

# Why African Governments should ratify the AU Protocol on Social Protection and Social Security

## Background

Social Protection refers to the support and services provided by governments, Organizations and communities in a country to ensure the wellbeing and basic needs of Vulnerable individuals and groups such as children, underserved families, persons with disabilities, unemployed or under employed individuals , older persons and refugees<sup>1</sup>,

Social Protection refers to public, private or mixed public and private measures designed to protect individuals against life-cycle crises that curtail their capacity to meet their needs. This includes all forms of social security, and strategies and programmes aimed at supporting and ensuring a minimum standard of livelihood and access to essential social services and care for all people<sup>2</sup>.

Social protection is therefore a basic human right as enshrined in the African Union Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Unfortunately, Social protection coverage in Africa is low at a paltry 17% of the population and generally fragmented and unevenly distributed<sup>3</sup>. Globally therefore, Africa is the continent with the least social protection coverage.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on The Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security was adopted by all the Heads of State and Government in Africa in February 2022. It offers a blueprint for developing robust social protection systems that effectively respond to the diverse needs of the population on the continent<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.africapsp.org>: African Platform for Social Protection. (2024). Technical Brief on *The protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of citizens to social protection and social security (Popular version)*

<sup>2</sup> <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-citizens-social-protection->: AU protocol on Social Protection and Social Security, Feb 22, 2022 adopted version

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/world-social-protection-report-2024-26-universal-social-protection-climate>

<sup>4</sup> <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/aspirations>

## **Key Messages**

***We urge governments to prioritize the ratification of the AU Protocol on Social Protection as a matter of urgency and life!. This why:-***

- Social protection is fundamental for reducing poverty and inequality. This ensures that all citizens especially the most vulnerable can lead a dignified life.
- Ratifying the AU Protocol on Social Protection demonstrates a government's dedication to safeguarding the well-being and dignity of its citizens.
- Effective social protection systems can boost economic growth by increasing consumer spending, improving health outcomes, and reducing the financial burden of poverty on the economy.
- A robust social protection system helps build a more inclusive society where all citizens have access to basic services and therefore contributes to social stability, mitigating the risks of social unrest and petty crimes.
- Ratifying the AU Protocol on Social Protection aligns with Africa's broader development goals and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and demonstrates commitment to regional and global initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and achieving equitable development.

## **Why Countries Must Ratify the Protocol and the Opportunities of Digitalization**

Although the adoption of the Protocol was momentous, some hurdles are still to be addressed. For this protocol to come into force, a prerequisite threshold of fifteen countries ratifying and depositing instrument of ratification or accession to the AU Commission is required. Thereafter the Chairperson of the Commission shall register the Protocol with the United Nations Secretary General in conformity with

Article 102 of the Charter of the United Nations, making this protocol an international instrument<sup>5</sup>.

Building on this advocacy moment, the Africa Platform for Social Protection (APSP) and partners<sup>6</sup>, conducted a study in 2023 on social protection coverage and digitalization in Africa, using Kenya as a case study. The study interviewed key players in the sector in Kenya and across several countries in Africa and carried out a detailed systematic literature review<sup>7</sup>. The study found that the AU Protocol on Social Protection and Social Security presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital tools can enhance access and efficiency, it is essential to address issues of equity, privacy, and capacity to ensure that social protection systems are inclusive and effective for all.

The protocol is a timely idea as it promotes universal access to social protection ensuring that all individuals, especially the most vulnerable, receive benefits including fair labour market practices and social and medical cover for informal workers. The protocol also addresses gender disparities ensuring sustainable financing which requires innovative funding mechanisms and partnerships with private and public sectors as well as the digital service providers. Some of the noted benefits of digitalization in social protection are digital systems will improve data collection, management, and analysis, helping to identify needs and target interventions more effectively, streamlining of the delivery of benefits and services, making it faster and more efficient by enabling online registration and payments.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://africapsp.org/projects/promoting-the-ratification-of-the-au-protocol-on-social-protection-and-social-security/#:~:text=The%20African%20Union%20PROTOCOL%20TO,by%20the%20African%20Union%20Heads>

<sup>6</sup> Faith, B.; Roberts, T. and Alfers, L. (eds) (2024) *The Digitalisation of Social Protection in Africa: The Perspective of Marginalised Workers*, IDS Research Report 90, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, <https://www.doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2024.022>

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<sup>7</sup> Faith, B.; Roberts, T. and Alfers, L. (eds) (2024) *The Digitalisation of Social Protection in Africa: The Perspective of Marginalised Workers*, IDS Research Report 90, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, <https://www.doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2024.022>

Digital data integration will also enhance social protection benefits like access to education, health, agriculture and business subsidies, mobile money and digital wallets can be particularly effective in reaching beneficiaries in remote areas. Digital tools will facilitate better monitoring and evaluation of social protection programmes, allowing for real-time data analysis and improved responsiveness. Equally important, by ensuring access to education, healthcare, and financial support, social protection systems contribute to a cohesive and educated workforce, which is vital for long-term economic development.

The increasing challenges of climate-related disasters (like floods and droughts) can disrupt livelihoods and economies. Health crises can devastate economies and social structures. Digitalized social protection systems ensure that vulnerable populations receive financial support, healthcare, and essential services during such emergencies and these can also facilitate a more effective response by providing stability and reducing the strain on health systems<sup>8</sup>.

In conflict zones, digitalized social protection can support displaced persons and those whose livelihoods have been disrupted.

Good social protection can reduce inequalities by supporting marginalized and disadvantaged groups and this helps in lifting them out of poverty through financial support and access to essential services, which helps mitigating social tensions in the society. However, digitalization should include digital literacy and access to technology, protection against data privacy and cybersecurity<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/A2241-maintains/sp-policy-note-lessons-from-the-covid-19-response-in-kenya.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Faith, B.; Roberts, T. and Alfors, L. (eds) (2024) *The Digitalisation of Social Protection in Africa: The Perspective of Marginalised Workers*, IDS Research Report 90, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, <https://www.doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2024.022>

Ratifying and implementing the Protocol demonstrates African Governments commitment to African homegrown solutions and the well-being of her citizens, which can build trust between governments and their citizens.

Ratifying the Protocol aligns African countries with international standards for social protection. Countries with strong social protection systems have dignified and high quality standards of living for their citizens<sup>10</sup>.

Social protection is integral to achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to poverty reduction, health, and economic growth<sup>11</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Ratifying the Protocol on Social Protection and Social Security is not just a matter of aligning with international instruments but a strategic investment in a country's resilience, stability and development.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/world-social-protection-report-2020-22-social-protection-crossroads-pursuit>

<sup>11</sup> Devereux, S. (2021). Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Africa. *Global social policy*, 21(3), 421-447.