

CASH TRANSFERS CHANGE FORTUNES OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN KURIA WEST

BY CHRISTINE BUKANIA

Over the past decade, social cash transfers have become a vital lifeline for the country's most vulnerable people. As the government promises to increase the number of people benefitting from social protection, elderly people in Kuria West are already feeling the impact of the cash transfers.

One of the beneficiaries is 77-year-old Shadrack Muroa Gibichai. Taking cover from the hot afternoon sun, the frail man of diminutive stature sits in the living room of his new mud-walled hut in Bukira North, in Kuria West. With slightly shaking hands, he peels and eats pieces of boiled sweet potato. By his side sits his wife Peris Boke Shadrack, whose grace and feisty spirit are muted, but not extinguished by the passing of the years.

Shadrack is obviously weakened by age and poor health, and it is now up to his wife to care of him and often, to speak for both of them.

She came to this home, a young and eager wife, anticipating a life as a part of Shadrack's wealthy extended family. But it wasn't long before her father-in-law decided to migrate to Tanzania.

"We refused to go and because of that, we were left with nothing. He carried all the property that we had relied on, including the cattle that gave us milk," Peris recalls. For the new bride, this marked the end of her honeymoon. The next decades would be marked by a frugal lifestyle and hard work as small scale farmers.

Break down of family support systems

No sign of this work remains. Having given all their cattle as dowry for their sons to marry, the couple lost their primary means of production. "We no longer have draught animals.

Neither do we have milk cows. If we had these two things, we would have been able to plough a large area and produce enough food."

Peris regrets that this sacrifice has not brought them much benefit. The relationship with her daughters-in-law is strained, and her two sons, though living in close proximity, do not help much.

"Considering that I am their biological mother, I wish they could have cared for me a little. It hurts to see my sons turn out with such hard hearts." Peris is candid, while Shadrack, a man of few words, only says, "I can only pray for them."

Slowed by their advancing age and with no family support, the couple's fortunes started dwindling and they found themselves in abject poverty. Until six months ago, they lived in two collapsing, leaking grass-thatched huts with two of their grandchildren.

"Our neighbours felt very sorry for us and worried that one day, our huts would cave in and bury us," Peris remembers.

Safe housing

Their life took a turn for the better when Shadrack became a beneficiary of the cash transfer for elderly people, which is administered through the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Services. Through this programme, people aged 65 and above, and who meet predetermined poverty and vulnerability criteria, are selected to receive Sh2,000 per month. The criteria, which has been tested and refined over time, includes age of the beneficiary, household income and productive assets, physical and health status, general economic status of other family members, just to mention a few. Apart from the data collected by government officials, community members participate in verification of the selected individuals. Because the fund is not yet sufficient to cover all



AGING WITH DIGNITY: Boke Gekene sits quietly outside her house. Below, Gekene discusses a point with a community development assistant, John Meng'anyi.



the elderly people, these meetings also help community members to collectively prioritize the names of those they perceive to be in utmost need.

Shadrack registered his name at the chief's baraza in Ikerege, and after a waiting period, he was informed that the money had arrived. The first disbursement was Sh10,000, which Peris says

is the largest sum she has ever held at one time.

"I immediately bought 15 iron sheets and wood, and then I asked my son-in-law to help us build this house. Do you know how it feels like? It's like moving from a toilet into a house!" exclaims Peris. So far, Shadrack has received Sh14,000, which enabled them to buy chairs, kitchen utensils, bedding and clothing for her grandchildren. With the rest of the money, Peris buys foodstuff like meat and sugar to supplement their diet.

The situation was not so precarious for Boke Matiko Gekene of Nyamagagana sub-location. In her heyday, she was an active and prosperous business woman, who travelled far and wide and earned enough money to build a durable homestead for herself. But her eyesight has since failed her, and until she was admitted in to the cash transfer programme, she sat outside her house and received whatever she could from her daughter-in-law. She says that

she now has a good mattress, a blanket and good clothes, and money to buy extra food. Judging by the glitter in her eye, the journey to the post office is a new highlight in Boke's life, perhaps because it is reminiscent of her younger years. "I sit on the motorcycle, right behind the cyclist, and my daughter-in-law sits behind me. Then we go pukupukupukupuku, all the way to the post office." She explains not once, but three times.

Community development assistant John Rioba Meng'anyi explains that it is not just the material benefit that counts. "Some of the beneficiaries had their first opportunity to collect money over the counter and to interact directly with government officials. This makes them walk a little prouder than they did. They now feel like they are also Kenyans."

Evolution of social protection in Kenya

About six per cent of the total population of Kenya is over 60

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— Peris

Photos/CHRISTINE BUKANIA



GUARDIAN: Peris Boke poses for a photo with her grandchildren.

years old. This is more than three million people. As traditional safety nets have eroded, elderly people have been required to take greater responsibility for their grandchildren, especially in the context of the devastating impact of HIV/Aids.

To provide immediate relief to vulnerable older persons and protect them from extreme poverty, the government initiated the Older Persons Cash Transfer. Since last year, more than 200,000 elderly people have received the monthly stipend of Sh2,000. Out of these, 525 are Kuria West residents.

Cash transfers are not very old in Kenya. It was only in 2004 that the first programme, targeting orphans and vulnerable children, was initiated — first as a pilot covering Nairobi, Kwale and Garissa districts. Over the years, lessons derived from this pilot and experiences by other countries have been used to improve delivery. In 2012, the National Social Protection Policy was approved. A sessional paper on policy is set to be presented to the National Assembly for debate.

Apart from the cash transfer for older persons, the Kenya government has started cash transfer programmes for orphans and vulnerable children and persons with severe disabilities as well as the Hunger Safety Net Programme and the Urban Food Subsidy Cash Transfer.

No smooth sailing

Although the benefits are visible for all to see, challenges still abound. Many old people in Kuria West live in remote areas and have no access to mobile phones. Where they are frail and unable to follow up on the payments themselves, they are vulnerable to trickery by the people they trust the most, often younger family members. Cases of forgeries and false representation are not unheard of, which has prompted the disbursing authorities to tighten

the system of verification and put measures in place to reduce duplication.

At the local level, beneficiary committees play an important support role. Thomas Bogomba is one of seven committee members in Tagare location. It includes people elected by beneficiaries, the chief and representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Services, who are ex-officio members.

“We help to organise barazas, through which communities get information about the programme. We go around the villages to inform beneficiaries about the dates of disbursements and that they receive the necessary mobility support to go to the post office to collect their cash,” Thomas explains. Where there are complaints, they advise community members to visit the social services office.

Thomas asserts that through his close interaction with beneficiaries, he has seen the change in their general appearance, clothing and homes, and this, according to him, is an indication that their lives have improved.

But his concern is for those who are not included in the scheme. “Many people need this support, but the funds are not sufficient to cover all the elderly people.”

Perhaps this too will soon be fulfilled. Speaking during the opening of the Social Protection Conference Week at the KICC last Tuesday, President Uhuru Kenyatta expressed his commitment to progressively increase investment in social protection. This financial year alone, the government has allocated a budget of Sh13.6 billion for vulnerable people, part of which will go towards increasing the number of elderly beneficiaries. He also launched biometric registration for beneficiaries to improve efficiency and accountability.



STITCH IN TIME: Peris Boke outside the new house.



WHAT ARE YOUR NEEDS? John Meng’anyi chats with elderly people.

LESSONS ON SAFETY NETS FROM AFRICA

BY CHRISTINE BUKANIA

OVER the last two decades, there has been a growing interest by African countries to provide safety nets to support poor and vulnerable populations. This represents a shift from seasonal emergency aid programmes that characterised past response to livelihood shocks.

In 2014, the World Bank led an assessment of social safety nets in 22 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The report, titled ‘Reducing poverty and investing in people: The new role of safety nets in Africa’, is an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies and approaches to reducing chronic poverty and vulnerability.

According to the report, there is an encouraging trend to develop social safety nets as stand-alone programmes, with countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mozambique and Tanzania already registering positive progress towards establishing national programmes.

In comparison, middle income Southern African countries like Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland have been more successful in establishing long-term national cash transfer programmes. Social pension programmes are common and cover a large percentage of older persons in these countries. Nonetheless, coverage of poor and vulnerable households is still inadequate even in these countries.

Closer home, Rwanda’s social protection programme is worth mentioning. Through political commitment and allocation of financial resources, the government of Rwanda has managed to grow small, fragmented interventions into a co-ordinated social protection programme. The

National Social Protection Strategy builds upon the country’s Vision 2020 Umurenge programme, and is therefore designed as part of a longer term strategy to tackle underlying poverty and inequality issues, so as to enable citizens to contribute to economic growth.

Public work, access to microfinance, vocational skills training and conditional provision of health and education services are offered alongside direct social support, depending on the vulnerability level of targeted beneficiaries. Consequently, vulnerable households receive critical support to improve their well-being, and at the same time, investments are made for long-term skills development, job creation and economic growth. Apart from the Umurenge programme, Rwanda has a special direct and in-kind Assistance Fund for Genocide Survivors. According to World Bank’s assessment, Rwanda’s priority now lies in harmonising these two programmes.

Kenya has not done badly either. The National Social Protection Policy was approved by the National Assembly in 2012, and a Sessional Paper on the policy will soon be presented for debate. To improve delivery, the government is consolidating five cash transfer programmes (the hunger safety net, the urban food subsidy cash transfer, cash transfer for orphans and vulnerable children, older persons cash transfer and cash transfer for persons with severe disabilities) into one national safety net programme. Other measures such as improved targeting, a single registry, introduction of biometric registration, and better monitoring and accountability systems, are intended to improve the effectiveness of the programme.