

STRENGTHENING DIGITAL SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR MARGINALISED WORKERS



STRENGTHENING DIGITAL SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR MARGINALISED WORKERS

INTRODUCTION

Global digital evolution is reshaping social protection frameworks worldwide, bringing advancements and challenges. This brief addresses Africa's urgent need for digital social protection systems to respect digital rights. It intends to guide and inform discussions among policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates to prioritise digital rights in developing digital social protection systems, ensuring that no worker is left behind, regardless of background or circumstance. With a collaborative approach to policy development and implementation, African governments can leverage digital technologies to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable social protection frameworks that serve the needs of all their citizens.

BACKGROUND

The digitalisation of social protection systems has accelerated globally, driven by technological advancements and the demand for more efficient government services. Digital Social Protection offers a transformative opportunity to improve the delivery and scope of social protection services. Initiatives such as electronic payments for social benefits, digital registration for social programmes and online platforms for service delivery are being implemented to enhance the operational capacity of social protection schemes.

This digitalisation is increasingly recognised as a critical component of policy design and reform aimed at improving efficiency and broadening reach in many African countries. Furthermore, the need to address informality

in employment and consequential gaps in social security coverage has catalysed the movement towards digital social protection. In countries like Kenya and Ghana, various digital initiatives have been pioneered to improve the accessibility and efficiency of social security. For instance, Kenya's integrated social protection information system streamlines processes for social assistance programmes, significantly reducing delays and corruption through automated payments and records management. However, while these innovations promise increased efficiency and wider reach, they also exacerbate existing inequalities, introducing challenges in ensuring that digital systems are accessible and beneficial to all, especially the most vulnerable among us.

This is particularly true for marginalised workers, including those in informal employment, those who live in rural areas and workers with disabilities, who often encounter barriers such as inadequate to non-existent infrastructural support, limited internet access and poor digital literacy. Additionally, the rapid shift to digital platforms sometimes overlooks the need for inclusive design, leaving many behind. As stated in the (DSP report), “Digital social protection promised to increase the convenience and efficiency of accessing social protection entitlements, but millions of informal workers are being further excluded by digitalisation”^[1].

These barriers prevent vulnerable groups from fully benefiting from digitally enabled social protection services, thus undermining the equity and effectiveness ideally offered by these systems. Addressing these challenges will ensure that digital social protection systems contribute to rather than detract from the goal of universal and equitable social protection.

DIGITAL RIGHTS IN DIGITAL SOCIAL PROTECTION



Digital rights are human rights and encompass privacy, access to information, freedom of expression, and non-discrimination in digital spaces. Consequently, these rights are pivotal for marginalised workers as digital platforms increasingly become the primary medium to access social protection services. Ensuring these rights means advocating for

1. **Right to Access:** Every worker has the right to access digital social protection services, including information about the services and the physical and financial ability to use digital platforms, irrespective of geographic or socio-economic status.
2. **Right to Privacy and Data Protection:** Workers must be assured that their personal data collected through digital social platforms is handled securely and that their privacy is respected, as highlighted by concerns about “monitoring people’s movements through the use of digital payment systems, or snooping on electronic communications”.^[2]
3. **Right to Digital Literacy:** Ensuring that all workers have the necessary skills to engage with the technologies central to accessing social protection services is essential. This involves government-led digital literacy campaigns and training programmes targeted at older adults, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups to improve their ability to utilise digital services effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY ACTION



The following recommendations are proffered to bridge the digital divide, ensure inclusive design and stakeholder engagement, protect digital rights and data security, and foster transparency and accountability.

1. Bridging the Digital Divide

- Investment in digital infrastructure is paramount. Governments must work to enhance internet connectivity in underserved regions. Subsidising the cost of broadband infrastructure, providing mobile internet access points and community internet centres where individuals can access online services, would continue to lower the barriers to access faced by marginalised workers.
- Digital literacy programmes that focus on building the digital skills of marginalised workers to enable them to access and effectively navigate digital social protection services should be prioritised.
- Governments should implement programmes to distribute low-cost

or free digital devices to low-income and marginalised individuals. This would help overcome barriers to digital access and ensure that more citizens can participate in digital social protection programmes.

2. Ensuring Inclusive Design and Stakeholder Engagement

- Stakeholders should implement a structured dialogue process with marginalised groups to ensure their specific needs and challenges are considered when designing and implementing digital social protection systems. These consultations must be accessible and inclusive, accommodating different disabilities and language needs.
- Designers and developers should

create interfaces that are intuitive and accessible to people with varying literacy levels and digital skills. To accommodate diverse users, they should incorporate features such as voice assistance, high-contrast visual elements, multilingual support, etc.

- Robust support frameworks should be established to assist users with general inquiries and specific issues.

3. Protecting Digital Rights and Data Security

- **Implement Robust Data Security Measures:** To protect sensitive personal information, utilise advanced cybersecurity measures such as end-to-end encryption and secure data storage facilities. Regular security audits and vulnerability assessments should be conducted to ensure that data protection measures are effective and current.
- Governments and policymakers must establish comprehensive data governance frameworks that clearly define how personal data is collected, used, stored, and shared within digital social protection systems. These policies should prioritise user consent and allow users to control their personal information.
- There should be clear and accessible processes for users to report privacy breaches or data misuse. These mechanisms should offer effective remedies for data protection violations and ensure that users can address their grievances promptly and fairly.

4. Fostering Transparency and Accountability

- Governments should implement platforms that make programme data transparent and accessible, allowing public scrutiny to foster a transparent

environment.

- Regulation should require all agencies managing digital social protection programmes to publish comprehensive, regular reports on their activities. These reports should detail reach, effectiveness, and operational challenges and be readily accessible to the public to ensure transparency and build trust in digital systems.
 - Independent bodies, including representatives from civil society and marginalised communities, should be established to monitor, evaluate, and oversee digital social protection programmes. These bodies should be able to recommend improvements and ensure that digital social protection initiatives are implemented fairly and effectively.
-

GENERAL RECOMMENDATION

Maintaining Non-Digital Options

- Systems that seamlessly integrate digital and non-digital services should be made available and actively maintained to ensure non-digital means of accessing social protection services. This will ensure that digitalisation does not disadvantage any group.
- Regular assessments should be conducted to evaluate the accessibility and effectiveness of digital and non-digital services to ensure that developments and adjustments are made based on user feedback and changing needs.



CONCLUSION

The transition to digital social protection systems offers a unique opportunity to enhance the reach and effectiveness of these programmes. However, to ensure that all citizens benefit, especially marginalised workers, digital social protection initiatives must be designed and implemented to ensure workers' digital rights. The recommendations outlined in this brief will enable policymakers to develop digital social protection systems that are efficient, equitable and responsive to the needs of all workers while respecting their digital rights. This approach will contribute to developments that truly benefit everyone, fostering a more inclusive and just society.



© 2024 Paradigm Initiative
HQ: 374 Borno Way, Yaba, Lagos - Nigeria.

www.paradigmhq.org