

# SOCIAL PROTECTION

## Role of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs)

### THE SMALLEST PLAYERS ARE THE BIGGEST FACTOR

State social protection services cover less than 10% of the population in many African countries. Non-State actors (NSAs) have stepped in to fill the void – especially small self-help groups which are more numerous, more active, and cumulatively reach more people with more impact than any other part of national social service systems.

Independent research in more than 30 diverse areas of Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda shows that community-based organisations (CBOs – self-help groups and membership associations) represent the first and often the only social services that are available and accessible to the people.

Virtually every low-income man, woman and child belongs to or depends on at least one such group. There are thousands of them, everywhere, addressing general welfare or specific vulnerabilities of widows, orphans, people living with disabilities or HIV/AIDS, refugees, among others.

CBOs do more than compensate for State default. Their small size, highly localised operations and traditional methods – which make them difficult to track and regulate – make them especially efficient and effective at the point of service delivery. They are owned by; run by; and, tailored to the community they serve.

Most are unregistered groupings formed and managed on traditional principles of solidarity and mutual trust. They provide financial, material and social support to the most needy (protective welfare), forms of insurance, savings and micro credit (preventive welfare), and establish income-generating activities (promotive welfare) to the best of their ability, with what little they have.

Though they lack the scale, reach and networks to drive transformative welfare, CBO services are available, accessible, flexible, relevant and responsive to community realities and priorities,

user-accountable and transparent, and imperatively cost-efficient. Yet most are completely disconnected from State welfare systems and strategies and have virtually no external support. The State does not know exactly where they are, who they are or what they are doing.

### POLICY CHALLENGE

Whatever policy makers think of or plan to do with CBOs, the prerequisite is to map them – accurately and comprehensively – in a manner that does not require CBOs to change in order to comply. Policy should not define what CBOs must be in order to register; it should register what they are – what they define themselves to be.

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The extent of current default in registration is detailed in the PASGR studies. This data illustrates the need for CBOs to be brought from the periphery into the heart of coordinated national social protection efforts. The challenge for policy will be to harness this potential – not by trying to turn informal CBOs into something they are not, but by enabling them to operate, in their own way, even more effectively.

Prime remedies will include skills training, measures which will enable CBOs to plug into and earn external financial support, and engaging them in more “transformative” interventions