of these pillars was adapted successfully to the novel challenge posed by Covid-19 lockdowns: Faced with severe hardship under Covid-19 lockdown, the state distributed food parcels widely, after an impressively short delay. This was a substantial achievement and compared very favourably with the failure of the South African government to distribute food at the same time. This operation was possible precisely because there was already a significant degree of decentralization in the implementation of social protection programmes.

The other pillars of the social protection system proved difficult to adjust in the face of the crisis. Workfare (through *Ipelegeng*) has in the past been adjusted in response to drought: The quotas for participants were expanded quickly and effectively. Village Development Committees can quickly identify additional participants. But the lockdown meant that *Ipelegeng* was suspended. In hindsight, this was probably an error. Pre-Covid feeding schemes (specifically the Vulnerable Groups Feeding Programme) have also been expanded in the past in response to drought. In response to Covid-19, the feeding schemes were suspended (or at least scaled back massively). Again, this was probably a major error. With hindsight, *Ipelegeng* workers could have been used to distribute food from clinics and schools to their intended recipients. Presumably the Government believed that its food basket operation would obviate the need to keep open the *Ipelegeng* and pre-Covid feeding programmes. Regardless of the success of the food basket operation, this was surely a miscalculation. In the face of drought, social workers have in the past recommended increased numbers of people for the destitute allowances. The speed at which the lockdown was imposed, and relief then required in April 2020, precluded the time-consuming procedures used to assess eligibility for the destitute allowances. In short, the bureaucracy in Botswana proved adept at rolling out the food basket programme but was insufficiently agile (or willing) to adjust other existing programmes to respond to Covid-19.

The government of Botswana appears not even to have considered the payment of top-up allowances to social grant beneficiaries or the introduction of an



emergency social grant along either South African (long-term) or Namibian (once-off) lines. The government appeared unpersuaded by the repeated proposals from international organizations for the expansion of social protection. The government surely felt constrained by the apparently weak state of public finances at the time (and funded its emergency relief measures largely out of funds repurposed from existing budgets). Supplements to existing grants (along South African lines) or payments (as in Namibia) could have provided poor households and communities with a significant injection of cash. The severe lockdown largely precluded using cash, however. The South African or Namibian measures would have made sense as a short-term emergency measure only if poor households had been able to purchase food and other necessities at local shops. This, however, was not possible under the severe lockdown measures. In addition, payments along the lines of the Namibian intervention would have required technologies and infrastructure that did not exist, or which the Government felt unable to mobilize at such short notice.

Payment system reforms were limited to the small-scale piloting of mobile money payments to pensioners, without giving much thought to the needs and abilities of this particular group of beneficiaries. While the pandemic has re-ignited calls for the consolidation and digitalization of Botswana's grant payment system, progress continues to be slow. The expansion of e-wallet payments for *Ipelegeng* beneficiaries, as well as for the once-off ISSF grant to informal workers, represents the only significant element of innovation. Broader payment system reforms, while under discussion by the MLGRD and repeatedly proposed by payment providers, are unlikely to be rolled out in the immediate future. This is partly due to the highly fragmented nature of the current payment system, as well as the relatively low levels of formal financial inclusion, and the difficulty of providing digital payments to financially excluded beneficiaries in remote and rural areas.

The limited effects of Covid-19 on social protection reforms reflected in part the weakness of political pressure for change: No prominent member of the government championed the expansion of social protection; some sympathetic government officials were redeployed into new positions, thereby reducing their influence; neither opposition parties nor civil society exerted significant pressure on the ruling party and state; and international agencies failed to coordinate effectively or promote significant public debate. It also reflected the enduring and widespread commitment within Botswana to the norms and values that underpinned Botswana's system of social protection. These rested, above all, on the idea that assistance from the state should be linked, wherever possible, to the goal of people achieving self-reliance through productive work, and thereby being able to fulfil their responsibilities to the wider society. Proposals for reform that got traction within Botswana were generally those that moved social protection in a more developmental direction. These norms and values rendered the

government of Botswana unable to respond effectively to the shock of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown on work. The government's response to Covid-19 was not to expand social protection in new directions but rather to ease the lockdown in order to return quickly to normality. Little attention was paid to the enduring short-term challenges of hardship. The Covid-19 crisis seems to have solidified sentiment within government that its priority was to assist people in poor households to acquire the skills and attitudes considered necessary to develop self-reliant livelihoods.

The primary lesson from the Botswana case is that even social protection systems designed to respond to shocks may not be able to respond to a new kind of shock. The Covid-19 emergency revealed the difficulties in repurposing Botswana's existing programmes in response to an urgent need for relief, as well as the ideological obstacles to expanding cash transfers to the poor. An emphasis on the creation of new livelihood opportunities for the poor might be an important long-term strategy, but it is no substitute for programmes that can provide relief quickly in the face of crises such as Covid-19.

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